

1883

magazine

BEN BARNES

PHOTOGRAPHY MALLORY TURNER STYLING SKYNNAR



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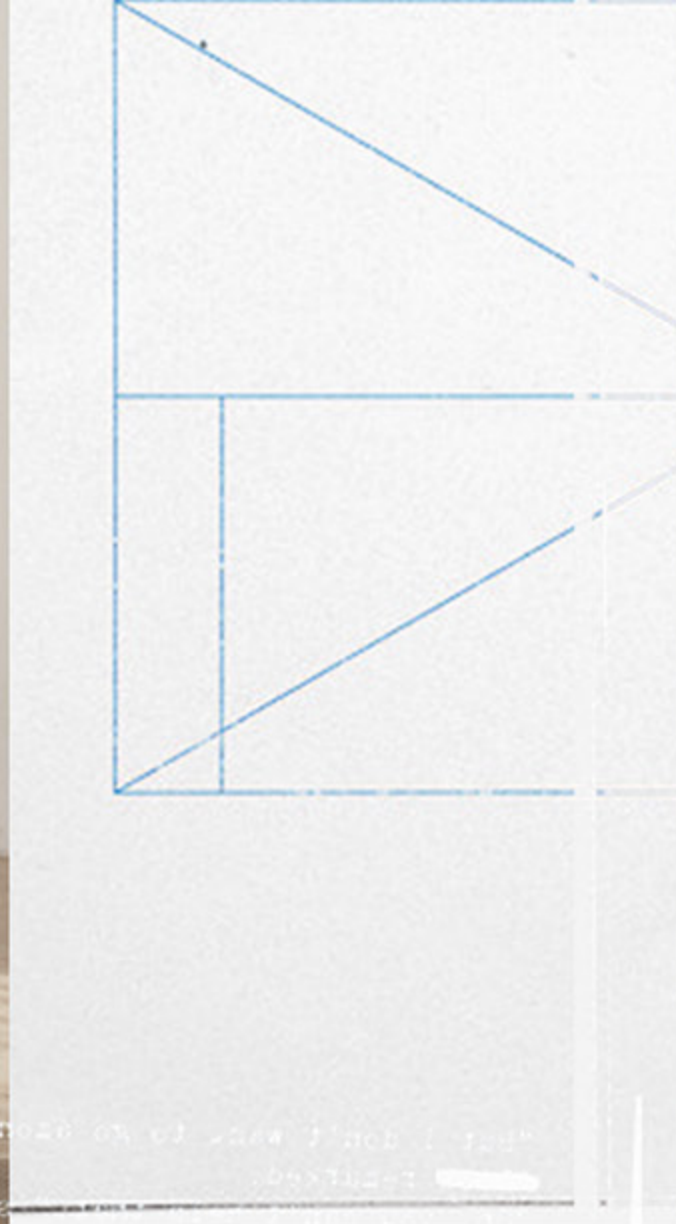
BEN BARNES' NEW EP MAY BE APTLY NAMED 'SONGS FOR YOU', BUT IT'S CLEAR THAT THE FIVE HEARTFELT TRACKS ARE AS MUCH FOR THE SINGER AS THEY ARE HIS AUDIENCE.



"I've been so many places in my life and time. I've sung a lot of songs. I've made some bad rhymes. I've acted out my life in stages. With ten thousand people watching. But we're alone now and I'm singing this song to you." When Leon Russell, a legendary American songwriter and musician, penned the opening for his self-titled debut solo album, he couldn't have known the impact the words would have. Since its initial release in 1970, 'A Song For You' has been performed and recorded by over 200 artists of various genres, including The Carpenters, Ray Charles (for which he won a 1994 Grammy Award), and Whitney Houston. In 2018, its expansive legacy earned the song an induction into the Grammy Hall of Fame from where it continues to inspire. The latest on the track's long list of devotees is multi-talented British actor and musician Ben Barnes.

