Madi Diaz – *History Of A Feeling*

out August 27, 2021 on ANTI-

Rage, confusion, despair, self-deception, and introspection—Madi Diaz cycles through the full spectrum of emotions on *History Of A Feeling*, her debut on ANTI-. It’s an album that undeniably marks Diaz’s status as a first-rate songwriter, a craft she’s spent years refining, and one wherein Diaz establishes herself as an artist capable of distilling profound feelings with ease.

On *History Of A Feeling*,Diaz comes to terms with the dissolution of a meaningful relationship. By the end of it, she wills herself into a self-reflective state where she doesn’t hate herself for being so heartbroken. She plays the line between the personal and the general with dexterity: in Diaz’s hands, quiet moments of self-pity are transformed into grand meditations on heartbreak, and unwieldy knots of big existential feelings are smoothed out with a sense of clear-eyed precision.

Diaz pulls from a range of folk, country, and pop leanings—she is as much influenced by Patty Griffin and Lori McKenna as she is the sonics of PJ Harvey and directness of Kathleen Hanna. Her strikingly honest lyrics describe crying on the Brooklyn-bound M train and the boiling point level of resentment that builds up after months of ambivalence. It’s relatable to anyone who has experienced heartbreak and great change in some manner, and this sense of intimacy and camaraderie she seamlessly weaves into the songs was important to her. “I wanted it to sound conversational, like I had just walked over to your house and we’re sitting and at the end of your driveway talking—just like we’re hashing it out in the same way that you’d call a best friend at one in the morning because you needed to talk about what just happened.”

These universals are shaded by the fact that the relationship breakdown Diaz is chronicling coincided with her former partner transitioning, a complex reckoning Diaz approaches with empathy, candor, and care. “The bulk of this music came from dealing with a kind of tsunami clash of compassion, both for my former partner while she was discovering a deeper part of her gender identity long hidden, and my own raw heartache over having lost the partner I knew,” Diaz says. “I felt so torn through the middle because half of me wanted to hold this person through such a major life event, one that is so beautiful and hard, and the other half felt lost—like I had lost myself in someone else’s story.” It was a sea change that reverberated and ricocheted not only in her reflections on their relationship but in her own sense of self moving forward and her process of healing.

Diaz started working on *History Of A Feeling* three years ago, and it’s a homecoming record of sorts that points to her Nashville songwriting roots. She spent her formative years in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with a father who is a member of a Zappa tribute band and taught piano lessons, a school teacher mother who played acoustic guitar and ukulele, a brother in a metal band, and a grandfather who was a tenor in the Greenwich City Opera. Diaz learned how to play acoustic guitar when she was 14, starting off with renditions of the Chicks and Sheryl Crow songs, but it wasn’t until she was 18 or 19 that she began to create original compositions.

After cutting her teeth in writers rooms in Nashville, she moved to Los Angeles. She spent a few years writing for other artists and playing in various bands, but when they all started to break up one by one, she felt she had more to say on her own terms. “Because I was running around so much and juggling so many projects, I don’t think I ever took the time to slow down and think about what I was trying to say and what I meant,” she says of this period of songwriting. These feelings started to come to a head around the time when opportunities in Nashville started to pay her bills again.

She ended up moving back to Nashville by herself in 2017, driving her old pickup truck across the country. The songs that make up *History Of A Feeling* started to untangle themselves in this time of major change. As things slowed down, Diaz felt she had the time and space to fully confront everything in her life with a newfound sense of clarity. Over the next two years, she wrote over 100 songs. She forced herself to play live shows once a month to keep flexing those performative muscles as she narrowed in on a selection of songs that best represented the range of emotions she experienced in this difficult period. “Woman In My Heart” came out in one long stream-of-consciousness sweep, whereas “Man In Me” took a span of nine months to fully work out. “The chorus always felt so permanent, but it was waiting for me to be able to be strong enough to talk about what was happening,” she says. “That song is very much just walking through a really tough moment.” With “New Person Old Place,” Diaz tried to visualize her feelings once the pain and loss she had experienced wasn’t so fresh. “I thought maybe if I visualized it, and if I sang about it, I could talk myself into healing.”

These songs, like the others on *History Of A Feeling*, are the most direct and introspective songs Diaz has ever written. And she found a true collaborator in co-producer Andrew Sarlo (Big Thief, Bon Iver) to help flesh out their instrumentation and capture the right performances. In the few times she’s gotten to perform them live in front of an audience, Diaz describes the experience as one where she feels acutely present even though she’s singing about emotions that started to take root years ago. With the title track, “History of a Feeling,” Diaz tries to excavate that sense of familiarity you experience when someone breaks your heart, lies to you, or just says something that makes you feel a certain way you know you’ve felt before. “I’m always trying to slowly walk backwards and figure out when the first time I ever felt that feeling was. There’s almost a wish that if you figure out where that feeling first came from, you can save yourself from repeating history.”