

X AMBASSADORS • BETTY WHO • THE CHAINSMOKERS • JON BELLION • BOMBAY BICYCLE CLUB • SWITCHFOOT

# VARIANCE

THE SIGHTS + SOUNDS YOU LOVE

40 ALBUMS  
TO WATCH FOR  
IN 2014

**BASTILLE**  
◀ **ANGEL HAZE**  
**PHANTOGRAM**  
**JAMES VINCENT**  
**MCMORROW**

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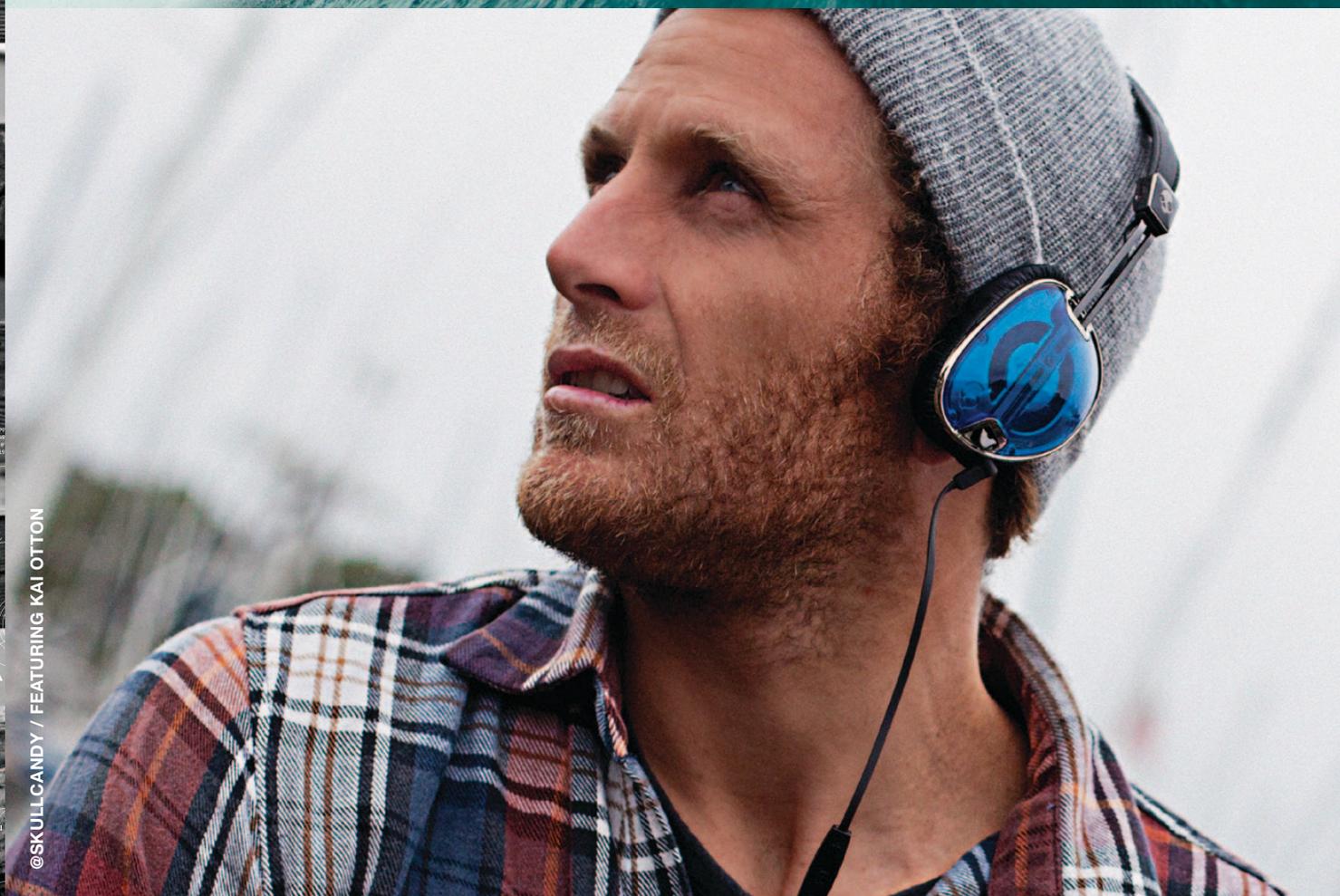
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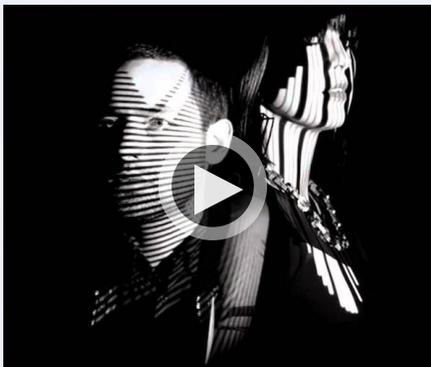
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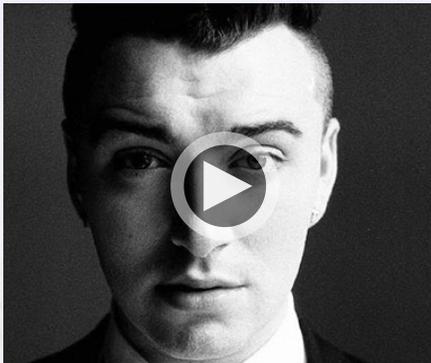
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**ST. VINCENT**  
"Digital Witness"

Annie Clark foreshadows her new album with this catchy tune

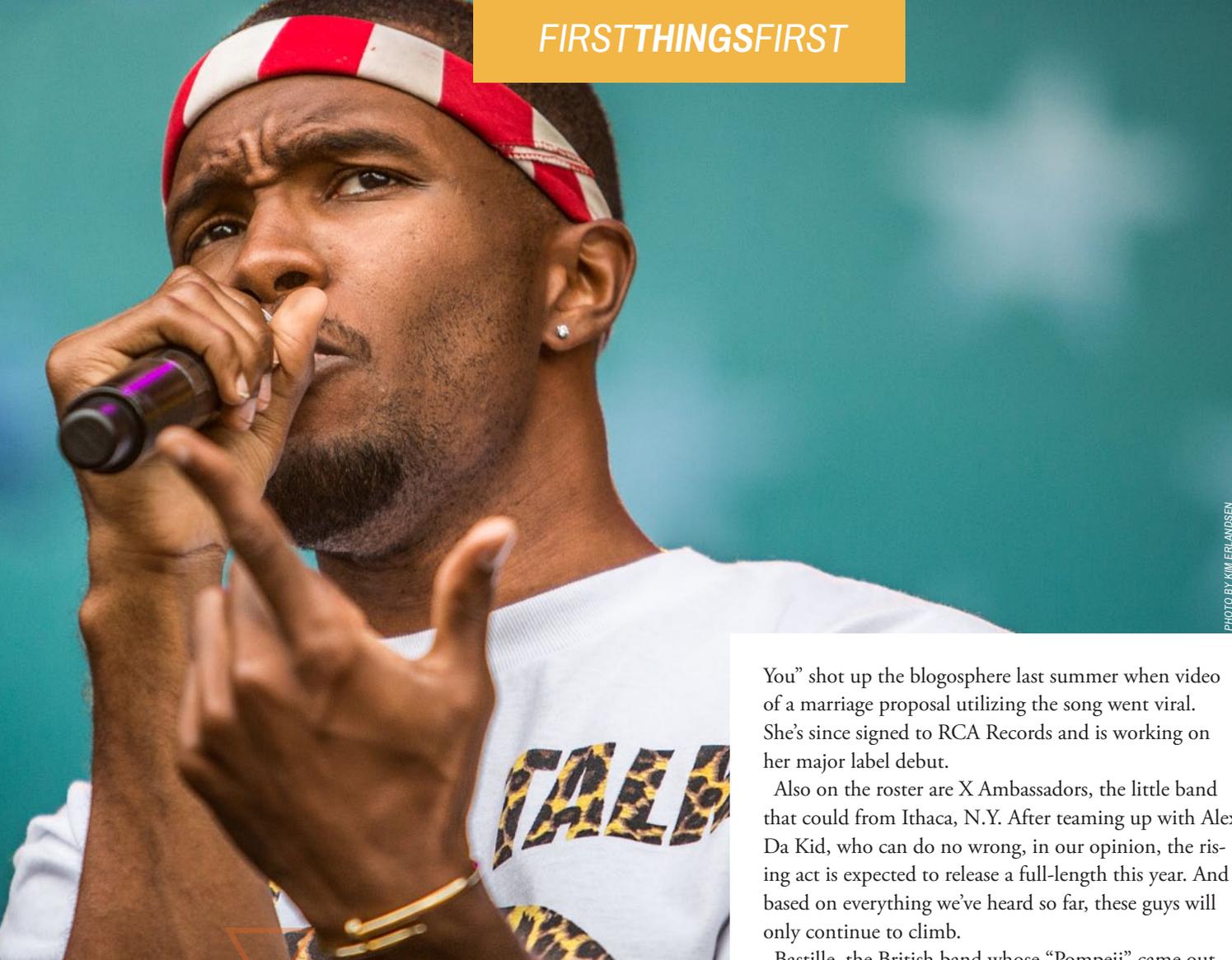


PHOTO BY KIM ERLANDSEN

## AFTER WHAT HAD

to be a landmark year in music and pop culture, it's hard to imagine topping such extraordinary reunions, albums, television moments and cultural events. Despite the raised bar, 2014 is already looking rather shiny itself.

While a Beyoncé-like surprise album may or may not be in the forecast this year, there are plenty of other records on the schedule. From newcomers like Sam Smith, SZA and Vancouver Sleep Clinic, to The Black Keys and Frank Ocean's much-teased new sets, it will be a busy year. And in this new issue, we're running down some

of the most-anticipated new releases, which include Kanye West, Foo Fighters, Solange, St. Vincent, Grimes, Wye Oak and so many more.

In this, our FutureSounds Issue, we're highlighting some of the voices you need to hear, such as Bahamas and Geographer. We also sat down and talked with some of the talent whose names and voices will reign in the coming year. Some of them are new, and some of them are returning fresh, new energy and brand new projects that will catapult them into the spotlight.

Among the new faces is Betty Who, whose "Somebody Loves

You" shot up the blogosphere last summer when video of a marriage proposal utilizing the song went viral. She's since signed to RCA Records and is working on her major label debut.

Also on the roster are X Ambassadors, the little band that could from Ithaca, N.Y. After teaming up with Alex Da Kid, who can do no wrong, in our opinion, the rising act is expected to release a full-length this year. And based on everything we've heard so far, these guys will only continue to climb.

Bastille, the British band whose "Pompeii" came out of nowhere and began its epic rise on American radio, is preparing to hit the U.S. with a new tour and more music in the works. Meanwhile, up-and-coming singer-songwriter Jon Bellion is proving he's one to watch, with stunning singles and breathtaking videos, the writer behind Eminem and Rihanna's "The Monster" is quietly prepping to take the world by storm on his own.

Back for round two, and likely their biggest moment yet, are Bombay Bicycle Club and Phantogram, both with brand new albums on the horizon and much more perfected sound. While we've been covering these acts for years, they're finally seeing their star rise. And this is going to be a big year for both of them.

Also back for his second go is Irish singer-songwriter James Vincent McMorrow, with a brand new album and a tour to support it. It's already one of the best LPs this year, and we expect big things from him this year. Then there's Angel Haze, nominated for BBC's Sound of 2013 last year and arguably one of the hottest rappers—male or female—of her generation. But then she leaked her own album and put a whole series of events in motion. So what comes next?

Read on, discover and enjoy.