The title of Barnes' debut EP, 'Songs for You' is partially inspired by the long adored recording. Although he prefers Donny Hathaway's version, it isn't hard to see, at least on the surface, where Barnes may relate to the first few lyrics. The majority of his career has had his vast fanbase watching him portray characters on a screen. From the gallant and noble Prince Caspian in two of The Chronicles of Narnia films to HBO's Westworld's pleasure-seeking original black hat wannabe, Logan Delos, to General Kirigan, Netflix's well-loved (at least on the internet) Shadow and Bone villain, Ben has quite the resume. While it is clear he loves what he refers to as his "day job," one thing he has always wanted to do is release his own music. With "Songs For You," Ben Barnes is stepping into himself and singing about his own life and experiences. There are no characters to play. He's alone now and he's singing his songs for whoever wants to listen.

To say this EP has been a long time coming is an understatement. That isn't speaking to the Brit's desire or availability, but instead to what and who I witnessed in our brief time speaking before the release of "Songs For You" and while at our cover shoot.



Simply put, Ben Barnes is a massive music fan. While listening to a playlist full of The Rolling Stones, Queen, Etta James, and just a dash of Foy Vance, Barnes admired lyrics, harmonized, and played a plethora of air instruments. His official foray into the music industry is likely no surprise to those who know him and a happy occurrence to those who enjoy his many covers on Instagram. But, for people who are unfamiliar with Ben Barnes' vocal talents, "Songs For You" is a stone not often turned. For the singer, making this EP was not about trying to "top the charts," but about discovering who he is as a man and as a musician. The answer is extremely complementary. The five tracks on the EP use hope as their heartbeat as they explore the complexities of human emotion in ways only someone who tells stories for a living can and there is an admirable vulnerability found in Barnes' voice as he sings about love, friendship, and heartache that captivates the ear and nudges at a listener's empathy.

In conversation with 1883 Magazine's Sydney Bolen, Ben Barnes chats about his lifetime love of music, what it means to have songs of his own in the world, what each track on the EP means to him, and more.



Zoom: Recording in progress I hate that voice. It always startles me.

"imitating robot voice" Recording in progress. I am going to do the entire interview in this voice.

[both laugh]

Hi! How are you?

"regular speaking voice" I'm good! Sorry I was a bit late. I've got so many of these today and each one is running over a few minutes and then I get stuck.

Oh, you're fine. I totally get it. How are you?

Good! Sorry, you have a busy day and don't really get a weekend.

Yeah, it's okay. I'm in Toronto at the moment shooting this Guillermo del Toro horror series, which I'm in almost every scene of. On top of that, it's required a lot of night shoots. Obviously, with my little dream quest of releasing the music coming true, I'm having to talk to people about it over the weekend instead. So, thank you for giving me part of your Saturday.

You're welcome. Honestly, it works better for me to do interviews on the weekends. Oh, good!

Congrats on the EP. It's wonderful. Thank you.

I've had it for a while, so I've been able to really sit with it. You're one of the few who's got it.

Really? I figured a lot of people had it at this point.

I mean, obviously, there's a whole lot of people in your industry who have it, but I haven't really spoken to them. Most of the people that I've talked to have only heard one song, so I'm so curious to know what you think. I can't wait for the record to come out so I can hear which songs people are connecting with and why, as well as which ones they don't like and why. Birthing something like this, making something from nothing, I'm so much more curious about the reactions to it than I would be for one of my films or shows or something where you know what it is when you're making it and who it's for. With 'Songs For You,' I don't really know who it's for. Do you know what I mean?



Yeah. I think I do. This one is all yours. Exactly. It really is.

It's really exciting. For the last 2 decades of your career, you have been portraying someone else and telling someone else's story. How does it feel to have gotten to a place where you are comfortable exposing a more intimate side of yourself?

That's a really salient question because people have seen me playing these different parts and musically have watched me play characters who sing differently from me.

For example, in 'Killing Bono,' I play a ridiculous rock star and in 'Jackie & Ryan,' I play a brooding train-hopping Americana folk singer.

