

Suba Senthil

Professor Amanda Petrusich

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This is a Good Sign Record Review: This is a Good Album

It's no fun being sad all the time! Unhappy music is nothing new, but in a "post"-covid, "post"-Phoebe Bridgers "sad girl music" scene, there seems to be a greater need to share unromanticized life through art. There's a certain sort of vulnerability in melancholia, but it isn't exclusive; there is arguably more fragility in the good, despite this sense that heartbreak is the only thing female artists have to offer. Using "good" as an adjective seems to find a sort of balance here; for Orlando native, Olivia Barton, good signifies *progress*—forward from bad. Barton's sophomore album, *This is a Good Sign*, draws simultaneously on a playful sense of self as well as unfiltered self-doubt. This album feels like it floats above Mitski or Lizzy McAlpine, in the sense that it begins to rise out of this label, as compared to Barton's own earlier EPs. The indie singer/songwriter's honey-like voice swims amidst an ocean of sadness layered in steady beats, as her lyricism navigates raw, unglamorous depression. Describing her music as "somewhere between Elliot Smith and Hilary Duff", Barton has a keen and rather translucent perception of her own identity, writing in a stream-of-consciousness manner. This record feels like reading journal entries—because that's what they are—with an aura of mundanity.

Music about the creation of the work itself holds an almost tangible transparency, like a peek behind the curtain. Barton's album opens with this sentiment in "I Don't Sing my Songs",

lamenting the constant battle of balancing artistry and having to make a living– “I work my jobs/ I don’t sing my songs/ I pay my bills”. This almost meta-awareness of her art is a reminder that creativity is in fact work; this idea is echoed both by Barton’s voice and the record’s production– simplistic in its rawer, sadder moments, and more layered as she begins to signal something more hopeful. The record finds its climax of vulnerability in “Erotic”-- a song I personally find hard to listen to, one Barton almost didn’t finish, courageously recounting a sexual trauma. She’s described her music as a means to walk listeners through a “diary of the healing process” (Sound of Boston), sharing “sad things she never intended to tell strangers” (WRBB Radio). With this expressed goal in mind, *This is a Good Sign* is distinctively, and tragically successful.

On the other hand, the other main thematic focal point of this album is the queering of joy itself. Joy is not monolithic, and often paradoxically exists intertwined with sorrow– embodied in *Good Sign*’s structuring. Her more hopeful songs almost grab you by the hand, pulling you out of more isolating parts of the album. The second verse of “I Don’t Do Anything” asks: “How is being in love/ Aren’t you like totally gay now”, followed by a really fun choice– the lyric “Soooo gay” echoing as a cheer in the background. “Florida Honey” is another shining and optimistic moment on the record, reminiscing about Barton’s relationship. The track builds in production, coming to a crescendo of folky steel-string guitar, producing a more plucky, lighter tone in its bridge. Barton repeatedly proclaims that “We will get back/ we will get flowing” so strongly, that you have no choice but to believe her. Barton and her partner, Corook (Corrine Savage), also gained TikTok virality with their song “if i were a fish”, sharing their story of first love with the world ([Rolling Stone](#)). Currently finishing her own first-ever headlining tour, as

well as being on an opening act run (for both Lizzy McAlpine and Madi Diaz), it really feels like Barton is about to have her moment.

There is in fact something paradoxically positive about recognizing one's sadness; this sentiment is the very foundation of the album's closing track, "Good Sign". The body of the song is cautiously hopeful, hashing out contradictions in real time— "I'm living with the love of my life/ So I'm living with the best distraction". This very acknowledgement, however, is progress, as Barton answers her own questions in the chorus of the song— "But what if all this is a good sign/ And when I let go/ It makes space to try". The track's outro marks a stark, despondent tone shift— "When everything falls apart I will trust it... I am the thing I've been choking on". This somber outro repeats, as a final voice underscores the album's central question: "What if all this is a good sign?" Using "good" as an adjective feels bland, unspecific, even hollow. It's easy to throw around "good" offhandedly, answering questions about our days, almost as a cop-out. The main drawback of this record is its simplistic (at times boring) sound, lacking variety in instrumentation with some weaker moments of recording quality. There is a certain authentic charm in this sort of "bedroom" style production; the middle tracks, however, are somewhat lost in their repetitive nature, not doing anything specifically "new" or distinctive. Where Barton concludes in "Good Sign" that she's beginning to make "space to try", there is also space for her to grow as both an artist and person.

This record is fun, painfully honest, earnestly self-aware, and takes time to sit in despair. These seemingly oppositional characteristics are exactly what indicates a sense of "good", being unafraid to recognize and relish in both life's highs and lows. Where this album feels safe in respect to production and experimentation, it makes up for it by pushing the envelope of comfort

in its storytelling and lyricism. Collapse leads to an eventual, inevitable rebuilding. My favorite experience I've had with this album was listening to the titular track on repeat for an hour on my daily commute home. Restarting the song cuts off the ending despair with a jarringly upbeat guitar, placing the listener in a never ending cycle of optimism, self-doubt, and recognizing that there is in fact "good" in this contradiction.

Works Cited

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