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**FUTURE SOUNDS**  
THE SOUNDS YOU NEED TO HEAR



PHOTO: FUTURE SOUNDS PICK ALFIE JURVANEN (AKA BAHAMAS) BY DAVE GILLESPIE

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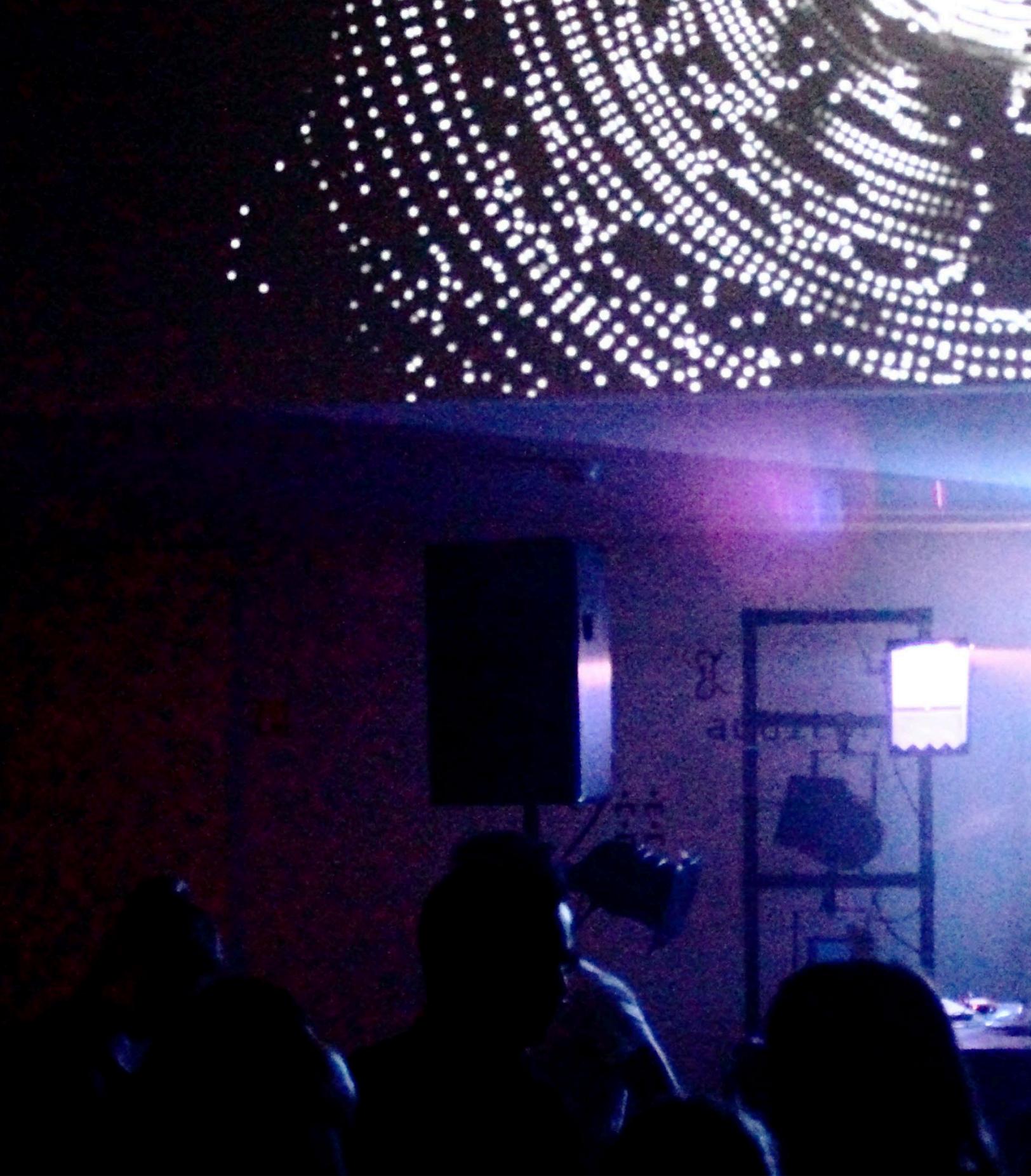
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PHOTO BY XIWEG

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**JAMES VINCENT MCMORROW**

He took a left-field turn and poured out his soul on his new LP. But why?



# BOMBAY BICYCLE CLUB

English rock outfit Bombay Bicycle Club is set to release their fourth studio album in just five years on Feb. 4. And for the indie four-piece consisting of Jack Steadman, Jamie MacColl, Suren de Seram and Ed Nash, their latest album, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, is an exciting addition to their already extensive library.

Variance spoke with guitarist MacColl about the upcoming release, the evolution of the band and his hopes of further popularity in U.S. as the band takes listeners on a journey

through some exotic countries with their notably more experimental new material.

Although the members of the band are all only 24, their growth within the last five years has been tremendous. And they've built a reputation for constantly releasing diverse, exciting music and keeps their fans eager for what's around the corner.

As the tour for the last album, *A Different Kind of Fix*, started to wrap up, writing for the next album began.



MacColl says vocalist Steadman left to do some traveling and writing. He trekked his way through Holland, Turkey and India, with Nash accompanying him for parts of the trip. Once everyone was back together and Steadman was armed with an array of new songs, it was time to start recording. So the natural next step was to find a producer. “We tried a couple of people and for what-

BY EMILY HULSEBERG

ever reason, it just wasn't working I guess,” explains MacColl. “The demo sounded really great, and I know a lot of the time bands do get quite obsessed with their demos and kind of get a bit of ‘demo-itis’ and think, ‘We can never sound better than these do,’ but we felt at this point—fourth album and quite a lot of experience, that we could actually do it ourselves.”

And that's exactly what they did. Steadman self-produced the album, and the way the band sees it, they couldn't have made a better choice.

“[We knew] it would be the best it could be if we were doing it ourselves,” says MacColl. “So that was quite [an] exciting thought, and I think [it] kind of drove us on more to make the songs as good as they could be ourselves. In the past we might have been able to say we [felt] a bit stuck with this, like hopefully a producer will have an idea, but we didn't have the safety net to fall on, so it drove us on a lot.”

Without the help or direction from an outside producer, the band made an album that is 100 percent their own. It's all Bombay Bicycle Club.

Of course, the record was greatly influenced by Steadman's travels. “There are some quite prominent Bollywood samples on the record,” MacColl explains. “I think for anyone that's ever been to India, it is a very musical place and you're constantly surrounded by music there, so I think it's generally quite an inspiring place to be as a musician.”

MacColl says that while the album doesn't have a pinpoint inspiration, Steadman used his personal journey more than the actual locations as inspiration behind the songs he wrote. And ultimately, it impacted the band's own journey.

With each release, the band has

shown growth and progression. But MacColl explains that it isn't something they initially think about. “I don't think we've ever really made conscious decisions to do that much, to do things that differently with the music.”

*So Long, See You Tomorrow* is an album that will take Bombay to a new level among their musical peers. Once known as an indie-rock band, the new sounds coming from these four push them dramatically forward, crossing into a more electronic territory.

“I do think there is kind of an evolution from the previous record,” explains MacColl. “When we first started messing around with samples and more electronic sounding [sounds], I think a song like ‘Shuffle was the start of us experimenting a bit more with making a different kind of music.”

The band is set to tour the new album starting in Europe throughout February, and MacColl is excited to get a chance to expand their fan base in the U.S. as well. “I really love traveling around [the States], so it would be nice to do it in a nicer way than we've done in the past,” he laughs.

Still being so young and having practically grown up together, MacColl says the band hasn't had any trouble when it comes to creative direction and getting along. “The most important thing is that there's never been an argument about the kind of music that the band is gonna make. That's the kind of strand that had run through the whole thing and kept it going I think.”

***So Long, See You Tomorrow* arrives Feb. 4 on Island Records. The band will tour internationally before heading to U.S. in the spring, including dates at Coachella.**

# THE CHAINSMOKERS

THE BRO-DUCER/DJ DUO TALKS ABOUT TAKING THEIR CAREER TO THE NEXT LEVEL



PHOTOS BY SAM BOISE

BY JONATHAN ROBLES

From the Hype Machine to the club scene, New York DJ-producer duo The Chainsmokers seem to have the Midas touch when it comes to creating hot and sweaty mixes that get the party going. But they're about to take it to the next level.

Despite only working together under their current moniker for less than two years, Alex Pall and Drew Taggart have

performed across the country, shared the stage with the biggest names in EDM and churned out some of the most incredible remixes. And they're only getting started.

Part of what makes the pair stand out over many of their counterparts, other than being a duo, is the authenticity they emulate. Sure, house music is already party-friendly, but not all DJs are. While fans of dance have accepted com-

puters' role in the music, it doesn't mean they always want robots at the helm. No disrespect to Daft Punk. And definitely #nodisrespecttobenaffleck.

What The Chainsmokers bring to the EDM culture goes beyond spinning tracks and tweaking synths. With their hilarious tweets, unmatched fan interaction and high-energy live performance, it's clear why they're racking up support-

ers left and right: These guys are actually human.

“It’s definitely challenging in this world, but we try our best to do things that are really inherent to who we are,” says Taggert, sitting down to talk with Variance. “Our social media is really just us posting things that we think are funny or cool, maybe trying to get everybody to pick sides in a really petty disagreement. There’s no filter. And we’re not forcing it or trying to do something from a marketing angle.”

While there may not be some giant marketing scheme, the guys are definitely making some calculated moves as they develop their own unique brand, although Pall admits it’s difficult at times. “Being patient sucks sometimes,” confesses Pall. “But we found early on what our sound was and we decided to stick to it, stick to our team and our vision. There have been so many styles that come in waves. There was the whole trap thing last spring and now the hardstyle. We’ll see what the next fad is, and the next one. But we’re sticking to our plan and we’ve cultivated a fan base around that, without following whatever the current trend was.”

They may not be following trends, but they certainly have their ears to the ground when it comes to picking some of the best artists to remix, including the likes of Phoenix, Mikky Ekko, BANKS, Icona Pop, Smallpools, Daughter and Say Lou Lou, to name a few. It’s proof that two heads are better than one, and they agree.

“We’re really creative together,” says Pall. “Working with two people, you can get a lot more done than when it’s just you by yourself. You always have someone to bounce ideas off of. It also helps that we trust each other and we can be honest if we really don’t like something.”

Of course, the duo benefits from having a healthy friendship outside of their working relationship. Call it part of their “brand” if you will, but while they joke about their “bromance,” they’re really grateful for it.

“Thank God things worked out when we met and decided to do this,” declares Taggert. “It was great because it was like, ‘We’re actually homies.’ We hit it off immediately and I really think that made all the difference. We think the same things are funny. We think the same girls are hot. We think the same food is good. There were definite similarities immediately that helped make the working relationship go smoothly. When you’re constantly together, that’s important.”

In their short time working together, the BFFs have witnessed plenty of highs but also some lows, such as the wave of criticism against EDM last year following multiple, high profile drug-related deaths at dance events. But as Pall sees it, “people are going to party no matter what music they’re listening to.”

Although they understand the seriousness of such tragedies, they believe the media’s “demoni-



zation” of certain genres of music and the so-called drug culture is “greatly exaggerated and actually unwarranted,” says Pall, continuing: “It’s definitely there, but I think EDM gets the blame for much more than its share of the problems. And a lot of that is because we have such a fun culture. And that’s the element we’re trying to encourage.”

As they move forward, the duo is sticking to their guns and focusing on building their following even more. But should the opportunity present itself, they wouldn’t mind a few collaborations either.

“It’s a huge reach, but it would be my dream to work with the guys from Miiike Snow,” says Taggert, adding that he believes “they’re some of the most creative producers, and the balance that they have between dance music and almost their own kind of genre, I love that. We’re also big fans of CHVRCHES and London Grammar. And of course, we just did the remix with The Colourist; we’d love to do an original track with them. And Drake. We would drop everything.”

Adds Pall: “And Adam Levine. Not really for music, but we just want to hang out with him and have tacos and stuff.”

Despite their wish list, they’re also firming up a game plan with new, original tracks in the works. Fol-

lowing their popular satirical cut “#Selfie,” which skyrocketed through the blogosphere, they have more up their sleeves.

“We’re working on another original track for March hopefully,” Taggert reveals. “And maybe another one around April that we’re pretty pumped about.”

While the guys definitely enjoy cutting up and having fun, they acknowledge this next phase is really important for them. And this year might bring about some changes as they try to expand.

“We’ve pretty much tapped out the span of where we can go online,” says Taggert. “Almost every track we release online goes on HypeM and does really well. But we’re kind of hitting that point where we feel like we’re reaching out to the same fans over and over again. So we want to partner with someone, probably a label, so we can push our tracks to the next level. It’s the logical next step for us, and we feel good about it. No, we feel great about it.”