I loved doing that. But what people probably know less about is when I was 15 or 16 I would do Frank Sinatra tribute concerts at school and I would do Stevie Wonder soul nights. I sang with a function band for graduations and I would always be imitating other singers and their sounds and their voices. I have such passion and love for music. I'm always trying to be like other singers. When I was 10 I wanted to be Freddie Mercury. When I was 15, I wanted to be Donny Hathaway. I wanted to sound like these people and be like these people. It's my way of showing love and respect and verve and passion for that music which cuts you deeply and reaches into those places that you can't really describe.



The questions that have been scratching away at me little by little for over 20 years are, 'what's my sound and what's my singing voice?' If I'm not trying to sound like someone else, then what do I have to say for myself? What's interesting to me thematically in terms of lyrics? This EP is the answer to those questions. So, to answer your question, it feels like a real relief. I think this process has helped me discover more about who I am. I'm sure a lot of people during the pandemic have settled into who they are and what kind of person they want to be going forward when the world frees up, but for me, it's been even more about releasing something that's me. I'm finding it easier to talk about myself and to talk about what's important to me in interviews than I ever have before. I've come to realize through the last year and a half, wouldn't it be better if we were all a bit more open and honest and easy with each other? Being able to share this EP feels like doing that.

Are you nervous at all? No. I'm really not. Somebody asked me in the first music-related interview I did if I'm worried about people thinking it's going to be like when pop stars are in a movie or when another actor that you know for acting releases music. If I was worried people were going to judge me for trying to do two things. I'm really not because I love doing this. I loved making it. The thing that far outweighs that feeling of fear of judgment is the fear that I'll be an old man and never have made music and never spent time doing something that I loved so much. Now that I've done this and made this little record nobody can ever take it away from me. I will never be somebody who didn't put music into the world that I like and hope that somebody else will listen to and love in their way. Even if they don't, that's okay.



Good. I love when people aren't nervous. Something about artists just being excited to release what they created makes me happy. I'm 40 years old. I know who I am and what's important to me and what I love and I know what doesn't matter. People sitting behind a computer screen judging music that they didn't make is not important to me. Hopefully, only the people who respond to it positively will reach me. Personally, I would never go on the internet and be like, "I didn't like this." I would never put my negative thoughts out there even if I hated a song. I might turn to the person next to me and go, "I hate this song. This is not my vibe." But I would never go out of my way to try and let the person that made it know. [chuckles]

Yeah. I'm the same way. I don't get the appeal. If that kind of person feels like letting me know they don't like the record, I'm not interested in their reaction.

Good. No one should be, honestly. I love your message of 'it's never too late' that you've attached to the EP announcement and release. We live in a culture that is so 'go go go' and 'find your niche and get good at it' and 'live in this box,' that it's inspiring to see someone be like, 'you can do something else if you want. There's time.' It's like a more relatable and meaningful 'follow your dreams.' Interestingly, people are actually tweeting at me about that more than they are about the music because they haven't heard the songs yet. They'll tell me that they found my saying this really encouraging or the fact that I'm doing it in general encouraging because it means they can confidently put their drawing on the internet or film a pole dancing class to my song and post it on the internet because if I can put out music, they can put that out their art. That's not even really the message of any of the songs. I guess maybe the chorus of '11:11' is a little. I do genuinely hope people can do the things they love and shout about them if they want to or keep it private if they want to. That's really like a nice buoying thing and feeds into the person I would want to be. If people think about me and are like, "Oh yeah, he's someone who would encourage me to be like this and see me for the things that I love." I would like to be that guy.

Speaking of people tweeting you, since the '11:11' release, I've noticed you interact a lot with fans reacting to your music. There have been drawings and covers, and ice skating routines among other things. Obviously, you have been a part of some massive shows and films and have a large fanbase, but did you expect this extent of...I guess the word is celebration? No, I didn't. It wasn't about expectation because I didn't think about it. I think 'expectation' is the mother of all misery really. I think sitting there squeezing something tight thinking and hoping that people are going to react a certain way or that I'm going to be number one on the charts or whatever is not conducive to a happy life. The adverse of that is that you get all of these beautiful surprises when people react by doing things you never thought of. I didn't expect people to do a cross-stitch of my music video that I made up or choreograph an ice dancing routine to the song or a pole dance routine. I never expected that kind of reaction. There was a video of this young girl dancing in her kitchen to '11:11' and she had such a big smile on her face. It made me so unbelievably happy knowing something that I nurtured and worked on would make someone smile like that. I know it probably sounds like a small thing, but I just didn't think about that when I was making it. That's not what I was doing it for.

