

JESSIE BAYLIN

“I had to write myself back into existence,” says Jessie Baylin. “I’d been feeling lost, empty, unsure if I’d ever make music again, and I think this album came along to remind me of who I really am, of who I could still become.”

Indeed, *Jersey Girl* is more than just another record for Baylin; it’s a radical act of self-actualization, a moving work of reflection and rebirth from an artist who’s spent the better part of her adult life running from her roots. Written and recorded with GRAMMY-winning producers Daniel Tashian and Ian Fitchuk (Kacey Musgraves, Birdy), the collection marks Baylin’s first release since the passing of her longtime collaborator Richard Swift, whose influence looms large here even in his absence, and it signals the start of a profound new chapter, one marked by love and empathy for the face staring back in the mirror. The songs are lush and dreamy here, drawing on a hazy palette of warm guitars and vintage keyboard tones, and Baylin’s performances are nothing short of mesmerizing, her tender voice front-and-center in the mix as she grapples with guilt and shame, pain and healing, purpose and identity. Baylin’s the first to tell you this wasn’t an easy record to make—in fact, it wasn’t a record she intended to make at all—but sometimes the biggest breakthroughs come from the most unexpected places.

“I had to be tricked into writing these songs,” Baylin confesses, “but it was a good kind of trick. I didn’t realize what was happening until I was already in the midst of it, and that turned out to be exactly what I needed.”

Born and raised in small-town New Jersey, Baylin left the Garden State as soon as she could, attending art school in Manhattan and then moving to LA for a stint before ultimately settling in Nashville, where she would solidify her reputation as a supremely gifted writer and performer with a knack for finding the beauty in moments of darkness and doubt. *NPR* hailed her “stunningly thoughtful tenderness” and “magnetically elusive” sound, while *Rolling Stone* praised her “spacey kind of Dixie soul,” and the *New York Times T Magazine* declared that her “lush, slightly nostalgic” delivery “recalls big, warm AM radio singles, as well as soulful female vocalists like Dusty Springfield and Nancy Sinatra.” Through the years, Baylin recorded nearly all of her catalog with Swift at the helm—including her most recent release, *Strawberry Wind*, which saw her drawing on her experiences with pregnancy and motherhood to craft a collection for children and parents alike—and the celebrated producer’s tragic death in 2018 simply shattered her.

“When Richard passed, I was filled with such overwhelming grief,” Baylin says. “The idea of continuing to make music without him just felt impossible. But Daniel and Ian and this small circle of friends kept lifting me up and pushing me forward because they saw something in me that I couldn’t see in myself, something that Richard had seen, too. They wouldn’t let me quit.”

Tashian started planting seeds subtly at first, dropping hints here and there and inviting Baylin over for tea and coffee in the early mornings after they’d both dropped their kids off at school. These were purely social calls at first, with no pressure to write or record, but as is often the case when two wildly creative people get together, ideas began to percolate.

“I’m not sure I would have picked up a guitar again without Daniel’s persistence,” Baylin says, “but deep down, I must not have needed that much convincing, because as soon as I did, the music just started pouring out.”

The songs Baylin found herself writing with Tashian were even more vulnerable than she was used to, bubbling up from somewhere deep within her subconscious as she reached out to reconnect with the inner child she’d left behind all those years ago.

“I spent a lot of years resisting the idea that I was ultimately just this scrappy kid from New Jersey,” Baylin explains, “but as I explored myself through these songs—the ugly parts, the shameful parts, the things I didn’t want to look at—I got closer and closer to the true essence of who I am.”

On a whim, she took up playing tennis around the same time, channeling the energy and physicality of the sport into her creative process, as well.

“There’s this Isadora Duncan quote that I carried with me through everything,” Baylin recalls. “She said, ‘You were once wild here. Don’t let them tame you.’ And so I wrote the album from that place, with that intention of embracing my roots and all the pieces—no matter how messy, no matter how wild—that make me who I am.”

That spirit is clear from the outset on *Jersey Girl*, which opens with the hypnotic “Night Flower.” Like much of the album, it’s a song rooted not just in self-acceptance, but in self-love, in learning to let go of desire and expectation and find joy and fulfillment in the simple act of allowing the world to unfold around you. “Let it grow,” Baylin sings on the track, her layered vocals floating out over a bed of arpeggiated guitars. “Everything in its own time.” The Lennon-esque “Cloud Nine” imagines life in a place far from worry and trouble, while the reverb-soaked “Velvet Touch” plays like a compassionate note to a younger self, and the driving “Time Is A Healer” makes peace with a universe that rarely operates on our schedule. “Time is a healer / Truth revealer,” she sings, “Let the rivers run / Let the water soothe your heart.”

“I was used to working very fast with Richard and knocking out albums in just a couple of weeks,” Baylin recalls, “but this record came together over the course of a year and a half. Recording it brought up even more grief than I’d expected, but at the same time, it also helped me find myself in ways that I never could have anticipated.”

For all her emphasis on locating the silver linings, Baylin doesn’t shy away from seeing the darkness for what it is on *Jersey Girl*, too. The intoxicating “That’s The Way That I Believe In Him,” for instance, grapples with a love so all-consuming it turns destructive; the bittersweet “Slowest Bullet” watches helplessly as a loved one’s crash and burn takes out everything in its path; and the noir-ish “Strange Diamonds” insists on perseverance and survival in even the most overwhelming moments of sadness. Rather than fight the darkness, though, Baylin makes room for it on the record, acknowledging that our imperfections are fundamental to our humanity, a humanity made all the more beautiful by its flaws and scars. “Jersey girls from Jersey towns with Jersey dreams / You want to claim them,” she sings on the title track. “Please don’t cry when they break your heart / Oh how can you blame them?”

“Here I am now twenty years after I left, reclaiming this title of being a Jersey Girl and feeling so grateful for it,” Baylin laughs.

How could you blame her?