

Yebba

Dawn

In September 2016, a 21-year-old unknown singer named Abbey Smith stepped onstage for a SoFar Sounds show in New York City, and accompanied only by a guitarist, pretty much rearranged the molecules in the room. Tearing through a staggering performance of “My Mind”—a song she’d written about facing up to the fact that the one you love is hung up on someone else—the Arkansas native unleashed a raw expression of emotional pain while somehow pulling off remarkably controlled vocal runs. With a YouTube video of that moment amassing millions of views, Smith’s volcanic talent soon became the talk of many of the industry’s most discerning tastemakers.

Three weeks after the SoFar show, one that would set her professional career in motion, Smith’s mother tragically took her own life in her family’s West Memphis home. In the aftermath, Abbey changed her name to **Yebba** (i.e., Abbey spelled backwards, one of her mom’s nicknames for her). Broke and grief-stricken, she’d wake up each morning in her Harlem apartment, go running, and try to tell herself something positive. “I prayed a lot, but it didn’t feel like it helped,” says Yebba. “I started finding joy by going out to the jazz bar and watching the musicians and jamming with them. That freed me up musically, and the feelings just started coming out. I didn’t give a shit about what I said, or what I sounded like, and that helped me to release a lot of my rage.”

Now 26, Yebba has seen her circle of collaborators grow exponentially over the past few years. Along with featuring on songs like Sam Smith’s “No Peace” and A Tribe Called Quest’s “Melatonin,” she teamed up with singer/songwriter PJ Morton on his 2017 cover of the Bee Gees’ “How Deep Is Your Love”—and promptly won a Grammy Award for Best Traditional R&B Performance. Chance the Rapper invited Yebba to sing back-up for a performance on *Saturday Night Live*, while Ed Sheeran asked her to open for him and later joined forces with Yebba for “Best Part of Me” (a duet co-written by the two artists for Sheeran’s most recent album). An incredibly versatile artist, she paired up with multi-Grammy-winner Robert Glasper for the title track to his 2019 mixtape *Fuck Yo Feelings*, and appeared on a song from Stormzy’s *Heavy Is The Head*. Also in 2019, Mark Ronson featured Yebba on three songs from his acclaimed album *Late Night Feelings*, soon earning lavish praise from outlets like *Pitchfork* (who noted that Yebba’s “daring vocals leap from near-Joanna Newsom falsetto to sultry, guttural contralto. Her delivery defies convention”). In 2020, she was featured on Lucky Daye’s “How Much Can A Heart Take.”

Even for those already familiar with her phenomenal vocal presence and penetrating songwriting, Yebba’s full-length debut ***Dawn*** is nothing less than a revelation. Executive-produced by Ronson (a Producer of the Year Grammy winner who’s also worked with Amy Winehouse, Adele, and Lady Gaga), the album finds Yebba closely documenting the grieving

process after her mother's death, narrating her trauma with a captivating intimacy. But true to the double meaning in its title—a reference to Yebba's mother's name, as well as the first glimpse of light in the sky after the darkness of night—*Dawn* ultimately conjures a radiant sense of possibility and sometimes even joy. “I love people like Stevie Wonder, who can put universal questions and truths into songs and have this deep understanding of pain, but still come out with unbridled hope,” says Yebba.

Mainly recorded at New York's Electric Lady Studios with Ronson and his frequent collaborator Andrew Wyatt, *Dawn* unfolds with a graceful alchemy of soul and R&B and time-bending pop, setting Yebba's often-heavy ruminations to an impossibly luminous sound.

On the album-opening track “How Many Years,” for instance, she lays bare the burden of her grief right in the very first lines: “How many years will it take for these tears to dry?/Oh my lord, please don't pass me by.” One of several songs co-created with her friend James Francies (an up-and-coming jazz pianist), the track twists that frustration into a free-flowing reverie, its dreamlike quality magnified by Yebba's ethereal vocals and crystalline melodies.