That's not a small thing. When you're making TV shows and films, you're making it for other people. You're thinking about the ones who are going to sit on their sofa with their dinner or whatever and watch it and hopefully feel tense or excited or laugh. When you make music, you're making it for yourself. I didn't really think about the reaction. To see this response has been incredibly buoying. It's heartwarming for me.

When I was researching for this interview, I watched one that you did with OHP Uncut Podcast where you talked about how when you were 19 and tried to release music you thought it had to be cool and edgy, but that wasn't you. Now, you've accepted that that isn't you and made an EP that your friends have said is you. I live in LA and people love being trendy and cool. What was the journey of coming into your own like for you? I think a big part of it was probably my unhealthy relationship with the idea of being cool and trendy and keeping up with the times. I think at some point you have to accept that you're not 22. Even when I was, I was never cool! I was never cool in high school. I've never felt like I have been part of the most front-footed movement in terms of fashion or taste in music. Like I said: when I was in my early teens, I was listening to Chaka Khan and Donny Hathaway and Whitney Houston. That was not what people were listening to. [chuckles] People were listening to Nirvana. I don't think I've ever known what it's like to feel cool. Actually, the older you get, you realize what is actually cool is people just like being themselves entirely. To me passion is cool, and acceptance is cool.

This is all sounding a bit cheesy but I think that I've never really been one to be on the front foot of what trendy looks like. Even using the word 'trendy,' I feel like that's a really 'old man' word to use. It's interesting because if you think of older music, like The Rat Pack, for example, you might think it's nostalgic or old-fashioned/easy listening, but at the time it was extremely edgy. The Beatles, Elvis, That Rat Pack were all doing things that no one else was doing. They were breaking the rules of the system. I'm not someone who has done a lot of that, but at the same time, that stuff is so cool to me even now.

That's a lot of what I listen to, to be completely honest. I obviously listen to current music as well, but songs from the 1950s to the 1970s are what I'll play around the house because it just makes me feel good. And isn't that the point? I want to go through my days feeling present and happy and feed my senses and that makes me feel that way. To some people that might be something different. There's a lot of music that is played on the charts that I do you love because I love so many different kinds of music. I can get into the raw authenticity of a Billie Eilish track. I will nod my head to a Justin Bieber track. I like Daniel Caesar. I just absolutely love music. I love it. But I don't think of myself as someone who is going to capture the musical zeitgeist of what's exciting for a 20-year-old. [both laugh] Even when there are millions of different types of 20-year-olds.

Because there is so much music, I would much rather listen to people who are making the music that they want to make instead of making something that they think is going to do well. Yes, that! Write that I said that. [both laugh]

When you were putting together "Songs For You," did you have a back catalogue that you had to narrow down, or did you really focus on taking these specific five songs from start to finish? I had a few more that were silent contenders for myself but the songs that ended up on the EP felt like they went together. There's a running theme of hope and dual perspectives. These songs were born out of similar periods in my life with similar sets of feelings. I can look at the record and not regret that there aren't 14 songs on it or feel like there should only be three. It feels like the right five. There was a time when people were telling me I should have four songs on it and get rid of one. But, I couldn't decide which baby to kill. There were also moments while I was making it when I would think, "this one isn't working" or "we should get rid of this one." Which song that was would change. It would sort of go back and forth between the two of them. But, in the end, when we finally added brass or I added a bridge to a song that didn't have one before, then they felt complete. When they felt complete they had to be included.

Totally. Since these 5 songs on the record feel so connected and are all parts of the whole of the album. I wanted to spend some time on each one. Oh, hit me. I love it.