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**As of Jan. 28, The Chainsmokers’ original track “#Selfie” is out on Dim Mak Records, the label founded by one of their heroes Steve Aoki. For more, follow them on Twitter: @thechainsmokers.**



*Betty Who*

# NO QUESTION ABOUT IT: SHE'S ON HER WAY TO BE A STAR

BY RACHEL FAYLENE

Australian singer-songwriter Jessica Newham, known on stage as Betty Who, is the promising fresh face of pop music this year after her popularity boomed in 2013. The 23-year-old talent released her debut EP and signed to RCA Records over the course of a year, while picking up steam with her first single “Somebody Loves You.”

The track was first unveiled in 2012 but was given new life after Spencer Stout, a fan of Newham’s, coupled the song with his flash-mob dance proposal to his boyfriend Dustin. Once the video was uploaded, the Internet did what it does best and exposed Betty Who to a new—much wider—fan base.

“The whole process of having people listening to the song because of that video—it doesn’t matter what shape or form it comes in—it’s just about being with somebody you love and having that be the answer to it all,” she expresses. “It’s so great, and I feel so lucky and blessed to have this platform for my music.”

The single itself carries a blissful aura, but for Newham, the song encompassed the emotions and reality of a relationship running its course.

“‘Somebody Loves You’ was a breakup song for me,” she explains. “When I wrote it, it was about me breaking up with this man and being like, ‘You don’t understand that I love you, and I’m literally standing in front of you yelling at you, telling you that I love you, and you’re not listening. So I’m walking away.’”

Her music is decidedly honest and accessible for listeners at any period of life. Some may use it as a way to deal with heartbreak while others apply it to celebrate the love of their life. Newham says her fans’ ability to connect with the music is what it’s all about, pointing out that it’s important even for herself as she’s taking the stage.

“The song changes for me,” she ad-

mits. “I’ll sing a song at a show, and six months later I’ll sing the same song and it means something totally different.”

Being able to spark an emotion in another human being through music is everything an artist like Newham desires. And while the natural inclination to make an impact with her voice is valid, it’s not the driving force behind her passion.

When she was only four years old, Newham began training as a classical cellist. Then she taught herself to play piano and guitar before writing her first song as a teenager. Musical performance is as central to her identity as her baby blues are to her appearance. And she’s remained faithful to that drive without the guarantee of major success.

“It wouldn’t really matter if nobody was listening to my music; I would still be making it, but I’d just be working a crappy waitress job,” she says. “Because it’s who I am. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do, and this is what brings me joy.”

Having blossomed into the young woman fans now know as Betty Who, she’s been compared to the likes of Katy Perry and Robyn. Whereas many up-and-coming artists might despise being compared to those preceding them, claiming to be something completely new, Betty is more than flattered by the comparisons and looks to both Perry and Robyn as inspiration.

“I’m obsessed with both of them,” Newham confesses without hesitation. “So I’m really, really happy about it, and also it’s just such an honor ... it doesn’t even feel real, because to me, Katy Perry and Robyn make pop that’s generational. They’re making the pop music of our generation that’s going to stick around. People are going to look back and be like, ‘Oh my God, it’s Robyn’s *Body Talk* album. That’s one of the best pop albums of the last 10 years.’”

Another addition to her celebrity “crush list” is Miley Cyrus, whose name

has been synonymous with controversy for the past year. But Newham takes her side in admiration, praising the young songstress for her bravery.

“I think if I could be as fearless as her, I’d be fine,” she states. “I think that Miley—she’s going to say what she wants. She doesn’t really care what people say about her.”

A courageous attitude is exactly what a budding artist like Betty Who needs as she dives into her much-anticipated debut album. With a larger platform and more eyes peeled, she hopes to reintroduce herself to both existing and potential fans. A brand new single, “Heartbreak Dream,” is also planned to be heir to Betty Who’s “Somebody Loves You” throne.

“It’s like I get to do my first impression all over again. This whole new group of people that maybe didn’t hear ‘Somebody Loves You,’ maybe they’ll hear ‘Heartbreak Dream,’” she says. “That feels so right to me, to be the next progression of where I am in my music and what it sounds like and what it feels like.”

Her hopes and plans for the year are clearly in place, but she admits that some things are unforeseeable. Fingers are crossed as fans, media and peers wait to see what her next move will be. And as her star continues to rise, Newham is learning to embrace this latest chapter, with all its fluctuations and surprises.

“I could tell you what my schedule is for tomorrow, and then I’d check back with you tomorrow night and it’d be nothing like I thought it was going to be. That’s kind of how my whole life is running right now, but it’s very exciting. It’s also totally unsettling and terrifying.”

**Betty Who is expected to release a second EP this spring, followed by a full-length later this year. For the latest, follow her on Twitter: @bettywhomusic.**



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LAVINE

## **SOMETIMES IN A SMALL COLLEGE TOWN**

like Ithaca, N.Y., there's nothing but trouble for kids to get into. But X Ambassadors frontman Sam Harris, his brother Casey and childhood friend Noah Feldshuh instead turned to music in middle school and managed to create some magic.

Now, they're on a national tour with Panic! At the Disco, navigating their first deal with Interscope Records, and being mentored by the same genius that brought us Imagine Dragons, Alex Da Kid.

Having made the pilgrimage to New

York City after high school, the Harris brothers and Feldshuh connected with drummer Adam Levin in college to secure their R&B-flushed take on alt-pop.

"It's been a steady grind, and when we look at it every year, we have gotten further than we were the year before," Harris explains. "A year ago, we didn't have a record deal; we didn't have anything new out, really. We had an EP that had been out for a year and we were sort of figuring out what the next step was, and the deal with Alex [Da Kid] and Interscope all sort of fell together. It was a year before that we really had nothing. We had just started to build our team of people; we had only just gotten a booking agent, just gotten management."

Though the band's proverbial nose has only been to the grindstone since 2010, in today's music culture fueled by YouTube, social media and countless iterations of online radio, three years can feel like a lifetime. How fast a band moves from open mics to the AMAs is now a common measure of success. But Harris seems to have seen past that, undeterred.

"Every year it builds and builds and builds, and you just have to look at it as a slow and steady wins the race kind of thing. And it's hard. It's really hard," he admits. "Especially when you see so many other artists coming up so fast ...You have to wonder, if it doesn't happen so fast for you, are you doing

# X AMB ASSA DORS

## THE BAND OF BROTHERS IS AT THE START OF ONE INCREDIBLE YEAR

BY AMANDA MORAD

something wrong? What's going on? Should I be making a different kind of music? Is the whole thing worth it?

"All these questions run through your head, and you kind of have to shut it all out because it's such a game – it's such a crapshoot, really. The only thing you can do is continue to write the best music that you possibly can. This is the music that we're making, and we're really proud of it. We work really hard at it, and that's all we can do."

Even though a meteoric rise to chart-topping success is only a byproduct of hard work and not the end game, being groomed by the guys who helped launch Imagine Dragons into the spotlight can't hurt. Frontman Dan Reynolds of the band who brought us "Radioactive" last year heard X Ambassadors' broody tribal-rock single, "Unconsolable," on Virginia's alternative radio station, liked what he heard, and made a suggestion to Alex Da Kid. From there, preparation just met opportunity.

But X Ambassadors' discovery raises an important ques-



tion: Does radio still have power to bring music to the masses? Harris thinks so.

"Living in New York, you get so obsessed with the blog world because that is how a lot of new music is being discovered. But to the rest of the country, radio is still a big, big thing," Harris acknowledges. "Even in L.A. when we're driving around, the radio is always on and that's where I hear a lot of stuff for the first time. I think it's still very much a powerful tool."

"I would love to see more radio stations taking more chances on these alternative up-and-coming bands. There are some stations that really are still doing that. It's great to see that radio can still have a hand in breaking bands."

But it's definitely not a magic bullet, Harris explains. "It's not just one thing or the other that's going to do it for you. You're not going to get a song on the radio unless you're getting a bunch of placements in trailers or commercials or if your songs are on blogs. But you're not going to get placements in trailers or put on blogs if you don't have some other story going on. It's all intertwined. So again, you just have to keep making cool shit. People will see that and they will respond to it. It's as simple as that."

The mantra "timing is everything" applies. And that's where X Ambassadors stand today: ready with a lineup of really great songs, waiting for the perfect moment to catch lightning in a bottle.

"We've been cultivating this sound, this kind of alternative, R&B, soul, kind of tribal thing that we really want to take to the next level," Harris explains. "We all grew up listening to pop music. We listened to what was on the radio: hip-hop, R&B, a lot of stuff that was carefully crafted to be accessible to young kids. Then later on, we all got involved in indie rock and a lot of stuff that was more under the radar. We want to try to apply the sensibility that we grew up having ingrained in us to this really eclectic sound that we're trying to capture."

This sound includes all kinds of outside-the-rock-box instrumentation, including saxes and horns, Sam's vocals—at times thick and just the right kind of raspy and at times in pristine falsetto—and a blend of influences that reflect the ever-evolving face of pop music.

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**For the band's latest updates, be sure to follow them on Twitter: @XAmbassadors.**



Nine Inch Nails at Staples Center by Derrick Lee



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*Winter '14*

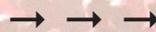


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L TO R FROM TOP: TAYLOR GOLDSMITH OF DAWES AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL BY MIKE WINDLE; ESTE HAIM OF HAIM AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL BY MIKE WINDLE; LAUREN MAYBERRY OF CHVRCHES AT HEARTRADIO THEATER BY GREG CHOW; ALLEN STONE AT VOODOO MUSIC + ARTS EXPERIENCE BY DAN DES-LOVER; ASAP ROCKY AT ALUMNI ARENA BY CHAD COOPER; HANNAH REID OF LONDON GRAMMAR AT TRANS MUSICALES DE RENNES BY NICOLAS JOUBARD; MATT BERNINGER OF THE NATIONAL AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL BY MIKE WINDLE

# Winter '14



L TO R FROM TOP: KATIE STELMANIS OF AUSTRALIA AT LE GRANDE MIX BY JOHAN BAUWENS; KENDRICK LAMAR AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL BY MIKE WINDLE; TAYLOR RICE OF LOCAL NATIVES AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL BY MIKE WINDLE; G-EAZY AT VOODOO MUSIC + ARTS EXPERIENCE BY DAN DESLOVER; LIZZY PLANKINGER OF MS MR AT AUSTIN CITY LIMITS BY MIKE WINDLE; MACKLEMORE AT VOODOO MUSIC + ARTS EXPERIENCE BY DAN DESLOVER

# 40 ALBUMS *to* WATCH *for in* 2014

As we move past the GRAMMYs, next year's possible contenders are already making for a shiny new year. While a Beyoncé-like surprise album may or may not be in the forecast this year, there are plenty of other records on the schedule. From the newcomers like Sam Smith, SZA and Vancouver Sleep Clinic, to The Black Keys and Frank Ocean's much-teased new sets, it will be a busy year. And we're running down some of the most-anticipated new releases, which include Kanye West, Foo Fighters, Solange, St. Vincent, Grimes, Wye Oak and so many more.



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## ◀ Foxes

The British songbird and FutureSounds alumna is coming off a fantastic year after collaborations with Rudimental and Fall Out Boy. And then there was her top 10 hit “Clarity” with Zedd. Now it’s her time to shine, and she’s aiming to release her *Glorious* album in March, just weeks before her 25th birthday.



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## BANKS

Following the release of her *London* EP, the Los Angeles singer-songwriter keeps us hanging on for more. Based on the handful of lustrous tracks she’s already released, she’s poised to make an enormous splash when she finally releases her debut album.



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## Sam Smith

He’s got arguably one of the brightest voices in music in years, and with consistent guest features on Disclosure and Naughty Boy tracks, the powerhouse vocalist and BRIT Awards Critics Choice winner is on course to have an amazing year.



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## The Black Keys

First, Dan Auerbach teased a new album would drop in spring 2013. Although that didn’t happen, the band has spent the last few weeks racking up headlining festival spots for 2014, suggesting new music is on the horizon.



