

# JAKE SHEARS

If you've ever seen Jake Shears hijack a stage – his falsetto hitting skyscraping notes, sweat dripping from his brow, his pelvic thrusts locked in synch with the beat – this will come as a surprise. After more than a decade as one of pop music's most cocksure and buoyant frontmen, Shears suddenly found himself alone and adrift a few years ago, nursing a broken heart and staring down an uncertain future.

Since the early 2000s, Shears had anchored Scissor Sisters, the glam-rock stars whose mash-up of synth-pop, disco and '70s rock swagger catapulted them well beyond their native New York to multiplatinum sales and sold-out arenas across the globe. After the group released its fourth album, *Magic Hour*, in 2012, it went on an indefinite hiatus.

"Without the band, I had a hard time figuring out what it was I was going to do," says Shears. "I was at a crossroads in my life and got a one-way ticket to New Orleans."

Not unlike David Bowie uprooting to Berlin in the late 1970s in search of fresh ideas, Shears' artistic vision blossomed in New Orleans, the epicenter of Southern decadence he had dreamed of moving to since his early touring days. He arrived a stranger, not knowing anyone or what he would do there.

Out of that vulnerability rose *Jake Shears*, his new solo album that has the odd distinction of announcing the arrival of an artist who's already an established star.

Set for release on August 10th, it's the rare album that ricochets in new directions while showcasing the essence of what Shears does best. Its 12 songs brim with anthemic choruses, Shears' wry sense of humor, lyrics about the joys and vagaries of love and sex – all of it underpinned by a swampy soul influence imparted from his new adopted hometown. (If you can imagine Bobbie Gentry laying down a Southern soul album with Elton John and T. Rex's Marc Bolan, you're halfway to appreciating Shears' debut.)

"I wanted to make something personal, but I wasn't interested in turning my back on my past and the music I had written before," he says. "I wanted this album to feel of the same body of work as what I've done for the last 15 years, like a continuation," he says.

The album found its compass in "Sad Song Backwards," an affirmation on turning your troubles inside out.

"I started writing that song and realized that I have a writing style that I'm good at," Shears says. "There's something I do that's very specific to me, and I realized that I need to write exactly what I want and the way that I want to. I need to stick to what I like and what I'm good at."

On the cusp of turning 40 this year, Shears sounds reborn on his debut, liberated from expectations and emboldened by a blank slate. On a whim, he sent his demos to producer Kevin Ratterman, who had worked on Ray LaMontagne's celestial 2016 album, *Ouroboros*, which Shears loved.

In their initial talks, Shears and Ratterman zoomed in on an overall vibe for the recordings, using Lou Reed's *Transformer*, the Velvet Underground leader's seminal 1972 solo album, and the Bee Gees' psychedelic pop masterpiece, 1969's *Odessa*, as guideposts.

Ratterman assembled an unlikely cast of musicians – Dave Givan (drums), Michael Libramento (bass), Bo Koster (piano/synths), Craig Pfunder, Seth Kaufman, and Carl Broemel (all on guitar), among others – who usually play with LaMontagne, My Morning Jacket, Afghan Whigs, and Sturgill Simpson.

“These songs are brutally honest, which is a very hard thing to share with the world sometimes,” Ratterman says. “We tried to approach the sexy, fun Sisters-like stuff in a more down-and-dirty, live-band-in-a-room way. We intentionally didn't use any click tracks or heavy editing and left mistakes and things hanging out, which Jake and I talked about heavily before making the record.”

With every song painstakingly recorded in a single take with all the musicians playing together in the same room, a live electricity courses through the album. Horns punctuate thick bass lines and boogie-woogie piano riffs, and Shears' vocals direct the songs as if riding out a rodeo.

He admits he felt full-blown panic attacks during the freewheeling sessions, wondering what the hell he was doing. “But then I remembered that some of my favorite albums were made exactly like that,” he says.

They ended up making the kind of celebratory album that you didn't even know you were missing in these topsy-turvy times, a rallying cry to shake off your worries and exorcise your demons on the dance floor instead.

On the closing “Mississippi Delta (I'm Your Man),” Shears pays homage to his new chosen home while honoring the journey it took to get there:

*New York may destroy me  
L.A. might ignore me  
But the Londoners are swell and seem  
Like they adore me  
Now I drive my sedan up  
Through Louisiana  
I got questions  
You've got the answers*

Perhaps the album's greatest revelation, though, is its window into Shears' vulnerability. So many of these songs ache with exposed nerves and heartbreak that Shears overcame after the end of a long relationship. It's all on display on this album, in direct lyrics about feeling lost before moving on.

"This record is more personal than anything I've ever made before. There were definitely personal Scissor Sisters songs, but this album is very much about me. When you've got a band, your whole band doesn't want to be just playing songs about you," he says, laughing. "I could finally say what I wanted to say and how to say it."

*Jake Shears* is the latest achievement in a year already full of them for Shears. He made his Broadway debut as a lead in the Tony-winning musical "Kinky Boots" in January, and the next month, Shears released a memoir, "Boys Keep Swinging," a tell-all account of his Technicolor life on and offstage. He wrote the book and new album at the same time, and both reflect a desire to turn a gimlet eye on his own experiences.

"I think the album is the most accurate representation of Jake's personality to date," Ratterman says. "He has such a quirky, surreal sense of humor, but the most important thing, which I think Sisters didn't focus on as much, was his deeply emotional side. He loves so hard and has such an open heart, and sometimes people like that get stomped on. I think most listeners want, more than anything, to really get a window into the heart of the artist."

And yes, Shears knows what you're thinking: But what about Scissor Sisters? He won't say the band is officially over; "on hiatus" is more apt. Instead, he simply says his heart is elsewhere these days. "When you hear this record," he says, "you'll understand."