

Joelton Mayfield

Crowd Pleaser

By the winter of 2021, Joelton Mayfield had done nearly a decade of work to prepare his debut LP, *Crowd Pleaser*. As a teenager, he'd toiled for years as the music director of his Texas church, despite extreme doubts about Christianity's role in his life and his role in Christian life. He'd then shipped off to Nashville, hoping to earn a music business degree in the city where they seem to be factory-made. He'd instead switched to English, studied the more mature songwriters around him, joined a series of college bands, and drifted into the edges of the city's indie rock and alt-country enclaves, building a patchwork of players he trusted.

And that February, he'd driven two trailers and several carloads of gear to a farm near Alabama's Mobile Bay, turning the family barn of a bandmate friend into an ad hoc studio. He'd trucked a Hammond organ from Nashville and his grandmother's century-old vibraphone from Texas, even buying a stack of area rugs to absorb the sound bouncing from the barn's concrete floors. And then, just days before Mayfield was set to make his first full-length testimonial, the love of his young life—and the person set to co-produce the album, no less—dumped him.

The three weeks that followed were among the best and worst times of his life. Mayfield substituted a pack of cigarettes a day and too much booze for sleep, teetering on the edge of a breakdown. He was moody, distraught, and distracted, caught in a nightmare. But this was also his dream, being surrounded by musical friends from Texas and Nashville in a barn-turned-studio that was more practical and interesting than he could have imagined, singing songs about trauma and hypocrisy and pain and disappointment that had, in a very real way, already saved his life.

So Mayfield and a band that sometimes numbered nearly a dozen rendered these 10 songs with radical urgency, the bummer feelings that had first led to them reanimated by sudden rejection. Mayfield clung to his own words, like a life preserver or guardrail or any piece of art that simply reminds someone that this world can always change for worse but especially better. Indebted to traditions of incisive Southern storytellers and country-rock bands interested in upending their forms, *Crowd Pleaser* squares up to the difficulties and betrayals of Mayfield's first quarter-century and makes the absolute most of them—10 compelling affirmations for the rest of us.

Raised outside of a small central Texas city, surrounded by open farm fields and dirt roads, Mayfield was a “miracle baby,” the child his parents never truly expected after decades of trying. His family was religious and musical, two disciplines forever intertwined in their lives, both at home and at their Pentecostal church. As a kid, Mayfield won awards in the Royal Rangers, a conservative Boy Scouts alternative, for his ability to recite Bible verses; as a teenager, he began leading Wednesday night worship services for people much older than him and eventually even

helming the church's music ministry. Outside of oil-slick Contemporary Christian Music, he heard only some classic country, scant Texas blues, and the Gaithers, a family institution that was in turn a family favorite. There was no household internet, and television was censored by a draconian device called TV Guardian.

Fissures slowly grew between Mayfield and the church, Mayfield and family. He heard the words about treating people kindly but then saw how others who were not straight and white were handled by the so-called faithful. He felt exploited, too, his interest in and predisposition for music used as (largely) unpaid labor. These feelings coincided with his late discovery of songs beyond his faith. Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" exploded his idea of what a tune could accomplish, as did a web of relatively outsider songwriters—Sufjan Stevens, David Bazan, Jeff Tweedy. He began writing for himself, not only slowly finding his voice but a map of what he believed and rejected. He fled Texas for Tennessee, intuitively knowing there was more to discover than his hometown cloister of culture.

Crowd Pleaser documents the widening chasm between Mayfield, the sheltered Texas kid, and Mayfield, the burgeoning songwriter indulging in all the music, movies, relationships, books and conversations that came with leaving his sheltered early life. His sense of the bigotry, misogyny, and myopia he'd left behind sharpened, too. These songs are a map of an unraveling and the concomitant reformation, as he sorts through hypocrisies, doubts, and disappointments and does his best to make sense of them. Throughout *Crowd Pleaser*, Mayfield returns to the line "God's children never grow up." It's as if he's finally admitting not only that he was cast out of the garden long ago but also that there may never have been a garden at all, that you have to move along to find out.

Penned in three sections, the pulsing "Speechwriter" wades through the lies we slowly learn we've been living with, from the way the government (no matter who has held power during the last 250 years) fronts about holding your best interests in its candid little capitalist heart to the promise of privilege that can still leave one rotten to the core. "How can I convince you anything I've ever felt is worth grieving?" he asks in one stinging line. That same unease permeates "The Shore," where everything we think we know and love seems only like a cover for a collapse that will happen any minute. "Is this the future we always dreamed of?" Mayfield sings, his voice and the band behind him so calm and cool that they seem to be teasing us for the devastation we have yet to detect.

The woes, mind you, aren't all so existential. If you hear some familiar lines in "Turpentine (You Know the One)," yes, Mayfield borrowed bits from Wilco and the Mountain Goats on one of the oldest songs included here, meant to illuminate both the perpetual failures of the music industry but also the miraculous way people keep making and sharing songs, anyway, because they remain so very powerful and potentially resonant. Wilco's Late Greats failed, as did the

Mountain Goats' Best Ever Death Metal Band Out of Denton. Instead, in Mayfield's vision, we get stuck with the bullshit band on Spirit 105.9 that is "everything you hate about everything you wish you liked." And still, we create. Cruelty comes in many forms, including rock radio.

Many of *Crowd Pleaser's* songs scan as steadfast alt-country, Mayfield digging into a bedrock of so-called Americana like a strata of sediment simply waiting to be discovered. As important, though, are the vivid signs here that he is part of a Gen Z cadre for whom Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* and *A Ghost Is Born*, Pavement's *Slanted and Enchanted*, and Neil Young's *Harvest* are part of the same firmament, not aberrations in its architecture.

You can hear it immediately in opener "Red Beam," an apocalyptic vision of every new morning where the growing sound swallows you like a blazing Southern sunrise. Cut by noise and samples and built with a nonlinear structure that allows Mayfield to wrestle with the biggest questions of our existence without pretending to have tidy conclusions, it is a theme song for stumbling into the unknown, blinking hard, and moving forward, anyway. You can hear it in "Blame," too, a chronicle of being let down and left out, even when one's desires are as simple as "a highway exit/a checkout before 11." Sheets of drone radiate beneath the electric surges of the chorus, while bits of dissonant strings circle the verses like the thoughts of a brain addled by its own overdrive. And what of the rumbles beneath and glows around "Jacob Dreamed a Staircase," a beautiful hymn about being deserted by faith, where the sounds sigh and moan and growl like heavenly taunts? *Crowd Pleaser* is only the first full statement from a singer-songwriter invested in the future of his chosen field.

In 2024, a year before *Crowd Pleaser* was even ready for release, Mayfield opened several shows for two heroes—John Darnielle, of the aforementioned Mountain Goats, and John Moreland. Both have used songwriting to stare into personal voids, to stand at the edge of some never-ending abyss and tell the truth about what they've seen down there. Mayfield is a new member of that tradition, having put some of the most difficult lessons he's learned in life to paper and then gathering his friends to help animate them, to turn them into these songs meant to be shared like communion. "God's children never grow up," goes that refrain. Yes, some of them just grow into something unexpected: songwriters able to relay the good news that can exist in passing through the hardest of times and emerging on another side, able to sing about it.