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## Frank Ocean

While he briefly hinted that he might not release another album, the *channel ORANGE* crooner has been hard at work on his next record. He said early last year that he already had more than 10 tracks down. His appearances on new albums from Beyoncé, JAY Z and John Mayer confirm he’s been busy in the studio. And he’s mentioned that a new album could arrive in the summer.



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## Solange

Not much is yet known about the younger Knowles sister’s upcoming studio set, but after years of struggling to find her lane in the musical landscape, the 27-year-old neo-soul singer proved she’s only getting started with 2012’s extended play *True*.



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## Schoolboy Q

Following the release of fellow Top Dawg Entertainment signee Kendrick Lamar’s *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, the bar is certainly high. But Q’s forthcoming *Oxymoron* is shaping up to be one of the most-anticipated hip-hop sets of 2014. Fellow rapper Mac Miller has already heard the record and declared, “It’s better than Kendrick’s album.”



## Lily Allen ▲

After years of silence, the British pop songstress made a boisterous return in November with new single “Hard Out Here,” in which she pretty much called out her contemporaries and gave a scathing commentary on pop culture, specifically regarding sexism. We’re watching for the full album sometime in the warmer months, and we expect it to be hot, hot, hot.



## St. Vincent

There are few others releasing incredible pop music like the multi-talented Annie Clark, known to fans as St. Vincent. Following a year of touring, she’s finally releasing new material in the form of a self-titled album on Feb. 25. Clark has referred to the set as “a party record you could play at a funeral.”



## Little Dragon

After about three years of touring, the Swedish indie outfit revealed last fall that they were tying up the loose ends for their fourth album, which includes a string quartet on several songs. This will be the first time outside musicians contributed to the band’s material. At last report, the group was aiming for a spring release.



## Cloud Nothings

Frontman Dylan Baldi has previously hinted that the new record would be noisier than the band’s other three offerings. The album is already finished, although only a few fans have heard it, but it’s expected to arrive in the spring.



## Ed Sheeran

Having covered the globe touring, including a massive trek with buddy Taylor Swift, the British singer-songwriter recently wrapped his sophomore album with power-producer Rick Rubin. He’s noted that he intends to add another song, but with a tour starting in October, he’s also promised the album will arrive before then.



## X Ambassadors

Having worked with producer Alex Da Kid and singer Dan Reynolds of Imagine Dragons (also groomed by Alex), songs like “Unconsoled” and “Love Songs Drug Songs” have demanded our attention. And the full-length debut from this New York outfit, whenever it does release, should be on your radar.



## Fleet Foxes

Despite drummer Josh Tillman's solo success with his Father John Misty project, new updates on social media suggest the band is ready to come back from its well-documented hiatus. Frontman Robin Pecknold's October appearance on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* to pay tribute to Pearl Jam further built up anticipation for new material.



## Chance the Rapper

The Chicago MC put his peers on notice with last year's *Acid Rap* mixtape, which was arguably better than some of the full-fledged albums released. In addition to collaborations with the likes of Childish Gambino and Action Bronson, his "Life Round Here" remix with James Blake quickly turned heads. Now the two are expected to be living together and recording tons of new music.



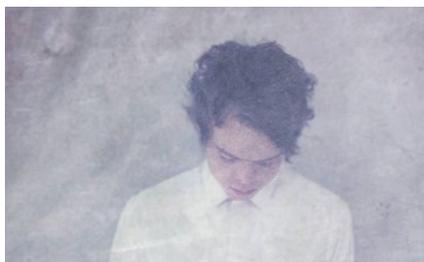
## Modest Mouse

Following years of consistent touring, the band had left a new album on the back burner. However, they cancelled tour dates last summer in favor of finishing up a full-length. Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic recorded on the new set and says it's "pretty edgy."



## Foo Fighters

Dave Grohl revealed last August that the new album was already written, vowing that it would be done "in a way that no one's ever done before." Of course, Beyoncé swept through shortly after that, raising the bar for album releases. Nonetheless, expect nothing short of extraordinary from this record.



## Vancouver Sleep Clinic

All the way from Brisbane, Australia, newcomer Vancouver Sleep Clinic (aka Tim Bettinson) swept us away with his Bon Iver-influenced new single, "Collapse." Since then, he's toured with London Grammar and has landed a spot at this year's SXSW. At the very least, he will be releasing an extended play.



## Pharrell Williams

The man behind two of 2013's stratospheric hits, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" and Daft Punk's "Get Lucky," is gearing up for his own solo album. Expectations are definitely high for the record, which reportedly will be light on rap. Expect Williams' omnipresent, Beats Music-approved "Happy" to lead the charge on radio as the new LP nears.



## hollychild

The California experimental pop duo comprised of vocalist Liz Nistico and producer-multi-instrumentalist Louie Diller began floating under the radar last year with tracks like "Happy with Me." They're expected to take things up a notch in March for SXSW, with a full-length—or at the least, an EP—sure to follow. Either way, these two are sure to skyrocket.



## Death Cab for Cutie

Shortly after his Postal Service reunion tour, Ben Gibbard assured fans that next up was new material from Death Cab. Through a series of Instagram updates, it's clear the band has been holed up in the studio since October.



## River Tiber

Toronto singer-producer River Tiber's (aka Tommy Paxton-Beesley) *The Star Falls* EP was some of the best music of last year, and the title track was one of our Top 50 Songs of 2013. But it all leads up to a full-length record, due to release this year.



## Sharon Van Etten

The singer-songwriter has blossomed into a powerful force, and 2012's *Tramp* further positioned her into the spotlight. With upcoming performances at SXSW and other dates, it's becoming likely she'll reign again in 2014.



## Kanye West

The rapper-designer confidently said at the end of 2013 that he was already working on a new album for this summer, although he pointed out that it would probably be limited to about eight tracks. He also hasn't ruled out a sequel to his JAY Z collab *Watch the Throne*.



## Kendrick Lamar

Just before his tour with Kanye West wrapped, Lamar said that he was heading back in the studio, where he's been since the beginning of the year. Top Dawg is expected to release as many as six albums this year, one of which reportedly belongs to Lamar.



## Rick Ross

*Mastermind* floated around Twitter as nothing more than a hashtag for most of 2013, but after delays and legal battles, Ricky Rozay has assured his loyal followers that this will finally be the year. On the upside, he was hardly quiet last year, giving us a handful of new tracks and remixes.



## Grimes

Festival appearances and remixes aside, Claire Boucher (aka Grimes) has kept fans waiting for her new record. It does appear the stars are finally lining up for a 2014 release. But one thing is clear: anticipation for more of her fizzy, glow-pop delicacies has not been higher than it is right now.



## U2

Bassist Adam Clayton confirmed last fall that the band was finishing up its new album. The rockers are expected to make an announcement during the Super Bowl regarding the new set, of which Danger Mouse largely produced. Of course, some fans won't like the rumored involvement of will.i.am and David Guetta.



## Wye Oak

For the next album, the band is ditching the guitars and switching things up, which will certainly make for an interesting finished product. 2011's *Civilian* was such an incredible record, and it's hard not to imagine the new one meeting—or beating—expectations.



## Flying Lotus

Only two years after the incredible *Until the Quiet Comes* and with a slew of collaborations to his name, Steven Ellison (aka Flying Lotus) has confirmed on Twitter that a new album is in the works.



## Charli XCX

With several standout singles and her international, mega-hit collaboration with Icona Pop, "I Love it," all eyes are on *SuperLove*, the singer's forthcoming sophomore album. It's expected to release in time to soundtrack your summer, she's previously suggested.



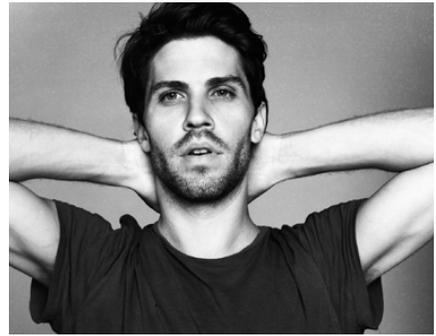
## Azealia Banks ▲

Ladies and gentlemen, it finally looks like we'll be getting that long-promised debut album this year. Following its never-ending delay, Banks had too much time to pick fights on Twitter. But she's since revealed that it will arrive in March, hopefully making the music her mission this year.



## The Decemberists

Frontman Colin Meloy said last fall that he had been "writing new material" specifically for the new album, insinuating it would be ready in the very near future. A couple of songs have already been performed live, and it's clear this one could be the band's most important record to date.



## Lo-Fang

Rising electro-soul composer Matthew Hemerlein (aka Lo-Fang) is set to release his debut album, *Blue Film*, on 4AD in February. And it's sure to be full of more of the stirring, sexy sounds that inspired breakout artist Lorde to invite him on her upcoming spring tour.



## Sampha

After bursting into the spotlight with unforgettable collaborations with Drake, SBTRKT and Jessie Ware, the Young Turks singer is expected to release a full-length album later this year. And he should plan to spend a lot more time outside of London as music lovers across the globe realize his vigor. ■

## Foster the People ▲

After laying low for a few years, the former indie-cult favorite revealed last fall that it was finished with a new full-length that frontman Mark Foster calls a “brave record.” With a new sound, this new material should hit retailers in March.



## SZA

With two blazing tracks, “Julia” and “Teen Spirit,” the buzz of the blogosphere, the TDE R&B songstress is looking to make a fiery debut this year on the label that turned Kendrick Lamar into a household name.

## Jamie N Commons

A year after his Alex Da Kid-produced *Rumble and Sway* EP, the British blues singer has opened for Bruce Springsteen and collaborated with Eminem for *The Marshall Mathers LP 2*. Now, it's his turn to stun the world.



## Chromeo

Anticipation for the electrofunk duo's new album is building, and now that we know it will feature contributions from Toro Y Moi's Chaz Bundick, Ezra Koenig of Vampire Weekend and others, *White Women* already sounds like a winner.

## Porter Robinson

From intimate venues to mammoth festival stages, Variance FutureSounds alum Robinson isn't sitting at the kids' table anymore. And with a brand new record on the horizon, we're watching for him to expand his prominence this year.

40  
ALBUMS to  
WATCH  
for in  
2014



# EXPOSING THE INVISIBLE

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### SWITCHFOOT IS CURRENTLY AT THE FOREFRONT

of a very big moment in its history. Nearly two decades in, the San Diego alt-rock outfit is not only releasing a new album, but they're telling a story that's perhaps been a long time coming—18 years, to be exact.

Preceding the band's newly released *Fading West* record was a documentary of the same name, which followed the surf-rockers across the globe capturing behind-the-scenes footage, tour struggles and even some very personal hardships.

"There are some parts of the movie that I honestly just don't like to watch," frontman Jon Foreman confesses, speaking with *Variance* on a late fall afternoon at the end of the band's tour to promote the new record. "The truth is, though, we wanted to tell an honest story. You can tell the truth in metaphor or in poetry, which is what we have done for years. But people can take away their own interpretation from that. Many times, you can tell the most brutal story in a song, but not everyone will understand what they're hearing. It's not that as a band we haven't had our hardships, it's just that the expression, looking for hope in dark places, has been in metaphors. With the movie, the question was, how much do you leave in? How much of the personal element do we allow into the public? Because we don't have all the answers. And I think the film was a reflection of that. It lets people into that struggle."

The film, which began as a surf project to showcase the guys' other love outside of music, turned into something more. After years of label-hopping and being pigeonholed as something they're not, Switchfoot's fun side-venture

became an opportunity to reveal, in the words of their new single, "Who We Are."

Switchfoot has long been pegged as a "Christian" band, and their battles to overcome the stigma of the genre have been well-documented. But despite notable mainstream success, even Foreman's brother Tim (the band's bassist) lamented during the documentary that they still don't know where they fit in.

While Foreman acknowledges the challenges associated with being this sort of crossover band, and he sees a bigger picture.

"Music is one of those few, incredible common bonds that unites us," the singer explains. "It's one of the true unifying elements of humanity that we can share together. But then again, the reason

I sing the songs and the reason I'm doing what I'm doing might differ from the next guy over. And those are the things that feel the most different between us as a band and a lot of the bands that we end up hanging out with on the road. The motivation behind it."

