Madi Diaz is an artist who cuts to the emotional core of her own experiences with startling precision. Her last two albums, 2021’s *History of a Feeling* and 2024’s two-time Grammy-nominated *Weird Faith*, set off a breakthrough for the professional songwriter. These records won over critics, audiences, and other collaborators with well-crafted songs and a compelling arc: first there’s the difficult breakup, then a mourning period and slowly, a sense of reinvention; when love comes around again, *Weird Faith* seemed to say, it’s worth fighting through the fear and uncertainty. *Fatal Optimist*, the Nashville singer-songwriter’s forthcoming LP, could be considered the final chapter in this heartache trilogy, and also its rawest entry. This time Diaz is asking audiences to lean closer in to hear what she has to say.

After ending a relationship with someone she once envisioned marrying, Diaz turned away from everyone and everything she knew and took herself to an island. This heartbreak felt different. Every one of them does. Admittedly, she was embarrassed to be in this position again. How was she going to write about this? "I put myself on an island,” Diaz wrote in her journal during that time. “I was already describing myself as an emotional island swimming in so much of an ocean of feelings... It was the perfect physical manifestation, alone with all of my disappointment.” She began to navigate isolation, and the good things that can come from it. Although people often warn others about isolating, Madi's time alone emerged as a powerful, insightful period of introspection. Rage, embarrassment and romantic grief shifted into inner wholeness and the pieces of *Fatal Optimist* started falling into place. “I didn’t know that I hadn’t chosen myself yet,” she says. “The only person I’m never gonna leave is myself.”

Solitude called to Diaz again during the initial recording sessions for *Fatal Optimist*. After entering a New Jersey studio with friends to flesh out the songs, she later realized it wasn’t right. The album needed to sound like isolation, to mirror her experience of being completely alone. She wanted to capture the sound of self-soothing. Diaz started over in Southern California with a new co-producer, Gabe Wax (Soccer Mommy, Zach Bryan) at his Infinite Family Studio. “This was the first time in my career that I stayed in this heavy place with the songs after leaving the studio,” she says, “rather than trying to escape it.” While you’ll find subtle accompaniment from an occasional baritone guitar or bass, *Fatal Optimist* comes down to Diaz alone in a room with her acoustic guitar. This is her *Unplugged* moment, her stripped-down version, the Madi Diaz album most likely to haunt you with its starkness. Simplicity can be much more difficult to nail than camouflaging a song with layers of production. It is exactly what these songs needed.

Song by song, she traces the phases of dissolution and rebirth like the moon waxing and waning in the night sky for all to see. Opener “Hope Less” unpacks the experience of being offered less than you deserve and trying miserably to shrink your needs. On “Ambivalence,” Diaz makes a meal out of a shitty feeling and turns that four-syllable word into a quietly anthemic chorus about not being sure if crumbs are enough. The romantic spell is fully broken on “Feel Something,” where Diaz captures the futility of reaching for emotional connection after it’s already been lost. Instead of calling her ex, she wrote this song. It captures the oscillating emotions of post-break-up limbo with energetic acoustic strumming, languid electric guitar, and a final declaration, "Fuck my life, goddamnit I might!" She moves confidently and quickly in her vocal style, showcasing her mastering the craft of phrasing: ”I used to think I needed to read your mind/I’m only gonna find what I’m gonna find, and then we’ll fuck and then we’ll fight.”

The sparse, devastating “Heavy Metal” was a late addition to the album. It pulls off the songwriting trick of cleverly repurposing a common phrase into a personal mantra: her heart is not precious like gold or silver, it’s built to endure pain and battle like heavy metal and her mother. Here her voice aches with vulnerability. “I really wanted to write a song that feels as hardcore as I am,” she says. “I am emotionally heavy metal, but everything comes out soft.”

It’s not like there aren’t moments of weakness, backslides, as Diaz waits for time to heal all wounds. She chronicles her not-so-proud moments with just as much gall-force clarity, grabbing the listener from the very first line on melancholic country song “Why’d You Have to Bring Me Flowers”: “My toxic trait is hanging on, your toxic trait is showing up.” Just because Diaz chose herself doesn’t mean her heart isn’t broken, too. But she takes it as a sign that, at her core, she still believes in love.

The closing title track speaks to her innate hope for something magical despite all the known risks. Here, Diaz is enveloped by a noisy, full-band rock sound for the first time on the album, as if to switch from black and white to technicolor just in time for the story’s cathartic ending. “Making the record felt like walking through fire alone,” she explains of the sonic shift, “the reward was getting my friends back and the color back into my world and getting to have this communal sound.”

In Diaz’s words, “Fatal Optimism is the innate hope for something magical. It’s the weird faith that kicks in while knowing that there is just plain risk that comes with wanting someone or something. It’s when you have no control over the outcome, but still choose to experience every moment that happens, and put your whole heart in it.”