



'Missionary'

Snoop Dogg

The National brings burst of energy to live album

'ROME' The National (4AD)

The National brings an abundance of energy for a brooding, middle-aged indie rock band, as evidenced on their new live album, *Rome*.

The 21-track, two-LP album — recorded in concert at the Parco della Musica auditorium in Italy's capital in June — is a fan-friendly sing-along that strings together some of the best sounds of their 25-year career.

Eight of the band's 10 studio albums are represented in *Rome*, releasing Friday from this Ohio-born and New York-based quintet fronted by the gravel-voiced Matt Berninger and fueled by two sets of brothers: Aaron and Bryce Dessner and Bryan and Scott Devendorf.

The opener, "Runaway," is one of a handful of deeper cuts, this one from the lyrically dreary yet melodically uplifting 2010 album *High Violet*. The drumming brilliance of Bryan Devendorf shines throughout another *High Violet* cut, "Blood-buzz Ohio" and spreads into "The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness," the heart of their 2017 album, *Sleep Well Beast*.

The self-described "sad dads," a self-deprecating nickname that shows up on some of their own merchandise, are rocking as hard as ever on this record.

Berninger, as he described during an interview last year with David Letterman, battled depression during the pandemic. *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, one of two albums released last year in what became a revitalization for Berninger and his bandmates, has a significant presence on *Rome*.

An example: The angst in "Eucalyptus" over the impending breakup of a close relationship is palpable, but the genius of Berninger's lyrics performed live lies in a mood-lightening list of household items — from



GETTY IMAGES

Matt Berninger of the National performs during weekend two of the 2018 ACL Music Festival in Austin, Texas.



bottled water to a ceiling fan.

"What about the ornaments?"

he sings. "What if I reinvented again? What about the moon drop light?"

Berninger's baritone becomes scratchier by the song, as much a feature of a National performance as it is a bug. And for that reason, *Rome* is not the place to make a diehard fan out of a newbie listener. Berninger rarely holds back during a show, and 2023's "Smoke Detector" is one of those songs that devolves into a cacophonous mess of top-of-the-lungs screaming.

The encore features a live-show staple, 2010's "Terrible Love," during which Berninger typically delights the crowd by trying to body surf as staff

frantically try to feed him enough slack on the microphone cord to make the stunt work.

On the closer, *High Violet* cut "Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks," Berninger lets the crowd take the first verse. As the horns from Benjamin Lanz and Kyle Resnick — frequent tour guests from the band Beirut — punctuate the breaks, the feel-good melody that belies every anxiety-ridden verse resonates to the end.

—Associated Press

'WINTER SONGS VOL. 1' April Varner (Self-produced)

Toledo native April Varner's on a roll.

She recently learned that her highly acclaimed debut album, *April*, is being recognized by DownBeat as one of the venerable magazine's "Best Albums of 2024," a mighty fine honor indeed.

Varner told me she is grateful for the recognition.

"Not only is it an honor to be in Downbeat but for being in the company of so many artists that I look up to," she said.

Her new release is a beautiful six-song EP called *Winter Songs Vol. 1*, which clocks in at only about 25 minutes.

But it's a memorable 25 minutes that display the power and range of her voice, her confidence, her sense of rhythm, her timing, and — yes — a little about her knack for jazz scat.

Her take on Irving Berlin's 1942 holiday classic, "White Christmas," featuring the Emmet Cohen Trio, is especially stunning, punctuated by some great riffs and an upbeat tempo.

It's followed by "Looks Like December," featuring Chico Pinheiro. The other four songs, in order, are "Christmas Cheer," featuring Nicole Zuraitis; "Chestnuts for Dexter," featuring the Emmet Cohen Trio again; "In the Bleak Midwinter," featuring the Sunhouse



Singers, and the melodic, soothing "Snow-bound." Each offers

something fresh.

Varner is teamed up again with Grammy-winning jazz drummer-producer Ulysses Owens, Jr., who adds another exciting dimension. It's not just with his performance, but also with the cast of uber-talented musicians that Owens got to work with Varner on this project.

Varner first aspired to become an opera singer, then fell in love with the freedom and improvisation of jazz, culminating in her big break as the 2023 Ella Fitzgerald Jazz Vocal Competition winner.

As a teenager, she performed in New York's Carnegie Hall.

Varner earned her master's degree in vocal jazz voice performance from the Manhattan School of Music in 2022, and her bachelor's degree in vocal jazz performance from Indiana University in 2020. She plays piano, and was previously a guest vocalist for a Toledo Symphony Orchestra Pops concert.

She has been living in New York since August of 2020, and has quickly become a fixture on the Big Apple jazz scene.

Varner will be in Toledo on Dec. 21 to perform "A Very Jazzy Christmas" inside the Peristyle at 8 p.m. with the Toledo Jazz Orchestra, a follow-up to a well-received holiday concert she gave last December with the same group inside the same iconic venue.

She also was heard at Lucille's Jazz Lounge on Aug. 24, and said she hopes to perform there again in the coming months.

Varner plans to make her Paris debut in February.

—Tom Henry, *The Blade*