At this point in the band's career, turning back the clock isn't an option. But the film gives them the chance to change the narrative and present their story unfiltered, potentially appealing to a wider audience.

Having a loyal core fan base is certainly a major perk for any band, but Switchfoot never intended to be a "Christian" band. And with the religious landscape more diverse than ever, Foreman is being a little more vocal about it.

"We've always wanted to play

# SWITCHFOOT

## Chasing a New Wave

**The Band Is Aiming Higher and Telling Their Story in Their Own Words**

BY JONATHAN ROBLES

PHOTO BY BRIAN NEVINS

music for *thinking* people,” he says, pointing to critics. “If people don’t have that kind of open-minded approach to life, then maybe our songs aren’t for them anyway. We want to play music for everyone, but if people want to live in boxes, that’s not really my job to tell them otherwise. The beauty is—and this is our inspiration—that I’ve met so many people from all forms of faith. Islamic and Buddhist and Christian and Atheist, they all find something that resonates with them in our songs.”

Although Switchfoot casts a wide net with their music, the religious sect that embraced the band early on is in many ways fractured and arguably more rigid than it was 10 or 15 years ago. And as Foreman sees it, it’s not healthy.

“In many ways, everyone is now more closed off than ever,” he posits. “People are very seldom starting conversations to learn. Most of the time, when you hear a political debate, on TV or at a backyard barbecue, it’s because two people are dead set in their views and want to prove the other person wrong. For example, in the film, I got a chance to interview Greg Graffin from Bad Religion. A lot of people would think, ‘Switchfoot and Bad Religion have nothing in common. Why would they even have a conversation?’ But we have tons in common and in many ways, I have so much to learn from him and maybe he’s got something to learn from me. We have to approach situations with open hands, not with an agenda. That’s the only way for us to move forward in a positive way.”

As agendas and ulterior motives tend to be relative with the music industry, Foreman

says acts like mewithoutYou, Mumford and Sons, Vampire Weekend and Dr. Dog give him hope for the future of music, noting that he tends to “end up gravitating towards songs and stories. It doesn’t matter how many or how few people they’re in front of, I listen to their story and I’m moved by it. And that’s something I really appreciate.”

After years of making music, with a critic for every fan, the 37-year-old believes the band has remained true to its original vision, despite many who might argue against that claim.

“Sure, we want to reach more people,” he says. “But we’ve never sacrificed who we are to do that. Both in surfing and in music, it started with the endeavor of joy. You pick up a guitar or you paddle out on your surfboard, and you are immersed in this incredible world unlike any other area of life. Of course, there’s the self-expression. And I know sometimes we throw around ‘hope’ and these large words, but even to this day, when I’m singing live on stage, I feel the purpose is for the sheer joy of being alive and simply wanting to share that. So where I am at this very moment, I cer-

tainly feel we’ve remained true to that foundation.”

With a new album and documentary and tour dates to follow, Switchfoot’s short-term plans are intact. But while the distant future is uncertain, Foreman hopes the band will still be around for years to come.

“We’re a band of brothers,” he proclaims. “We will always have that. I know we are at that place where we have families, and you never know. But whether or not we’re making music together, we will always have that common bond. Who’s to say what the future holds? It seems with every album, we do kind of break up the band and start from scratch. We want to make sure we’re not just going through the motions, that music doesn’t just become a paycheck, and that it comes from the heart. But I guess never quite knowing what comes next, just riding the wave, it’s all part of the thrill of it. And I couldn’t ask for anything else.”

**For tour dates and information, go to [switchfoot.com](http://switchfoot.com).**



# PHANTOGRAM

BY RACHEL FAYLENE



M

any acts stick to a release formula that has become dependable for anyone interested in music in the new millennium; Demos and EPs leading to a first full-length, then releasing another EP and another full-length until the spark is gone.

Over the past few years, Phantogram has bucked this trend in releasing only one album and a handful of rich EPs that have kept them at the forefront of indie music. Their work has since been featured in smash movies, popular television series, and even used to promote brands like Canon and Gillette.

While many bands would feel obligated to churn out an album or two with this level of exposure, Phantogram has kept a steady course that has allowed them to work on their own terms. It's also afforded them the chance to work at length with a modern music legend, mixing genres and their fans on a grand scale.

A couple of days before heading off to Mexico City for one more show, Sarah Barthel (the vocals and keyboards to Josh Carter's guitars and sampling) explains the decision to roll out their self-titled EP ahead of their forthcoming record, *VOICES*: "It's just the way it worked. We finished the album and we weren't able to finish it in time for the deadline that we had for our label, and they wanted more time to push it. And then we just wanted to be able to focus more on it, so they decided on pushing it back, and instead of pushing it all back and not giving fans a little taste of Phantogram, they were like, 'Alright, we'll just release some of the songs for now, and then we'll release the rest of them, the full length, later on in the cycle.' That's what the EP [was] for, really. Just to kind of give a little taste of

IT'S  
ALL  
LED  
UP  
TO  
THIS.

what the full length is going to be.”

*Phantogram* was actually the fourth of the four EPs released since the band’s debut album, *Eyelid Movies*. During this run, the duo also decided it was time to expand their reach. Originally releasing their material exclusively through the Barsuk record label, they recently joined forces with Republic Records. Known for pushing popular, progressive acts to the top of the charts, this is an opportunity the band is looking to take full advantage of, as Barthel explains. “The reason we transitioned is because we wanted more of a push. We wanted our music to get out to more people, so we wanted to make this the next step. I mean, so far, so good, but we’re looking forward to the next year when we can really get our music out to more people, and they’re the best for that.”

Now part of a roster that includes forward-thinking artists such as Drake and The Weeknd, Phantogram are in a fantastic situation to sample, shake up and fuse disparate genres into a crackling creation for audiences that may not go digging for fresh music regularly.

In between releasing their music in exciting doses, Phantogram also had the fortune of being discovered by hip-hop great Big Boi, one-half of the seminal Southern rap act OutKast alongside André 3000. For his second solo album, *Vicious Lies and Dangerous Rumors*, Big Boi featured the group on three tracks and shot them a producer’s credit for the track “Objectum Sexuality.”

Barthel elaborates: “He found us online, like [an ad or something] just popped up on his screen while he was doing something, and he pressed the button, and it took him to a music video for “Mouthful of Diamonds.” He looked through it and he fucking loved it, he was super pumped about it, put it on his blog. We found out about that; we started just talking to him. After that we became friends with him on Twitter, and then we were doing the same festival circuit at the time, so we met him in San Francisco, and then we met him again in Atlanta when we played. He invited us over ... Josh played him some of his beats that he had just laying around and hoped that he would want to use some of them.”

Listening to OutKast growing up, Barthel says it’s a “dream come true” to be working closely with Big Boi. “It’s great. He’s kind of a mentor to us in a way. He’s always rooting for us. Whenever we stop in when we’re on tour and stuff, we play him our stuff and he gets really excited about it.”

Although they’ve had success delving into the hip-hop genre, the group still draws creative boundaries for individual proj-



ects. The new album, *VOICES*, will be a distinctly Phantogram record, continuing the sonic themes of their last EP. “We kind of wanted to keep the album a piece of work on its own, just because sometimes it’s hard. There’s a fine line of change that can happen if it’s not done right. Like intermixing different genres or having guest appearances and things like that. We wanted to keep *VOICES* [separate].”

Collaborating with Big Boi will undoubtedly attract new fans to *VOICES*. But for those who cannot get enough of the *Vicious Lies...* efforts, there will be a future release expanding on those ideas, according to Barthel: “What we’re going to do with Big, we’re going to release an EP with him where it’ll be a collaboration of stuff. Because we’ve got more than just one song idea. It just gives us another really fun excuse to work with him for longer.”

Of course, the timeline for that has yet to be drawn, considering an expected OutKast reunion this spring at Coachella and what will likely be a busy summer for both Big and André. But Barthel says it’s definitely in the works.

When it comes to the influences of *VOICES*, Barthel points to the origin of the title: “It actually came from an idea of an older song that we made a long time ago. We ended up re-recording it. The plan was it would be on the album, but it didn’t come out together correctly. It didn’t fit,” she says.

“But it’s just the idea I guess of having personal conversations with the other person in your head. Hearing voices, not knowing where they’re coming from; It kind of gives it a psychedelic idea, too,

which there’s a lot of psychedelic [influence] on the record as well. Just kind of leaving it open to – you know, everyone has their own voices that come up, come in your dreams or when you’re walking down the street or wherever.”

The samples and songwriting also put bandmate Josh Carter’s talent on greater display, as Barthel explains. “The songwriting in general is great, but Josh was super [big] on records and old vinyl, these pieces of music that he finds in the most random places, from an old band concert to some Indian records we sampled off of. We played some really cool shit, old soul, Motown. Just obscure stuff that we kind of started with as the base for the album and kind of built from there, built around it and were able to build songs on top of it. We were able to make full dynamics. A lot of things are more dynamic compared to our last album.”

She ultimately cites their approach to production as the quality that stands out most on *VOICES*: “The biggest influence, I would have to say, is just beat-making and sampling. We just got such a different way of looking at production and beats. You’ll hear a lot of that.”

Phantogram rode a steady wave of quality releases into 2014, but it’s only the beginning. Incorporating ideas from different, dynamic genres of music and pulling new fans from each of them, they are now postured to continue surprising the public with their effusive, beat-driven pace. All in all, it’s going to be a very good year for this pair.

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***VOICES* is set to release Feb. 18 on Republic Records.**

**DON'T LOOK BACK**



**THE WALKING DEAD**

**RETURNS FEB 9  
SUNDAYS 9P**

**amc**

Afie Jurvanen, also known as Bahamas, is a Canadian musician with a knack for music that simply makes the listener feel better. It's subtle, never over the top, and perfect for those just wanting to relax and listen to good music. There is always a place for tunes like that.

His first album, *Pink Strat*, was recorded in a cabin in rural Canada, and the end result catapulted him straight into local fame. Equipped with an acoustic guitar and soft, soothing vocals, there is believability in his voice that disarms

fans and allows them to feel the song as it is intended. With his second album, *Barchords*, he created an album that has been widely overlooked but easily one of the better efforts from any musician in recent memory.

For those unfamiliar with *Barchords*, or Bahamas in general, start with "Lost in the Light" for a track that guarantees to improve mood, make you smile or provide the cure for a bad day. In the quieter moments, move on to "Montreal" for a track that puts the listener at ease and provides a

great soundtrack for thought and introspection.

As 2014 begins, look for Bahamas on the recent soundtrack for *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, in which he teams up with The Weather Station to present a slowed down, acoustic version of The Human League's "Don't You Want Me." It's a perfect cover and brings a different take on a classic song that most everyone has likely heard. Aside from that, we'll continue looking forward to the next full-length album in hopes for much more of the same from this wonderful artist.



BAHAMAS



GREGORY ALAN ISOKOV

A native South African that immigrated to the United States as a child, Gregory Alan Isakov is a singer-songwriter that has the ability to paint any picture using only his voice and an acoustic guitar. Inspired by his travels, his music is mellow, honest and altogether beautiful—a brand of tunes that promises to ease nerves when life gets too stressful.

Releasing his first album in 2005, Isakov is no stranger to the music business, but

his *Mona Lisa* came on 2013's album, *The Weatherman*. From the very first track, listeners are enveloped in a story that unfolds across the entire album, as each song builds upon the last. His voice inspires reflection and wonder, and you soon find yourself starting the album all over again once it's finished.

To get a feel for Isakov at his finest, check out "Amsterdam" from his latest album, and also make sure to lose yourself in "Astronaut." However, to fully appreci-

ate what he does, you must listen to each album in its entirety. This sect of music is not the type that is best experienced in chunks.

Be looking for more from Isakov in 2014 and beyond, as he promises to continue creating music for his passionate and very engaged fan base. His music is timeless and will always have its place among mp3 players, playlists whatever comes next. Hopefully you heard it here first.

## THE SOUNDS YOU NEED TO HEAR



### GEOGRAPHER

Finding their origin in San Francisco in 2007, Geographer's unique brand of music is upbeat and cool; perfect for the new beginnings that a new year often inspires. The guys have described their music as "soulful music from outer space," and after one listen, such an outlandish statement makes complete sense.