'11:11,' you've obviously talked about the most as it was the debut single, but one of the things I haven't seen touched on yet, and maybe that is just because of my experience with the song, is how good of an example it is for the duality of human emotion especially when it comes to romance. The first time I listened to it it was this happy, hopeful love song and it still is.

But after I watched the video, my first thought was: wait, is this song also a little sad? With the video was it your intention to show that? That's the theme that runs through all the songs is that actually we very rarely experience just one emotion. In a moment we can experience one emotion very purely, definitively, and singularly, but actually, most of life is lived in the gray areas. Being comfortable in those gray areas is really important. Can you tell I was raised by a therapist?



[chuckles] It's a bit like Westworld, we dial up the empathy. You dial down the vulnerability. We dial up this and dial down that. I think you can feel 80% joyful and 20% miserable at the same time about the same thing. It's possible.

I'm so glad I've watched the first season of Westworld recently so I know what you're talking about! [both laugh] Was the video your creation or was it written by someone else? The '11:11' video was entirely out of my head. I was sitting with a friend and they said, "I think this video needs a performance. You could just sing it with a band." I was like, "yeah, but that's not what I do. I tell stories. I'm an actor. I think it would be a shame not to tell a story." I thought, "well, what if it ends with me on a stage" and worked backward from that. I had this image in my head of performing to an audience of one and then they would disappear because people sometimes do. There is a second video for the record. It's almost the opposite video. This one is very glamorous and performative and very joyful and upbeat and celebratory, and then melancholy in the end. The other one is very grimy and melancholy and almost a little desperate but ends with something joyful and sunny and hopeful. That's on purpose. I didn't come up with the concept for the second video, but I look at lots of different ones before deciding on it. I do really feel like every song has two perspectives, so I wanted to make two videos that had different perspectives on a similar theme.

Can I guess which song it's for? Which one do you think it is?

Is it 'Ordinary Day'?

[Smirking] You're not right and that's your only guess.

Ok, fair enough, but only because if I guess more times we'd run out of songs. It's cheating when it's only out of three! [laughs]

Ok, fine. The second song, 'Rise Up' starts off very mellow. It's calming. But, then you get to the end of the first chorus and hit a very jarring tonal shift, both lyrically and musically. Talk to me about the symbolism of that moment. 'Rise Up' started life as a poem. At Christmas, my dad always writes a poem about the year and our family. Often it's something that celebrates the good things and notes the things that were sad or difficult. It always makes me laugh and it always makes me a bit teary every Christmas. I love that he does it and I started doing it on people's birthdays. I'll write them a little poem. I think it's more thoughtful than writing 'happy birthday' on a card. I'll do it on other little occasions sometimes and then sometimes when someone's having a hard time. One of my best friends always writes me cards and leaves them hidden around the house. Sometimes they say things like, "open when you're feeling down" or "open when you're proud of yourself." So, I started writing poems to people. I wrote 'Rise Up' as a poem for somebody, but it was only four or five lines. I built it up into a song.

Again, I just wanted to make sure I had more than one perspective on the moment that it's about because, yes, it was about trying to buoy someone in a moment, saying, "I know you're feeling down, but you're literal sunshine and it will be okay," but it's also my experience of being there for someone and I wanted to say that. That's why I think it feels like it shifts and then builds into this quite anthemic thing. I was just going to have it with strings and my drummer, Hammy [Paul Hamilton], who was involved in Killing Bono 15 years ago, and who I knew I wanted to play drums on the album, was like - he's Irish - he was like [in Irish accent], "man, you've got to have drums on this song. I know you didn't want them, but I've got to put them on. It's gonna be anthemic. Please let me do it." Needless to say, he put the drums on it and built it into this long song with some real scope to it and that felt right. It blooms like a sunrise.

