

There's a double meaning to the title of *What Now*, the revelatory new album from singer/songwriter Brittany Howard. "With the world we're living in now, it feels like we're all just trying to hang onto our souls," says the Nashville-based musician and frontwoman for four-time Grammy Award-winning Alabama Shakes. "Everything seems to be getting more extreme and everyone keeps wondering, 'What now? What's next?' By the same coin, the only constant on this record is you never know what's going to happen next: every song is its own aquarium, its own little miniature world built around whatever I was feeling and thinking at the time."

With five Grammy® wins and sixteen nominations, Howard follows up her massively acclaimed solo debut *Jaime*—a 2019 LP that landed on best-of-the-year lists from the likes of Pitchfork, the New York Times, and Rolling Stone – with *What Now*, drawing an immense and indelible power from endless unpredictability. Over the course of its 12 tracks, Howard brings her singular musicality to a shapeshifting sound encompassing everything from psychedelia and dance music to dream-pop and avant-jazz—a fitting backdrop for an album whose lyrics shift from unbridled outpouring to incisive yet radically idealistic commentary on the state of the human condition. At turns galvanizing, cathartic, and wildly soul-expanding, the result is a monumental step forward for one of the most essential artists of our time.

Like *Jaime* (whose celebratory single "Stay High" earned a Grammy for Best Rock Song), *What Now* finds Howard taking the helm as producer and working closely with engineer/co-producer/co-mixer Shawn Everett (Beck, The War on Drugs). Recorded at the legendary Sound Emporium and the historic RCA Studio B in Nashville, the album emerged through a deliberately free-flowing process, with Howard doubling down on the unfettered creativity that's long defined her work. "I don't ever plan too deeply, but usually I show up with the songs almost fully formed," she says. "With this record there was a lot of exploring sounds on the spot, and trusting that the right thing would come to us." Despite that highly exploratory approach, many of the songs on *What Now* unfold in intricate and hyper-inventive arrangements rooted in complex rhythm patterns, achieved with the help of musicians like Paul Horton (keys), Lloyd Buchanan (keys), Brad Allen Williams (Guitar), drummer Nate Smith (Fearless Flyers, Vulfpeck, Paul Simon), and Alabama Shakes bassist Zac Cockrell. "All the sounds on this album are analog, all the drums are real drums," Howard points out. "There's so many different structures and tones happening within the songs that it ended up being a real monster to mix, but we figured it out. In a way it's shocking to me how it all came together."

Anchored in Howard's inimitable and infinitely commanding voice—a supreme vessel for channeling raw emotional truth—*What Now* opens on a slow-building and rapturous track called "Earth Sign." An intimate meditation on the limitless nature of love, "Earth Sign" immediately envelops the listener in its quietly symphonic convergence of musical elements: Howard's frenetic piano work, barbershop-quartet-inspired harmonies, otherworldly textures formed through an ingenious bit of in-studio experimentation. "We were playing keyboard sounds through a speaker, and on top of the speaker was a trash can with different metal objects attached, and we recorded the resonance of those objects to bring into the song," Howard reveals.

A departure from the dreamy languor of "Earth Sign," *What Now*'s title track takes on a potent urgency fueled by its syncopated grooves, blistering guitar riffs, and fiercely honest lyrics (e.g., "I've been making plans that don't include you anymore/My heart wants to stay but I don't know what for"). "'What Now' is maybe the truest and bluest of all the songs," says Howard. "It's never my design to hurt anyone's feelings, but I needed to say what was on my mind without editing myself. I like how it's a song that makes you want to dance, but at the same time the lyrics are brutal." Next,

on “Red Flags,” Howard offers up a gloriously brooding reflection on love’s darker dimensions, echoing the stormy intensity of her emotional state by continually pulling the track into strange new directions. “In my past relationships, I’ve had a tendency to see red flags as part of some parade just for me—something for me to run right through without paying any attention,” she says. “To me ‘Red Flags’ sounds very dystopian, which makes sense for a song that feels like end-of-times as far as me emotionally maturing. It’s like a big tower fell and now I have to create something new.” Later, on “Prove It To You,” *What Now* bursts into a more euphoric mood as Howard delivers a four-on-the-floor dance track spiked with her explosive guitar work. “I wanted to write something fun that captured the joy of a new relationship, but also tell the truth about how I always feel like I don’t know what I’m doing when it comes to love.”

An album deeply informed by the chaotic climate of modern life, *What Now* looks outward on songs like “Another Day”: a soulful and sublimely uplifting track preceded by an interlude in which Howard samples Maya Angelou’s reading of her poem “A Brave and Startling Truth.” “The poem talks about how as humans we’re all powerful beings with the capacity to do so many wonderful things for the world and for each other, even if that’s not what we usually focus our attention on,” says Howard. “‘Another Day’ is my way of agreeing with Maya Angelou and trying to see the good in others, trying to change my outlook despite what’s shown on the news, trying to stay strong in how I live my life.” And on “Every Color In Blue,” *What Now* closes out with a gorgeously sprawling reverie graced with a spellbinding performance from trumpet player Rod McGaha. “That song has to do with depression and how it can be such a horrible, heartbreaking thing but also bittersweet,” says Howard. “Within that depth of feeling, when you’re as low as you can go, that’s also where you find your capacity for love and for empathy. It’s a heavy subject for me, but I’ve gotten to the age where I realize that it’s a part of life and something that a lot of people deal with. So why not talk about it, and why not encase it in a beautiful frame?”

In putting the finishing touches on *What Now*, Howard reached out to two friends from the Nashville Center For Alternative Therapy and recorded their performance on crystal singing bowls, then used those hypnotic tones as a transition between each song. “This record’s definitely meant to be listened to alone so you can really meditate with it,” she says. “At the end of the day I hope people use the album however they need to, but I do think the gift I bring is to help people to be more introspective and ask themselves questions. And I think with a little self-examination, we can learn to be kinder, more compassionate, more understanding of each other. We can see that a lot of us are going through the same shit, and we all just want to be seen for who we really are.”