With the release of their 2010 EP, *Animal Shapes*, Geographer very much hit the scene with force. Each track blends electronic and acoustic music, throwing

in perfect vocals on top of that. The finished product inspires fans to move their feet but also think, as the lyrics of each song are worth paying attention to as well.

With their last full-length album, 2012's *Myth*, the group put its musical maturation on display as the collection of songs proves to be a complete listen from start to finish. The sound is familiar even to those who have never heard it, and fans from all different genres can find something to appreciate in each track.

The band's songs have been featured on MTV's *Awkward*, *The Buried Life*, in addition to an iPad Mini commercial.

In becoming a fan of Geographer, expect to find a brand of music that makes you feel cool while listening to it. It is perfect for top-down driving or rainy days stuck in the house—a versatility that is hard to come by. Geographer will undoubtedly become the next band you can't wait to tell your friends about, and we're hoping for new music and big things in 2014.

Described on its Facebook page as simply “Indie Post Punk Pop band from Paris,” Concorde is a relatively unknown group that is great at making fantastic music. After a year that saw the band release a critically acclaimed EP, 2014 looks to be another big step in the overall success of this group.

Concorde released two full-length albums in 2012, followed by 2013’s *Floating There* EP, so coming up with catchy new material is clearly no

struggle for these boys from Paris. Blending electronic with catchy lyrics and upbeat feelings, listeners will experience a type of funky, head-bobbing brand of music that is uncommon in today’s landscape. Another one of those bands that just makes you feel kind of cool for knowing about it, this is the type of group that you want to get in on early so you can say, “I told you so.”

For those looking to get on the fast track of what this group and its music

is all about, start with the title track from the *Floating There* EP. Then move on to “Lie Down” from 2012’s *Summer House* album. Both tracks perfectly showcase what this music is all about and guarantee to make you a fan in the process.

Long story short, this is a feel-good brand of music that you want to jam when the sun is out. Also perfect for those of us deadlocked in the middle of winter and daydreaming of sunnier days. Give it a listen and fall in love.



CONCORDE





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# Angel Haze

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**BREAKING THE RULES AND  
FOLLOWING HER OWN PATH**

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BY EDWIN WILSON

**IT'S**

a cold afternoon in late November. Winter has made its way to the East Coast, and it's starting to feel like the holidays, but Raykeea Angel Wilson (aka Angel Haze) is still busy working ahead of her debut album, *Dirty Gold*, believed at the time to be coming in March.

"It's so close, I can't believe it's finally starting to become a reality," the young songstress beams. "It's one of those things you dream about, but to think that's it's actually time, it's just unreal. It's hard to wait."

So she didn't wait. Only days later, she took to Twitter in a fury and leaked her own album, slamming her label Island/Republic Records and declaring: "Since they don't want to put it out this year, I will. Here's the album. Here is *Dirty Gold*. I hope you all enjoy it."

Of course, the leak was pulled down immediately. And the label

opted to rush the album out officially on Dec. 30 instead of holding for March.

It didn't take long for the opinions to roll in. Did Angel Haze really just do what M.I.A. and Kid Cudi had once threatened to do? Surely it was a career-killer. What was she thinking? Or maybe she just gave herself the best kind of PR. Maybe Beyoncé just got to her with that surprise album.

While there has been no shortage of critiques surrounding the "leak" and its aftermath, just days prior, the blogosphere was on fire, singing the rising MC's praises. Her "30 Gold" cover series was a hit, offering renditions of Lana Del Rey and Miley Cyrus hits, among other seemingly left-field song choices.

"It was something I used to do before I was signed," she reveals. "I told my manager, 'I miss that. Putting out new freestyles everyday. It'd

be fun to tap into that and do it again.' I don't think people expected me to be able to sing. And maybe I did it to prove something to them, but probably to prove something to me before the album. Because I'm not gonna lie, listening to it—the finished, real thing—I'm freaking the fuck out."

At 22, perhaps Wilson is in some ways the victim of her own success. Not too long ago, she was working her way up in the game, just trying to catch someone's—anyone's—ear. 2012's *Reservation* EP quickly established her as a force to be reckoned with, and her cover of Eminem's "Cleanin' Out My Closet" was met with applause. But the underground scene isn't like the mainstream, and the rules are very different. So many rules.

Although Wilson has made clear before that her rap skills are competitive with better-knowns, and her passion has never been in question, the reality is that, despite her authentic desire to just make her music, the label's trying to make a star.

By now, fans know the formula: a feature here, a feature there, a single, a showcase, an EP, a cover and wait. Another song trickles out. Give it time to catch on, and then hopefully it's album time.

*Dirty Gold* is proof of that timeline. The fire's there. The skill is evident. But it's brimming with radio-ready, mainstream-friendly material, clearly aiming for Macklemore's territory, with uplifting lyrics and anthemic choruses. And while it may seem outside of Wilson's sphere to some, she'd actually like to collaborate with the "Same Love" rapper, whose song she brilliantly covered with her own personal experience.

"I struggled with wanting to cover that song," recalls Wilson, who is openly queer. "I'm fairly moderate about imposing my own views upon other people. I like to give everyone a chance to think for themselves, and that's pretty much it for me. But I know that struggle and when I hear from kids about how much they hated being gay or they hated being different, it struck me. I feel like, if I have been given a platform, this is a chance for me to say something and use it for good. It's a chance for me to add my voice, as someone who's actually been there myself, letting people know, 'Here's why you shouldn't worry, because it will get better.'"

While Macklemore has been criticized

for rapping about marriage equality as a straight man, Wilson doesn't see the problem. In fact, she encourages more of it.

"I get why people didn't like it," she admits. "But I don't know if I see it like that. It has to be important for people to speak out, regardless of who you are or how you identify yourself. Black, white, straight, trans, it doesn't matter. Someone has to say something. And more importantly is actually doing something, taking action. It's not just talking. But with anything, why would you want less voices? What we need is more."

It's clear from the young star's fervency that she isn't fond of voices being silenced, which is understandable. But only days before Wilson talked to *Vari-ance*, an interesting thing—at least, in hindsight—happened. Azealia Banks, who's frequently mentioned alongside Wilson thanks to their highly publicized diss track war, took to Twitter in a rage.

Banks, who's quite familiar with Twitter feuds, had called out Pharrell Williams for his lack of support for their collaboration "ATM Jam," and she blamed her label for delaying her long-forthcoming debut album.

"I don't understand all that," says Wilson in reference to Banks' rant. "I know I'm not in a position to criticize and I'm not trying to give my two cents in regards to her anyway, but there has to be a better way. I just can't see myself doing that."

That's not to say it's easy for a young artist—or any artist, for that matter—to deal with a major label, as Wilson quickly acknowledges.

"I've only ever actively had a problem with one person and very instantly regretted that," she admits. "I try not to be a person who's putting out negative energy. And if I feel that my album is being delayed and it's not my fault, I have to try to understand where they're coming from. And I'll be honest, that's hard. So I get that. I really like Republic. I love my label. And they've given me the freedom that I've needed. But everything's not perfect. You as an artist have a vision, and it's not easy sometimes to accept that not everyone will see what you see. They might have their own vision, but it's not yours."

While Wilson's battle over her vision versus the label's might be an ongoing one, she recently earned the praise of one of her idols, Missy Elliott, who en-

couraged her to press on. And despite the flawed album release, there's plenty for Wilson to be inspired by.

"One of the things I love about rap is how your peers push you to work harder and be better," she says. "I mean, look at Kendrick Lamar. If we're talking about the rap game right now, I don't think there's many people outdoing him at the moment. That's just how it

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is. Of course, Eminem just dropped his album, and hands down, Eminem ranks over anyone. Period. And those guys inspire me. They push me to try just a little more.”

With a shaky launch into the mainstream spotlight, Wilson’s latest chapter will be a curious one to maneuver through, but if she remains true to herself, she knows she’ll be fine.

“I want to be known for my honesty, and my relentlessness,” she reveals. “It’s who I am as a person and it’s part of the message that I have. I want people to know that, even if you piss some people off, you can be who and whatever the hell you want. That’s what my story is about. A person who comes from the fucking dirt who believes you can aspire to be something better. I know I’m not there

yet, and I’m still growing.

“But I still want to be more. I know I’m not perfect, but I’ve poured my heart into this music. That’s the most important thing to me, is just to spread that hope. Someone out there needs to know that they’re valuable and that they can make it. When you have that on your conscience, you just can’t ignore that. You just can’t.” ■





# BASTILLE

## OVERJOYED AND ABSOLUTELY UNSTOPPABLE

BY EMILY HULSEBERG

This year is already turning out to be a great one for English four-piece Bastille. The band just released their deluxe album, *All This Bad Blood*, and has four BRIT Awards nominations for the upcoming ceremony on Feb. 19, tying for the most nods with producer duo Disclosure. And of course, there's the Jan. 25 episode of *Saturday Night Live*, in which the band serves as musical guest alongside host Jonah Hill.

2013 catapulted the band into international stardom with their debut album, *Bad Blood*, which earned them the title of the U.K.'s top-selling debut act. It's just one of countless chart-topping numbers for the band that only formed in 2010. Their single "Pompeii" can be heard across the globe and has jumped from chart to chart, reaching sales of nearly two million. And it really seems like this is just the jumping-off point.

Frontman Dan Smith chatted with *Variance* while he was in the States preparing for a series of promo shows to discuss what's next for a band that is in such high demand.

North America for the past few years has experienced a surge in great music from across the pond, prompting many music observers to refer to it as another "British Invasion." Whatever you call it, Bastille is certainly no exception. The guys have been selling out U.S. shows and getting tons of radio airplay in a market many international acts acknowledge as the toughest to break into.

With all the success, the band still has a hard time believing it. "I think we're kind of—we're quite thrilled about it and we're a bunch of realists," says Smith. "So I don't think we ever imagined we'd ever be coming to America and playing."

"I think the thing with America is, it's obviously such a vast country, and it's so varied and I think the majority of the country, we've never visited. We're just already lucky to have the opportunity to even travel around America. To be able to do it in the context of playing songs, playing our music, is unbelievable."

The band's first official release was "Overjoyed." The song found some success back home, but the single that really put the band on the international map, so to speak, was "Pompeii," an upbeat, fun, sing-along type song that's an earworm for sure. This track was the catalyst that propelled the band into mainstream popularity. The song released in February 2013 and hasn't let up since.

"It's always been really important to us to release a lot of music... the idea was to make a bunch of songs we really like but that allowed us to kind of experiment," explains Smith. "The thing that we found really gratifying in England was 'Pompeii' doing well, but then the album did quite well, which means that people hopefully really like the collec-

tion of songs and not just a single."

The entire album is filled with great music. The second track "Things We Lost In The Fire" is a great follow-up from intro track "Pompeii," while "Overjoyed" takes on a totally different set of emotions and draws the listener in closer. The highs and lows from the album show the depth of the band and their diverse sound.

The new release, *All This Bad Blood*, is a reissue of the original album on disc one with some B-sides and new tracks on the second disc.

"I think the thing with the reissue of the album...all the songs on there, I really want to release properly. It's a really nice way to do that. It almost draws the line to close this chapter and start the next one properly," says Smith.

Despite an avalanche of success and a rapidly growing fan base across the globe, the band's next chapter is still unclear, even for Smith, who admits that it's hard to speculate about the future when the band could hardly anticipate their current status.

Of course, a new album is most definitely in the cards, the 26-year-old singer assures. In fact, he's already begun working on the new record. Ultimately, the timeline will be impacted by other factors, but he suggests it will be sooner rather than later.

"I think if I was given the time, which I don't think I have—I'd love to release it this year. But we will have to wait and see."

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**Bastille's deluxe album, *All This Bad Blood*, is out now. For tour dates, go to [bastillebastille.com](http://bastillebastille.com).**



# JAMES VINCENT MCMORROW

## SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS

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**S**ure, we're only weeks into 2014. But James Vincent McMorrow has already released one of the best albums of the year.

His sophomore record, *Post Tropical*, marks a noted shift in sound, something many fans are quick to point out. But for 31-year-old McMorrow, whose birthday was the same day as the album's stateside release, the only thing that matters is his fans finally having their hands on the record.