Throughout *Dawn*, Yebba's voice drifts toward an unearthly beauty but remains firmly grounded in visceral feeling. Written in response to a close friend's escape from an abusive marriage, “Boomerang” channels both ferocious anger and total equanimity, a dynamic that heightens the drama in Yebba's thwarted revenge fantasy. Later on the album, Yebba shares one of the deliberately few love songs she penned for *Dawn*, a sweetly hypnotic number called “Distance” (featuring legendary session bassist Pino Palladino and Questlove of the Roots). But while the track's heavenly harmonies suggest a mood of romantic bliss, its lyrics speak to a certain melancholy. “I'd gotten into a relationship but I knew it wasn't a good fit; I knew we were both just trying to fill a void for each other,” says Yebba. “Even though we were still together when I wrote that song, I knew there was a distance between us, because I even had distance from my own heart.” “Distance” was the first song released from the album. It was nominated for a Grammy Award for “Best Traditional R&B Performance” and received stellar critical raves upon release from *CLASH*, *Rolling Stone*, and *NPR* praised her “ultimate exercise in restraint. Fully aware of her ability to vocally run circles around any production, she matches the tenderness of the orchestration and lyrics.” Just following the release of “Distance,” Yebba paused on releasing her debut album during the summer of 2020.

As the softly stunning and lovingly detailed centerpiece to *Dawn*, “October Sky” builds a quiet symphony around a particularly potent memory of Yebba's mother—a high school science teacher who sometimes brought home the bottle rockets her students had constructed for class. “I wrote this whole story about remembering her sliding down the hall and telling us, ‘Come outside, we're shooting off bottle rockets,’” Yebba explains. “That memory came to me and the words just spilled out: this story of her and the promise that she broke, in a way, because she killed herself in October. I genuinely feel like she was standing there in the room with me as I was writing it, in my little studio apartment in Brooklyn.”

For the closing track to *Dawn*, Yebba selected the glorious “Louie Bag,” a song that hints at the complete conviction at the heart of her artistry. Elegantly composed yet undeniably cutting, “Louie Bag” fires back at those who attempted to pressure Yebba into signing a record deal at a time when she was still reeling from her mother’s death. “It’s for any label that tried to sign me, for all those men talking to me like that—anything that’s going to try to disengage me from my vision and my dream that I’ve had since I was a little girl,” says Yebba of “Louie Bag.”

A preacher’s daughter who first started singing in church—and later music-directed choirs in her hometown of West Memphis, Arkansas— Yebba grew up idolizing gospel vocal group The Clark Sisters, as well as soul/R&B legends like Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston. “I’d turn up the volume really loud on their records and sit there and cry in front of the speakers,” she recalls. “I think in my weird-ass, seven-year-old mind I felt like the speakers were crying with me.” Although Yebba wrote poetry in high school, she didn’t really start writing songs until her mom passed and “I just absolutely had to.” “My wildest dream was to sing background for Aretha or D’Angelo,” she says. “That was all I expected. It didn’t occur to me that I could do anything as an artist.”

One day Yebba was out running and had an epiphany: “I was praying while I was running and I said, ‘Father, if you really want me to be a singer, then I need you to remove these fears one by one.’ I caught the Holy Ghost right then and there. I fell to my knees and just started to weep because I knew I was going to be a singer.” She went home and created a schedule, singing four hours a day and working on her agility, musicality, and endurance. Soon after she’d posted a few short clips on Instagram, the calls started rolling in: J. Moss. Timbaland. Missy Elliott. Yebba dropped out of college, then took that fated trip to New York to perform “My Mind” at SoFar. In October 2017, she released her debut single “Evergreen” (hailed by *Rolling Stone* as a “slow-burning ballad full of mettle and longing”), returning in summer 2019 with “Where Do You Go”—a spellbinding and soul-stirring track produced by BJ Burton (Bon Iver, Low, Lizzo).

Through all the upheaval of the past few years, certain fundamentals have endured for Yebba, including a fierce refusal to compromise her artistry. “Music is the communication of my pain,” she says, adding that if she ever feels like she’s faking it, she promises to “give back all the money” and open a dog rescue on a farm. And though *Dawn* was borne from unbelievable sadness, she hopes her listeners might find the same shift in perspective she discovered in creating her debut album. “Anxiety and depression are really great at making you feel very alone, and that can be the scariest part of the whole thing,” says Yebba. “Part of the reason why I really wanted to dig into my mental health and share what I’ve gone through was to show other people that they’re really not alone. I want them to know that someone else understands them. I want them to feel seen.”