Oh, I like the words blooms. It's fitting. 'Pirate Song' has the biggest vocals on the EP. How did that song grow from when to first wrote it to the final version? That started as a song that was a bit more about that person that you can't quite grasp and pin down. Then I was reading about this real-life female pirate called Back from the Dead Red who sounded like such a badass. She would just pretend to be dead and then Captain a pirate ship. I was like, "oh that's interesting. What if use this symbolically in the song?" I grabbed onto the idea of this pirate woman who presumably must have left a man in every port, the way we always hear about pirates leaving the women. It's written from the perspective of one of those men. The gang of soul pirates that she's leaving in the ports sing the chorus together. I wanted it to have a St. Paul & The Broken Bones funky feel to it. It's like '11:11' in that it has that punchy feel to it, but there is that little tinge of otherness. It's still about that person you can't quite get to see you.

I have to say I'm learning so much about the songs. Which is great! When people read this, they can listen to the songs differently. It'll be fun.

Oh true! While it is almost entirely made up of cliches, 'Not The End' is the most comforting song on the 'Songs for You.' At least to me. I agree.

It makes me think of getting advice from that one person or few people whose opinion you really value and who you know actually care about you. You've felt the exact feeling that I was hoping for. That song is actually about my dad.



How lovely. My question was actually 'who is that for you,' so [chuckles]. I have lots of those people and I'm very, very lucky in that regard. My dad is someone who will always mock people for using cliches, but then he'll use one. He's an unbelievably brilliant wonderful and loving human being, but he has that duality that I have too. Sometimes you feel cynical and sometimes you feel hopeful. Particularly over the last few years, I've seen some of the phrases and cliches that we use getting some bad press simply because they're cliches. Sometimes people are just trying to be there for you in a way they know-how. That's all there is to it. On top of that, when I was very young my dad used to always quote John Lennon to me. He'd say, "it'll be okay in the end. If it's not okay it's not the end." I always loved that and I always found power in that and took strength in thinking about that. Sometimes just having somebody sit you down and say, "it will be okay" is all you need to hear. You don't need a lot of cliches. If people are using that language to support you, let them do it. Just having that person that will tell you it will all be okay is the most important thing. If you're hearing those cliches, you have that person. Plus, it's got a really cool organ on it at the beginning, which makes me really happy and my friend Hunter Elizabeth, who is a brilliant singer, sings some backing vocals on it which I think are amazing.

I really like the music on your EP. It's beautiful. Thank you.

You're welcome. The last track on 'Songs For You' - 'Ordinary Day' is so interesting lyrically because you shift perspectives in a much more noticeable way. You go from an outside perspective in the verses and the beginning of the chorus to seemingly your own perspective when closing the chorus and in the bridge. Can you tell me what the reasoning was behind that decision? As I said earlier, this EP is very much about seeing moments from more than one party's perspective. I think people are smart and they can follow along. You've just expressed that you felt that there was a shift in perspective. If you're talking to a friend and you're describing your experience with someone and you say, "I just want them to say this" or "I just want to tell them this." For me, if I'm watching a musical, if it's a really good musical, people only burst into song because what they are feeling can't be contained. This is kind of like that. It's a story of telling someone how you feel. The chorus is what you want to tell them.

To close, there is a very jazzy, orchestral sound to 'Songs For You.' I know the songs were "born" at your piano, but with the bigger sound they now have could there be any live shows on the horizon? Not as of yet. There are no plans for it. Since I released '11:11' there are definitely more people that are interested in the music and helping me than were interested in helping me at the beginning. I always find it interesting that once you've proven yourself able to do something, the doors open. I suppose that's just how the world works. Starting to do music was a scary thing. Again, releasing it was very freeing. I think the same would be true of performing the songs live. I haven't sung them live for people. I haven't done much live performance at all. I've recorded some live performances of the songs. Just me and a piano. So, I'm going to release those on various platforms in the next month or two. Singing the songs with a band is something I would love to do. I would love to challenge myself and do it for people who might get a kick out of it. But, there are no plans to do it yet. I don't want to be 80 years old and not have done it, so I'll find a way.

Well, that's exciting to hear. I'm sure people will take that answer and run with it. [chuckles] Yeah. They'll hold me to it.

Songs for You is out now!

Interview Sydney Bolen
Photography Mallory Turner
Styling Sky Naval
Grooming Mya Zan
Production Kelsey Barnes