

SERATONES

“We went through a pretty dramatic shift with this record,” says Seratones frontwoman AJ Haynes. “The band lineup, the creative process, the sound: all of it changed in ways that really reflected our growth and evolution.”

One listen to ‘Power,’ Seratones’ spectacular sophomore album, and it’s clear just how much of an evolution has taken place. Produced by Cage The Elephant guitarist Brad Shultz, the record finds the Shreveport five-piece trading in the brash proto-punk of their critically acclaimed debut for a timeless brand of gritty soul, one that takes its cues from vintage Motown and Stax even as it flirts with modern synthesizers and experimental arrangements. Haynes’ captivating voice remains front and center here, but her delivery this time around is more measured and self-assured than ever before, a beacon of confidence and clarity amidst a sea of social and political turmoil. Perhaps even more marked than the any sonic development on the record, though, is Haynes’ lyrical turn, which points her gaze inwards for the first time as she grapples with race, gender, and justice, writing with an unfiltered honesty that at once exudes strength and vulnerability, hope and despair, beauty and pain.

“I learned to tap more into my own stories with these songs,” says Haynes. “I came to recognize that I have this lineage and these inherited experiences that are beautiful and worthy of exploration. The more personal my writing got, the more deeply I was able to connect with people.”

Seratones have been chasing those kinds of deep connections since 2016, when they first rocketed into the national spotlight with their breakout debut, ‘Get Gone.’ Rolling Stone called the album a “fitful collision of punk, soul and jazz echoing out of a shed strewn with whiskey bottles,” while Pitchfork praised the collection’s “soulful grease and punky grit,” and NPR hailed it as “lean and compact, with an impressive assortment of anthemic stompers.” The music earned the band dates on the road with artists as varied as St. Paul & The Broken Bones, Thao & The Get Down Stay Down, The Dandy Warhols, and Drive-By Truckers, along with festival slots from Hangout to Newport Folk and invitations to perform on national television and at NPR’s Tiny Desk.

While it might have been easy for the band to stay the course with their follow-up, Haynes felt herself pulled in new artistic directions after the release of ‘Get Gone,’ and creative differences ultimately led to a parting of ways with original guitarist Connor Davis. In the wake of Davis’s departure, two new members—guitarist Travis Stewart and keyboardist Tyran Coker—officially joined the group, embarking with Haynes, drummer Jesse Gabriel, and bassist Adam Davis on their journey to ‘Power.’

“With this album, I knew that I really wanted to draw from the pantheon of soul music,” says Haynes. “Soul was what I danced to in the kitchen with my mother. It’s what I’d come home at night and listen to on my record player. Things are really heightened and scary and overwhelming in this country right now, and returning to soul music was a way of reaching for comfort and security in all of that.”

Change came to the band’s live show first, where the manic on-stage energy of their early performances gave way to a more focused, provocative delivery designed to inspire movement on an almost primal level. Haynes says the shift came, in part, as a result of touring with Charles Bradley.

“He radiated love,” she explains. “Every night, I’d look out at the audience and see people in love, and not just in the romantic sense. His performances created this space for healing and understanding, and I realized that I needed that in my life.”

When it came time to record, Haynes and the band headed to Nashville institution Battle Tapes, where they set one simple rule for themselves before laying down a single note: don’t mess with the groove.

“The groove is integral to each of these songs,” says Haynes. “As a band, I think we’ve learned to trust ourselves more, to be less reactionary, to know when to hold back. What I love about this album is that we know when to shut up in service of the song.”

That collision of explosive abandon and nuanced restraint defines ‘Power’ from the outset, with gripping album opener “Fear” blurring the lines between sugary Doo-Wop and distorted gospel, between Ronnie Spector pop and Audre Lorde poetics. “Fear is the weight of the world coming down / With no love in return,” Haynes sings, artfully setting the table for an album all about the day-to-day beauty and horror of modern life. The impossibly funky “Gotta Get To Know Ya” transforms existential dread into dance floor

ecstasy, while the playful “Sad Boi” cuts down toxic masculinity, and the astonishing title track exudes a fierce femininity in the face of corporal oppression.

“I’m terrified by what women endure,” says Haynes, who spent years fighting for reproductive rights and serving as a counselor at one of Louisiana’s last remaining abortion providers. “I’m in awe of what women survive. I’m humbled by what women build. I wanted to write a song that could bring strength and encouragement to the women that have changed my life, and to anyone who works to change their world.”

For Haynes, autonomy—be it political, social, or sexual—is non-negotiable. She locates the blissful freedom that follows a breakup on the infectious “Over You” and channels Prince’s unequivocal sensualism on the seductive “Permission,” painting pleasure and power as two sides of the same coin.

“Sex can be more than just bodies in motion,” says Haynes. “It can be an expression of erotic intelligence, a language shaped by poetry and desire.”

For all its bold confidence, though, ‘Power’ ultimately recognizes that we still exist at the mercy of forces far greater than ourselves, historic and systemic structures and institutions designed to strip away agency from the most vulnerable among us. “If they pull me over, will I see you again?” Haynes asks on closing track “Crossfire,” whispering the lines as if she’s almost afraid to say them out loud.

“Sometimes, when you’re in the thick of the struggle, it’s hard to see the possibility of change,” she reflects, “but you keep striving nonetheless. Some call it faith. I have yet to find the right words, but I’m still trying.”

In the end, there may be no act more subversive, more radical, more powerful than that.

‘POWER’ is scheduled for release on New West Records late summer 2019

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