



Alexis Petridis's album of the week

Lewis Capaldi

Broken By Desire to Be Heavenly Sent



Stadium-sized anthems from self-deprecating star

Pop

Label EMI

★★★★☆

Last month, the 99-minute documentary Lewis Capaldi: How I'm Feeling Now premiered on Netflix. Its effect on the singer's sales figures was almost instantaneous. Singles that were dropping out of the charts suddenly reversed their course. When his latest, *Wish You the Best*, came in at No 1, Capaldi had three singles in the Top 20. For good measure, he also had a Top 5 album, 2019's deathless *Divinely Uninspired to a Hellish Extent* having also enjoyed its umpteenth surge in sales and streams.

Well, of course it did. If there was a lesson to be learned from the *Stranger Things*-fuelled ascent of Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill*, it's that, in the 2020s, nothing drives streaming figures quite like telly. Nevertheless, it seems a little odd in the case of *How I'm Feeling Now*, a harrowing study of the weight of responsibility that comes with selling 10m albums - the moment, as Capaldi puts it, when you realise an array of people are "depending" on your continued success. It's filled with haunting images - the distressing footage of the singer having a panic attack midway through a gig at Wembley Arena; Capaldi's manager lecturing him on the necessity to not "fuck it up" - that linger in the mind far longer than the apparently

happy ending: Capaldi back at No 1, his mental health in check, everyone wreathed in smiles. You find yourself wondering whether another huge hit album is what he needs.

But on the evidence of *Broken By Desire to Be Heavenly Sent*, that isn't going to happen. Capaldi has been bullish about his second album offering more of the same - that this is the music he wants to make - and he isn't joking. The mid-tempo *Forget Me*, which sounds a little like the Lighthouse Family's pop-soul, represents the most dramatic departure, unless you count the Max Martin co-write *Leave Me Slowly*, which steers Capaldi towards an old-fashioned 80s power ballad - 3am on Mellow Magic electric piano, widdly-woo guitar solo, a break for an *In the Air Tonight* drum roll - rather than the 21st-century equivalent which made his name.

The homogeneity has its drawbacks - there are moments where the Hey Jude-by-way-of-Coldplay piano intros and

wounded, roaring choruses merge into one long heartbroken ballad - and occasionally points up his limitations. He's better at misery than soaring happiness; if *Pointless* is his most coolly received recent single, it might have less to do with his audience demanding more of the same than the fact that his lunge for wedding first-dance ubiquity lands flat and sappy. But it also highlights that, within the confines of what he does, Capaldi is authentically skilled. It's impossible to hear the choruses of *Haven't You Ever Been in Love Before?* or *Wish You the Best* without automatically imagining a stadium full of people singing along, which says something about their efficacy.

His voice is undeniably powerful; moreover it adds grit that's lacking among rival balladeers. So, occasionally, do the lyrics. A common complaint about Capaldi is that his music is less entertaining than his social media, but you get a hint of his earthiness. "When I'm with you, it's like nothing else," offers *Heavenly Kind of State of Mind*, before dropping into Capaldi-ese: "I could run and tell the devil to go fuck himself."

If you've seen *How I'm Feeling Now*, it's tempting to scan for references to Capaldi's state of mind. The Pretender, summarily dismissed as "shite" by his father in the documentary, may well be the most potent thing here, a rather brave dismantling of his jokey public image with a naggingly effective chorus. It highlights the album's central conundrum, which is evidently set to prolong the success that exacerbates its author's insecurities. He'll just have to suck it up, which Capaldi seems to think he can. You can only hope he's right.



Artist Naïssam Jalal

Album *Healing Rituals*

Label Les Couleurs du Son

★★★★★



In the startling sound of the Paris-raised, Franco-Syrian improviser and composer Naïssam Jalal, the flute's oldest virtues and wildest modern manifestations become one. It came into its own as a solo jazz instrument through such pioneers as Yusef Lateef, Herbie Mann and Rahsaan Roland Kirk in the 1950s and 60s, and Jalal is a comparable 21st-century visionary, drawing on Arabic, African, classical and jazz techniques, hip-hop and more. Time spent in hospital inspired the cinematic *Healing Rituals*, an album later realised with skilful partners Clément Petit on cello, Claude Tchamitchian on bass and Zaza Desiderio on drums. Here, Jalal salutes the inspirations from the natural world that helped her back to health. *Rituel du Vent* is a standout, with a hooting, twisting melody. *Rituel de la Forêt* builds from eerie vocal and birdlike sounds to a thundering climax. *Rituel de la Lune* from a percussive bass intro to a dizzying Jalal improv crescendo of headlong flute runs and semi-vocalised whoops. A cert for the end-of-year hitlists. **John Fordham**

Country

Artist Brandy Clark

Album *Brandy Clark*

Label Warner Records

★★★★☆



Brandy Clark is one of country music's most reliable provocateurs. Her witty songs tell of characters such as the woman who would kill her cheating partner if not for the fact that she knows the prison jumpsuit wouldn't suit her. Clark's self-titled fourth album is supposedly her rawest since her 2013 debut *12 Stories* and there are gorgeous songs here about her family, but it often feels as if she has mistaken seriousness for honesty.

When the lyricism falters, Brandi Carlile's production picks up the slack: *Tell Her You Don't Love Her* offers an inventive counterpoint to Clark's rich vocal melody. *Ain't Enough Rocks* offers a glimpse of Clark at her best, as she writes vividly about a girl who conspires to kill her abusive father. **Shaad D'Souza**

Classical

Artist Beczala/Gerhaher/Huber

Album *Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde*

Label Sony Classical

★★★★★



Das Lied von der Erde was one of the two masterpieces that Mahler left completed but unperformed on his death in 1911. The score suggests tenor and baritone as alternative soloists to the preferred tenor and contralto, but few of the outstanding recordings of the work have opted for that all-male pairing. Lieder baritone Christian Gerhaher recorded it in its orchestral form in 2009, and he returns to it now with tenor Piotr Beczala and with Gerold Huber playing a piano reduction of the full score. If orchestral colours are missed, the lack of the full orchestral palette brings the voices into sharper focus. Beczala's performances are immaculately weighted and coloured, a perfect counterpoint to the range of Gerhaher's inflections and the way in which he treasures every word. **Andrew Clements**

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