"It's a feeling of relief mixed with excitement and terror," he says, speaking with *Variance* ahead of the album's arrival. "It's strange because I've been living with it and thinking about it for years now, and I've been making it for so long. But then when it was finished, you kind of have to sit on your hands, almost—for seven, eight months, to do all the other parts of it, which are relatively unexciting but important."

Thankfully, the singer has had plenty on his plate in the meantime to keep him busy.



STORY BY JONATHAN ROBLES  
PHOTOS BY EMMA J DOYLE

“

MAYBE SOME OF MY FANS WOULDN'T LISTEN TO DRAKE OR NEIL YOUNG OR PUSHA T, BUT THIS IS THE MUSIC I LOVE. SO I DRAW FROM IT AND THEN WATCH IT BECOME ITS OWN THING.

”

“We’ve had the rehearsals, traveling, talking to all the labels, making sure everything’s set up,” he recalls. “So you don’t really have time to think about the fact that a record is about to come out. It didn’t hit me until recently, and I realized that everybody was about to hear it and people were about to start talking about the songs on the record. It overwhelmed me in a way, but I’m just excited for people to finally be able to hear it.”

Of course, the James Blake/Bon Iver/Alt-J comparisons are inevitable, as the singer’s second offering veers from the folksy roots of freshman set *Early in the Morning* to a majestic, glowing world of soul and synths.

While some may question his entry into the column of alt-R&B, one thing is true: The honest lyricism fans came to love before is still there. In fact, with those sweeping falsettos and soaring vocals, the authenticity of the words spilling from his mouth only seems further highlighted. And according to McMorro, one of *Variance’s* 2012 FutureSounds picks, it’s a natural progression.

“I don’t think there was any thought on my part to challenging implications or ideas,” the singer explains of having previously been lumped in with other folk singers. “I wasn’t trying to surprise anyone, no. My instincts are always pretty clear, and with this album, more than anything, this is a completely unfiltered version of what I hear in my head and what I would want to listen to and what I wanted to make. People will make up their own minds when they hear it, but I always call myself a soul singer.”

As McMorro explains, it’s much different for those of us hearing the finished product without having experienced the struggle of its creation or the process from beginning to end.

“It’s easy for people to hear an album and go, ‘Here’s my opinion,’” he says. “But when I’m the one actually making the record, pulling those songs

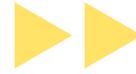
from the depths of my soul, I wasn’t thinking about defying expectations or about people’s response. I just literally wanted to make the best possible music. Whatever it was, was whatever it was. I wasn’t thinking about where it would fit in or where it could go on a chart or how it would even relate to the first record. It didn’t even occur to me that someone might listen to it and go, ‘Wow, these are big changes.’ I’m learning and growing as an artist, so I think it’s natural that I would want to apply the production with the knowledge that I’ve learned, things that I understand for the first time. People have to understand that musicians have to live and experience life between records, and that will affect their music.”

The singer isn’t shy about admitting the influence of others’ work on his material. In fact, he believes it’s unrealistic to claim otherwise.

“I’m a lover of music first,” he admits with ease. “So all the music that I love is rattling around in my head. Of course, I wanted to walk into the studio with as little real estate taken in my head as possible, but it’s still in there. I remember reading an article of Fiona Apple saying she doesn’t listen to new music—and there are others who won’t listen to any music after 1925 or something. They don’t want new music to influence what they do. That’s not how I approached my album.”

Instead, McMorro sought to capture the inclinations of his own heart while marrying contrastable sounds.

“There are all sorts of songs that sparked my creativity,” he recalls. “I remember listening to the Flying Lotus record, *Until the Quiet Comes*, and thinking, ‘What a beautiful, densely-crafted record.’ It amazed me that people don’t try to go for that production in my world. They don’t try to create these beautiful, big productions. Instead, that’s over there and songwriting is over here, and the two never meet. That was a catalyst in my mind. I thought, these beautiful



records exist and maybe some of my fans wouldn’t listen to Drake or Neil Young or Pusha T, but this is the music I love. So I draw from it and then watch it become its own thing.”

Ultimately, McMorro is trying to push music forward. And he hopes that’s what he is doing with this new album.

“Sometimes we forget the context for all the records that we love,” he says. “We think that a record that was made in 1950, 1960, was trying to be nostalgic. It was trying to be cutting-edge. Marvin Gaye was the first to use a 808 on a commercial record. Some people were like, ‘What’s going on? This is conceptual, it’s progressive.’ The label struggled to release it because it was too far ahead of the curve. And even James Jamerson; he was pushing the limits and I think that’s good for music. We need that.”

As the new album has finally begun making its way to fans’ ears, McMorro hopes it’s simple enough to make sense upon first listen but complex enough to require some effort.

“If people keep coming back to the record and discovering something new about it, then I know that I’ve done my job right,” he declares. “I just hope it keeps giving back. And I hope that whatever people take away from it, that it resonates and that they’re able to carry it with them as they go about their lives.”

**Post Tropical is out now in North America. For McMorro’s upcoming tour dates, go to [jamesvmcmorrow.com](http://jamesvmcmorrow.com).**



# Jon Bellion



Ξ a brilliant visionary with the chops  
to back it up }

WRITTEN BY RACHEL FAYLENE //

## → JON BELLION

is a young voice already making a big impact with his skills and creating some impressive opportunities for himself. His fearless mindset and numerous talents have capture the attention of many in the music industry, as it's becoming increasingly clear that Bellion is an artist on the verge of something new.

"I produce and I write, I mix and I master everything myself," he tells *Variance* on a cool winter morning. "I produce and direct all my videos and all that stuff. The blogs just thankfully kind of picked up on it and dug what I was doing. Therefore, it kind of spread on its own. It's been really good."

Most people at 22 years old are still looking for a clue as to the next phase of their lives that might hopefully lead to another. Bellion, on the other hand, has been sure of himself for some time now. He isn't anxious trying to figure out who he is or how he would like to present himself and his work.

"I started rapping way before I was singing," he explains. "So I kind of wanted to do a record that's reminiscent of something super urban or something that shows the side of me that tells you, 'No, I'm not just a kid who writes pop records' or 'I'm not a kid who your girlfriend likes.' I'm a dude at the same time. I also have testosterone. I'm not just thinking about happy-go-lucky type things. I'm not afraid to be the cool kid. But I also want to let kids know you don't have to stay in a box."

Bellion has confidently allowed his influences guide him toward a more active approach to his passion and away from theory. As many liberal arts students are beginning to realize, he found it was important to weigh his drive and ability against an all-too-formal pass at his craft. And for that, he cites Kanye West's debut album, *The College Dropout*, released 10 years ago this month, as one of his greatest inspirations.

"*College Dropout* is the reason why I literally dropped out of college," he reveals with a laugh. "I went to college for about a year, and I'd kind of reminiscence on when that album came out. I was listening to it one day and literally there's a couple of skits in [it] where this guy is talking about going to college and racking up debt, so then [he] can pass it on to [his] kid when he dies."

And that's when it hit Bellion. That's when he realized what he needed to do, admitting that West's record "struck a chord" with him.

"I'm like, 'You know what? I'm in a music school [but] I'm learning what I already kind of know,'" he recalls. "Because I had already started years before I went to college, so I was like, 'Maybe it's time for me to move on.' I didn't really have a plan or anything, but I just had a feeling to kind of – whatever. Exactly one year later, that's when everything started really picking up. I got a full-time job. It was actually the best decision ever because that year, all I really did was work at a catering hall and just made beats for like a year straight, seven days a week, eight hours a day. It was going to work and then work on beats. So that album (*Dropout*) actually inspired me to really go for it, really chase the dream."

Exercising one's talent and realizing its life-altering potential are two very separate things though. Bellion may dream big, but he also stresses that his ultimate message is a humble one.

"Music is just going to be a vessel for me," the young multi-hyphenate explains. "I feel like once I have the masses – and I know I'm talking really insanely prophetically, and I sound like a nutcase right now, but this is kind of just to get people to listen to what I'm saying. I have something to say. Music's just my medium. One day, I want to tell 4 million people that compassion is everything. There's a bigger picture, and it's all for God. It's not really for me. I could show people that you don't have to be

dirty and disgusting or completely negative and dark. You can still be dope and still show people that it's cool to be kind, that it's cool to be nice to people, to be good to them."

Beyond that lasting message, Bellion feels that his efforts will continue to be appreciated long after the radio cycles and bloggers have moved on.

"I think people will look back on the records I'm making right now from an eclectic standpoint and it'll still sound good," he predicts with an unusually confident sense of humility. "I feel like that's what can separate me. I think my records can stand up against what's out right now, and they'll see the time that was put into the lyrics or the production, and they'll see the growth from album to album, to the care that I put into my music. And I think it's starting to catch on."

He's right about that. Following the debut of his mega-hit "The Monster," made famous by Eminem and Rihanna but written and produced by Bellion, he released his own free album, *The Separation*. And with it, he hopes to grab the attention of the masses and compel them to listen to what makes him stand out from the crowded pop music scene today.

Even after accomplishing what most artists might consider a breakthrough, Bellion carefully proceeding onward, stressing the importance of refining your skills and growing as a serious artist.

"I'm still perfecting my craft," he admits. "I'm still getting better at what I'm doing. I'm still getting better at relaying messages through music. That's what the craft is. And you've got to work on it. But when you know what your message is and why you're doing it, when you have that vision, you can't fail."

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**For the latest updates from Bellion, follow him on Twitter: @jonbellion. Expect a full-length album from him later this year.**

BY AARON LACHMAN

*a*

armed since 1997 with only an analog, four-track tape recorder, Mason Jennings has been recording and releasing his rootsy, folk-pop according to no one's rules but his own. So when Jennings started writing for his latest album, *Always Been*, he returned to the basics that brought him success in the first place.

Retreating to the back room of his cabin studio in the woods, bringing only a guitar, piano, books, and a tape recorder with just one 90-minute cassette inside, Jennings crafted new songs all winter long. He took time to slow down and concentrate on the songwriting.

"I spent some time there just working really on the writing part of it," he reveals. "The last couple of records I had made with the computer in front of me and done a lot of recording of the instruments all myself, so



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# MASON JENNINGS

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for this writing process I got rid of the computer and just kind of holed up with a guitar and a piano and a cassette recorder. Just spent a lot of time writing the songs with a notebook and just working on the song part before I even thought about the recording part.”

Slowing down helped Jennings rethink his approach to making records. Separating the writing process from the recording also helped him avoid getting wrapped up in getting an idea down too quickly. “In the past, I’d write a song and then I’d record it, and I’d get kind of attached to the parts. I’d get attached to the drum part or I’d get attached to the guitar part, and then I wouldn’t want to really go back and mess with it too much. But if you stay at that part where the song is still malleable and not connected to an actual recording, then it’s a little easier to change.”

Known for his self-recorded albums, Jennings really wanted to take a different approach with *Always Been*, explaining that he “felt like I kind of hit the end of a certain path I was on. I had made three or four records in a row that were really heavily based on working on my own, and I sort of got to this spot where it wasn’t really flowing as naturally.” He continues: “I thought, ‘Well, that usually is a good sign to try something different and to see if something else lights up.’ And this pathway lit up for me.”

Instead of recording on his own, this time Jennings chose to record with producer Bo Ramsey, whose work he admired from previously projects with Greg Brown, The Pines and Iris DeMent. He says, “When I was thinking about producing this, I looked through my record collection and was just checking out what I probably listened to the most this

year, and those records were right at the top of the list, so I thought, ‘He’s the common name on the back of those records. I should check in with him and see if he’d be interested in helping.’”

Having an outside producer allowed Jennings to focus less on the overall product and concentrate on giving the best vocal and instrumental performances he could.

“It made me really have to gain some clarity with my performances and with every song,” Jennings recalls. “We spent the time to go into a studio and I’m there with other people, and ... it’s the time to record the song right now; for me, it was a situation where I definitely felt like I had to step up.”

In the past, working alone, Jennings could take plenty of time to perfect his recordings. Working on a tight studio schedule forced Jennings to pull out his best performances on the fly, making for a raw, honest sounding record where the songwriting takes center stage. Ramsey even brought in some of Jennings’ favorites to play on the record, including the previously mentioned DeMent, Brown and members of The Pines.

