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# 5 ARTISTS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT



## BRIGITTE CALLS ME BABY CHICAGO

*All the King's Men*

"All my life, even outside music, I've been told that I was a little dramatic," says **Wes Leavins**. These days the singer-songwriter fronts the Chicago-based **Brigitte Calls Me Baby**—and he knows that what once was a critique is now one of his biggest strengths. Indeed, upon first listen, it is easy to get forcefully sucked into Leavins' inescapable melodies on the band's inaugural EP, *This House Is Made of Corners*—belted to the rafters in his velvety romantic drawl, his lovelorn melodrama bolstered by rockabilly percussion and shimmering guitars. Leavins grew up in Port Arthur, Texas, with his grandparents a short walk away. While other mid-2000s kids were diving into modern hits, he was getting an education on Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison and Frank Sinatra. As a high-school senior, Leavins joined a nationally touring production of the Tony-winning musical *The Million Dollar Quartet*, playing a young Elvis. Stepping into the icon's shoes helped Leavins embrace a style that would quickly become his own. "When I first started writing songs, I realized there was no getting away from it," Leavins says. "I've always loved singers with strong, bold, dramatic, confident styles. It took time for me to write for my own voice but, once I embraced it, I wanted to go all in." Relocating to Chicago, Leavins slowly assembled Brigitte Calls Me Baby—fusing churning guitars with lyrics about longing and obsession. Apt comparisons to The Smiths came rolling in atop adoring new-nostalgia for Leavins' bygone-era voice. Then a call from director Baz Luhrmann changed everything; Luhrmann invited Leavins to record vocals for his 2022 smash *Elvis*, where the singer met Grammy-winning producer Dave Cobb. Before long, Brigitte Calls Me Baby were at RCA Studio A in Nashville recording their five-track debut EP. "It was another whirlwind, but very welcome of course," Leavins says. *This House Is Made of*

*Corners* is, to be frank, ridiculously catchy—a delicious blend of Morrissey's gorgeously aching sadness and the explosive energy of early-era rock-and-roll. More is on the way; in early 2024, the band wrapped its initial LP, recorded in fits and starts with Cobb at the helm. "When a song comes in 15 minutes and just lands in your hands fully wrapped with a bow on it, then you really have something," Leavins says. "You can't ignore it."

[brigittecallsmebaby.com](http://brigittecallsmebaby.com)

Justin Jacobs



## EMMA JO KANSAS CITY, MO.

*Overcoming Adversity*

**Emma Jo** manages to find an ideal balance between style and substance on her new album, the teasingly titled *Girl Bandit*. "For most of my life, I've either been holding back or trying to be something I'm not," she insists. "*Girl Bandit* is the album that taught me how to just be myself. I'm showing up as what I am—just a girl with stories to tell—and it feels good to be there." The Kansas City songstress has been making music practically her whole life. Raised by a mother and a father who shared a love of music, she entered her first talent show at the age of four and never looked back. Jo bought her first guitar after seeing one advertised on an infomercial, fronted an alternative band while still a teenager and released her debut album, aptly dubbed *Waiting to Be Heard*, at the age of 15. "I used to go to concerts with my dad," she recalls. "The first time I saw Bruce Springsteen, he played three encores and *still* nobody wanted to leave. I wanted to learn how to give an audience that same feeling." Nevertheless, life hasn't always been easy. In 2017, she was shaken by her father's suicide. Having already reserved studio time, she transformed despair into determination, vetting her emotions during the sessions for what would become her next LP, *Brave*. At age 22, she married a man who turned out to be a narcissist, eventually filling for divorce. A series of singles—2021's "Queen of the Silver Lining," 2022's "Same Moon" and "Straight Into Mine," released just last year—detailed Jo's struggle to assert herself while concurrently setting the stage for her new album. "When I was young, I told a lot of other people's stories in my songs because I didn't have much life experience," she reflects. "On this album, I really gave myself permission to share my life, the mistakes I've made and the lessons I've learned. I'm not happy about it or proud of it. But then again, I'm not writing songs for perfect people." With its theme inspired by old Westerns, the Americana-indebted *Girl Bandit* shatters the gender stereotypes. "It's a record about how I discovered I was living the wrong life, grappled with that and made the decision to change it," she says. "It's a call to action to take the first step out of the darkness."

[emmajo.rock](http://emmajo.rock) Lee Zimmerman

## RACHEL GARLIN SAN FRANCISCO

*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*

Rachel Garlin's latest album, *The Ballad of Madelyne & Therese*, continues to evolve. The songs on the record follow the relationship of two women in the 1940s, a time of global unrest, as they discover their gender identities. And when she began performing the tunes on the LP live, Garlin started linking them to poems and stories she'd written to flesh out her story. The record is now the basis of a one-woman show she's developing. "I narrate a storyline and provide tidbits of conversation between the characters, playing all of the parts myself," Garlin says. "In addition to Madelyne and Therese, there's Floyd, Madelyne's husband, who is gay and out—at least to his friends. There's also Therese's husband Severin, who has a drinking problem, and Hazel, a lounge singer at the Dandy Lion Dine and Dance Club. It's not a gay space, but Therese and Madelyne can go there with their husbands and hide in plain sight. Hazel is pushing the envelope on gender expression, with her cabaret act and onstage costumes. The women become Hazel's seamstress and costume helper, so it makes sense to everyone that they're backstage. That's where the magic of their relationship happens. I'm workshoping the piece in front of live audiences and I've met with directors in New York, as I continue to take the script to the next level." Garlin says that the concept grew out of her research into the history of lesbian and gay communities. "In college, I read *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* by Lillian Faderman," she says. "It goes through the decades and is full of stories and historical facts about communities where women chose each as lovers, partners and spouses and how they creatively hid their relationships." She adds that the Harvard and Radcliff libraries are full of primary documents about women's history, including letters, photos and archival footage. "I used them to inform the story," she says. "In the '40s, there weren't