There’s a lot of honesty on *Always Been*. There are plenty of uplifting songs on the al-

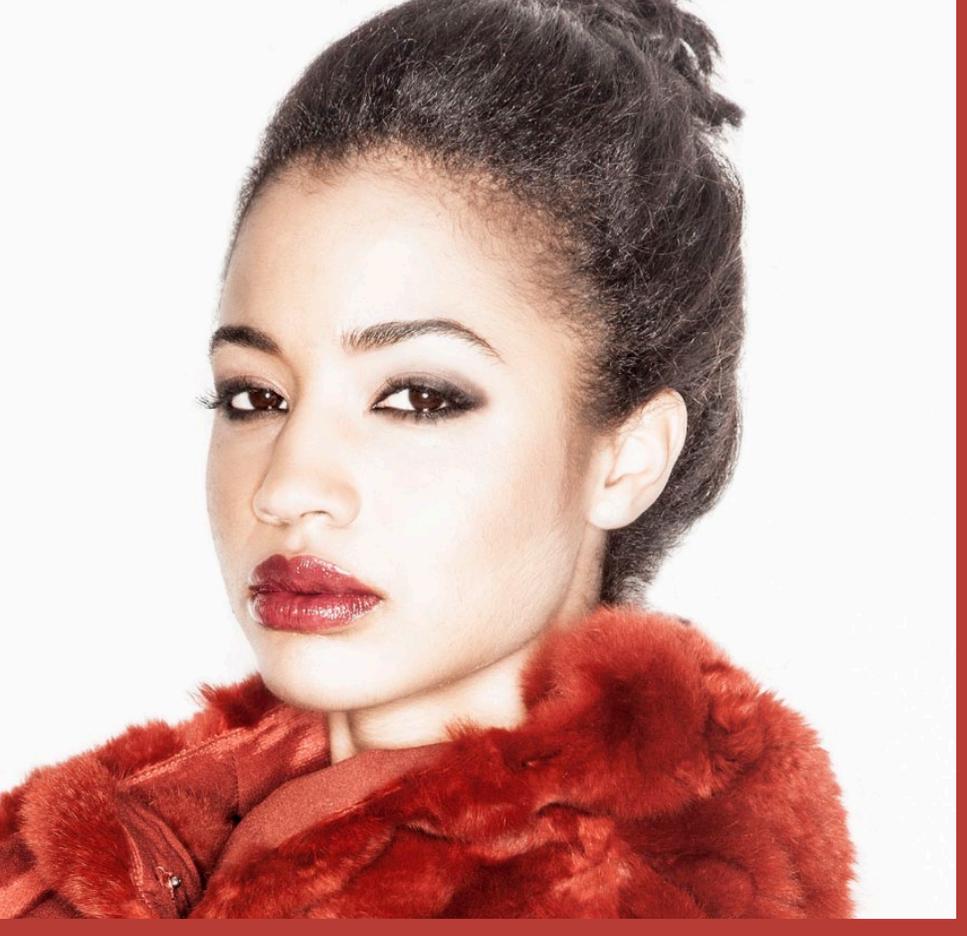
bum, but also a lot of pain. It’s important for Jennings to be open with his songwriting, as he says he is “trying to get the full spectrum of human emotion.” And it shows on the record.

“I’m always looking to have as much contrast as you possibly can within a piece of art, whether it be a photograph or a book. I like things to have real dark darks and light lights,” Jennings says. He wants his songs to connect with people, so he puts his heart and soul into his music. Even while he’s on the road supporting the new record, which was released in November, he’s constantly working on new songs, and exploring new ways to bring people together.

Ultimately, Jennings is blunt about his mission statement with his latest effort: “I hope it somehow connects and maybe gives [listeners] the sense that they’re not alone. For me, that’s the beauty of music. I constantly turn to music for just that comfort, [and] also inspiration, but deep down, that feeling of interconnectedness and hope. I hope that I can help in the way that I’ve been helped by music.”

**Jennings is on tour now through May. For dates, go to [masonjennings.com](http://masonjennings.com).**

PHOTO BY BENSON RAMSEY



# ERINN WESTBROOK

BY MERLYN HAMILTON

has been in American homes. From equality to drug use and gun violence in our schools, *Glee* has brought attention to issues that most families would not normally discuss. And despite the show's flagging ratings and recent criticisms, Westbrook is looking at the big picture.

"I'm so excited to be part of a show that has carried that torch and will continue to bring forth relevant issues to the table," says Westbrook. "I think it gives people things to discuss and it makes those harder issues a little bit easier to talk about and to focus on. In a time where you can't just ignore lots of the things that are being dealt with on *Glee*, it sets the stage for really interesting discussion and it opens people's eyes. So anything I can do to be a part of something that is pushing the envelope and making people think and become a little bit more open-minded, I'm certainly all for it and I'm really happy to be part of the *Glee* family in that regard."

Despite the open diversity on *Glee*, not all shows have embraced that principle. NBC's *Saturday Night Live* last year found itself at the center of ongoing criticism over their lack of black female players. It was further highlighted last November when *Scandal* star Kerry Washington hosted the sketch comedy show and brought attention to their lack of diversity. Weeks later, the show began casting calls for an African-American woman to join the cast.

"I think that diversity is certainly very important," Westbrook agrees. "I mean, at a time like today, clearly Kerry Washington is holding her own on that show (*Scandal*) and that's not a comedy, so you can see that she can do a whole bunch of things and see that African-American women and different women in general can—they're bringing lots of different things to the table. But yeah, in terms of diversity, it's clearly very important. It's clearly important to *Glee* and I'm happy to be bringing something different, not just as an African-American girl, but as Erinn basically, and I think that's the most important thing."

**To follow Erinn Westbrook's latest moves, look to her Twitter account: @EriVeronica.**

If *Glee*'s newest Cheerio, Bree, looks really familiar, perhaps you recognize her from MTV's *Spring Break*. Or maybe you saw her in *Cosmopolitan* or *Seventeen*. Regardless of where you've seen her, it's undeniable that Erinn Westbrook has a face and a personality that is not easily forgotten.

Even though it may seem strange to some that this actress followed her parents' footsteps and graduated from Harvard, Westbrook admits that there has always been a plan.

"I've always explored exactly what I've been interested in and journalism was definitely an interest of mine," she tells *Variance*. "I interned at *Allure* magazine and *Vogue* magazine, and I've always had an interest in fashion and fashion journalism, but acting was always sort of my primary goal and it's something that I always wanted to explore more seriously upon graduating."

She certainly did explore it more seriously. Known perhaps for her roles on the television series such as *Movers & Changers* and *Mr. Box Office*, Westbrook recently joined the *Glee* roster as Bree, the newest mean girl. So how does she turn off the "mean girl" when she's not in front of the camera?

"I think as actors, there's really no—I guess there's a switch [but] I'm just having fun and performing and doing what

I think that character would do," Westbrook says. "[People ask me], 'How do you prepare for such a mean role and character' and I'm just like, I'm sort of doing my own thing. I guess I'm just drawing from actresses I've watched sort of consciously, perhaps I'm drawing from them, but I just am throwing myself into the part and am having fun and doing what I feel in the moment. I mean, the writing is great so really it's about memorizing the lines and then sort of bringing in my own sort of feistiness and interpretation to the character."

While some actors may have been apprehensive about starting on a show as established as *Glee*, Westbrook was not.

"I feel really blessed and inspired to be with this cast and ... I admire everybody I work with," she says. "So it's been truly a remarkable experience so far, and I would say, in terms of the fan base, it's overwhelming, but in the best kind of way. Really, people have expectations as the new girl, sort of all eyes are on you and what you're going to do, and what you're going to bring to the table. Some people are going to like it, some people aren't. [You] have to do your thing and do your best and hope for the best. And I [don't think I've] let the fans down. I'm excited about it."

With less than two seasons left, there is no denying how monumental the show



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## REALITY CHECK: *Singing Competition Overload*

BY ABBY OLSEN

**W**ith the recent return of *American Idol* for its 13th—or as Fox calls it, XIII—season and *The Voice* soon kicking off round six, singing competitions will once again rule the airwaves.

In a crowded and fatigued market, both shows are facing challenges. *Idol* is trying to plug its leak of viewers after a 23% decline last year from season 11, which was already down double digits as it is. Several years of musical chairs on the judges panel haven't helped either, and the well-documented Mariah Carey-Nicki Minaj feud only emboldened that problem.

Meanwhile, *The Voice* has all but anchored NBC outside of football. The show is now regularly used to launch other programs on the network or help failing ones, as was seen last fall when the Peacock had the chair-turning show airing three nights a week in hopes of boosting its comedy lineup. But there may be trouble ahead.

Bromance duo Blake Shelton and Adam Levine are only contracted through the upcoming season, which will premiere Feb. 24 following NBC's non-stop promo fest during the Winter Olympics. And after a stratospheric climb, *Voice* ratings have mostly stabilized, actually dropping off a bit during its fall run.

So will Shelton and Levine return for a seventh season? Granted, with two seasons a year, it's only been three years. But they would certainly expect pay hikes. Or perhaps it's time to move on. Both of their careers have surged because of the show, and they'd be fine without it should they choose to exit. But would the show be fine without them?

Of course, *The Voice* also has another glaring issue: Where are its Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwoods? Even a

winner with Adam Lambert or Clay Aiken-level success would be nice.

According to host Carson Daly, producing a superstar isn't the show's main concern, telling Oprah Winfrey in June that it's on the artists to find their own success, which "doesn't come without work. Luck favors the prepared."

While that much is true, it seems NBC has taken notice of its lack of star power among *Voice* alumni, incorporating performances from past contestants during the live shows and embedding music from recent winner Danielle Bradbery in promos for the upcoming Olympics, not to mention a more prominent partnership with Republic Records to push the finalists' songs harder.

Nonetheless, with all the resources available to artists now, compared to 12 years ago when *Idol* premiered, are musicians wising up to the reality of these "reality" shows?

"I don't want fame without true fans," DIY standout Matthew Mayfield told *Variance* last year, in response to friends having urged him to try out for *The Voice*. "One minute you're flying high, the next you're doing commercials for the local car dealership. I'd rather jump off a building."

Between *Idol*, *Voice*, *The Sing-Off*, *X Factor* and *America's Got Talent*, there have been more than 400 so-called finalists vying for their respective show's crown since 2002. And props to you if you can name 10 of them without Google.

Despite the saturation of singing contestants, some of them have been able to make the most of their situation and many times end up better off than their competitors.

"We wouldn't change anything that's

happened," confesses Nadia Cole of the trio Voices of Glory, finalists during the fourth season of *Talent*. "We've seen some of those who we thought got a better deal waste it or do nothing with it. We actually appreciate [having gone] the independent route."

Having enjoyed the spotlight of national television, Voices now maintains a performing residency in Branson. But their journey only backs up Mayfield and Daly's arguments, that the temporary celebrity status won't benefit everyone.

As ratings likely continue to tumble and focus remains on judges (or coaches) rather than contestants—or the music, for that matter—are singing competitions on their way out? Unlike the GRAMMYS, which rejuvenated its ratings decline recently thanks to major superstar performances and unusual collaborations, these shows go on for weeks at a time. It's one thing to engage an audience for "Music's Biggest Night," compared to 12-15 weeks.

And that's just it. *Idol* and *Voice* don't lack for star power. That's not the problem. But in the age of Netflix and DVR and Hulu, live TV just isn't as important. In the age of Twitter and Spotify and YouTube, voting 100 times for a boy playing his guitar to maybe be the next big thing isn't as important.

Right now, viewers—at least the ones that matter to advertisers—aren't connected. They're not invested in the show. They don't feel like their own "voice" matters. But one only needs to look at this past season of *The Voice* for a glimmer of hope.

The show began testing real-time voting on Twitter using hashtags to "save" someone who would otherwise go home. With only a five-minute window, fans watching live could tweet their selection and therefore impact the show's results immediately. Gimmicky? Sure. But it's a start.

Ultimately, if these shows are to survive, the key is audience engagement. For now, music lovers have plenty of other options to discover new tunes and artists. And maybe that's for the best anyway.

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