names for people in a two-woman couple. Speech was often coded. I'm interested in how people communicate. That's why I'm a singer-songwriter. Turning the songs on the album into a performance let me open things up and give color to the story. It's historical fiction about a couple who found each other but couldn't be with each other. Yet, they communicated with each other and constructed a meaningful relationship. In the play, they do that through poems and songs."

rachelgarlin.com *J. Poet*



## BUGA BROOKLYN, N.Y.

*Deep-Feeling Alt-Country*

The members of Buga came together the classic way. "I put out an ad to start an alternative-rock/country group with bandmates in their 20s," says Grant Anusbigian, the outfit's singer, songwriter and producer. "I listed about 30 different artists I considered to be my favorites—everything from Curtis Mayfield to Slowdive. Many musicians responded, but they were often too stuck in one style." However, when guitarist

Cameron Criss came by Anusbigian's apartment something cliqued; they jammed on the George Harrison/Ronnie Wood deep cut "Far East Man" and Neil Young's "Down by the River." And, after riffing on Anusbigian's original, "Even I Believe," the seeds of their deep-feeling alt-country indie band were born. Criss and Anusbigian cycled through a few bassists and drummers, before eventually moving forward creatively as a two-piece project. "Grant does the aesthetic/sonic curation because he really listens to everything and pulls ideas from all over the place," Criss says. "My responsibility is more musical direction for the live band in a technical sense." Recently, a six-piece version of Buga hosted a release show for their new single, which was mixed by Tucker Martine. "I shot out a cold email to Tucker to see if he could mix it. To my surprise, I awoke the next morning with a note that he had just had a cancellation and could do it right before he left for vacation." They also draw some inspiration from the Dead, who Anusbigian was first exposed to after he was offered a free nosebleed ticket to a Dead & Company show while attending college in Boston. He later turned his bandmate onto the group and, with Buga, the duo aim to mix the Dead's improvisational ethos and Criss' jazz and country roots with elements of The Velvet Underground, Wilco, My Morning Jacket and Anusbigian's personal favorite, Luna. (Anusbigian also makes a point to mention that he played Criss a *Relix* video of Grateful Shred covering "Shining Star" the second or third time they got together.) Looking ahead, the duo plan to record an EP or full-length album later this year. "We hope to head into a studio and, if not, the apartment is just fine for us," Anusbigian says, highlighting their grassroots ethos. "I was recently going to a DIY country show in a car repair garage in Bushwick and, on the way there, I heard a hardcore band playing on some apartment building's rooftop. The scene is alive, but not in Manhattan or even Williamsburg." bugaband.bandcamp.com *Mike Greenhaus*



## FBR LEIPERS FORK, TENN.

*Story of the Ghost*

"We met over 'Hallelujah.' I'd sung a bunch of lesser-known verses that Leonard [Cohen] had written, and [Tim Hunter] came up and was like, 'You didn't learn that in church or from the movie *Shrek*, did you?' I was like, 'No, I love Leonard Cohen,'" Malarie McConaha says, piecing together the serendipitous moment that led to a full-blown creative and intimate partnership with Hunter under the acronym FBR—a reference to Cohen's 1971 released track, "Famous Blue Raincoat." The pair solidified their bond thanks to a shared love of the bard and delved into the acclaimed artist's folksy lean. They also layered in some Southern flair that's reflective of their Leipers Fork, Tenn. location, eventually abandoning the project's initial acoustic presentation. "Acoustic is fun, but we noticed my energy onstage completely changed when we had the full band," McConaha says, alluding to the group's high-powered approach on the nine original tracks that make up their debut album, *Ghost*. Steeped in double-barreled whisky and the peppery drag of a blue label American Spirit, the record presents like an open letter scorned in experience and assembled under a thematic umbrella of poltergeist. Tracked chiefly live in Nashville, the project took an unexpected turn after a chance encounter with Matt and Gunnar Nelson, who witnessed the band taking part in a rare open-mic night. The brothers didn't waste any time, offering up producer Jim Scott's aid. After a couple of calls with the industry vet, the duo were en route to California. "Jim's studio is Willy Wonka's factory for musicians, in the sense that it's just magical and whimsical," McConaha says. The most striking feature of the experience was the invisible thread that connects FBR to the album's ghostly motif. While working in Scott's studio and putting instruments and mics once utilized during Petty's *Wildflower* sessions in 1994 to good use, the band members sonically appropriated the late artist's meld of classic rock and Southern comfort. "We want [the listener] to feel like they just watched a movie based in 1950s Alabama," Hunter says. McConaha then cuts in, "I want them to go, 'Oh, gosh. I wanna listen to that again.'" fbrmusic.com *Hana Gustafson*

