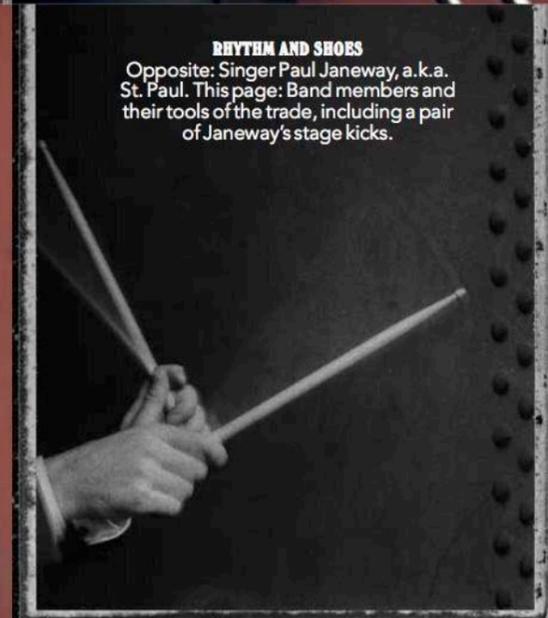


The  
Second  
Coming  
of



**RHYTHM AND SHOES**  
Opposite: Singer Paul Janeway, a.k.a. St. Paul. This page: Band members and their tools of the trade, including a pair of Janeway's stage kicks.



# St. Paul

Inspired by a legacy of soul artists who weren't afraid to speak up, ST. PAUL & THE BROKEN BONES pursue a higher calling

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**N**IKI'S WEST STEAK & SEAFOOD SITS IN A bland industrial area northwest of downtown Birmingham, Alabama. But inside the Magic City dining institution, heaps of Southern entree staples and a colorful bounty of fruit and vegetables gleam under the harsh lighting of the cafeteria line. The real visual treat, though, might be the cross section of humanity who have arrived hungry for lunch at 11:30 a.m. on a Wednesday—warehouse workers from across the street, lawyers sweating in suit coats and ties, and three generations of one family, all of them transfixed by the newest member sleeping in an infant car seat. A peek inside the boisterous dining room shows two white police officers in uniform joshing with a table of African American women.

"It's the melting pot of Birmingham," says Paul Janeway, grinning. Janeway is the front man for the Birmingham success story St. Paul & the Broken Bones, who have just released their stirring sophomore album, *Sea of Noise*. Wearing a red snapback Birmingham Barons baseball cap and a T-shirt with a graphic of a University of Alabama football helmet, Janeway and his longtime friend and bandmate Jesse Phillips offer advice on navigating the line to avoid raising the ire of Niki's often surly servers. "Know what you want and move quickly," Janeway says. Adds Phillips: "Changing your mind is not advisable." We make it through unscathed, until the cashier barks at me: "Get your bread, sir! It comes with your meal!"

With our trays loaded with fried pork chops, salmon patties, mac and cheese, and collards, Janeway leads the way to the dining room but stops to say hello to two older men at a table. "That's his father," Phillips says as we find seats. "Did he ask about me?" he asks Janeway as the singer pulls up a chair. "Yes, he wanted to know if my boyfriend was here," Janeway says. "He calls Jesse my 'boyfriend' because we spend so much time together." His booming laugh prompts some looks from nearby diners.

The two men's rapport is like that of Mick and Keith, with Phillips playing the wry straight man to Janeway's outsize personality, which is on full display every time he takes the stage. Propelled by his passionate showmanship and earth-rattling voice, the band vaulted to the mainstream after their 2014 debut, *Half the City*, a stunner of an album steeped in classic soul sounds, with Janeway howling his way through songs about desperation and lost love over Phillips's thick bass grooves. The thirty-three-year-old Janeway grew up singing in church in Chelsea, Alabama, and met Phillips after moving to Birmingham to study accounting. The two wound up playing together in various bands and nearly called it quits before recruiting St. Paul's other members, including two horn players who were still attending college at Birmingham's Samford University. Their sizzling live shows have since garnered so much buzz that the Rolling Stones handpicked them as their opener for two dates last year.

They could have coasted the same wave for *Sea of Noise*, but Janeway and Phillips agreed on a bolder tack. "We



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**ALL TOGETHER NOW**  
The band at Sloss Furnaces in Birmingham. From left: Trumpeter Allen Branstetter, bassist Jesse Phillips, organist and pianist Al Gamble, singer Paul Janeway, drummer Andrew Lee, saxophonist Jason Mingledorff, trombonist Chad Fisher, and guitarist Brown Lollar.



**HOT LICKS** Janeway and crew clown around in front of the blast stoves at Sloss.

needed to move away from the retro thing,” Janeway says. “My voice is always the way I’m going to sound, but I feel like there’s so many bands with horn sections now.”

“The live show began to feel a bit staged,” Phillips adds. “We play the instrumental to open the show. Paul comes out and yells at the crowd and falls to the stage during the same song. It began to feel like shtick.” As he pokes at a bowl of strawberries, Janeway lets out a heavy exhale. “I got married in 2014, so the heartbreak and loneliness shit is over for this band,” he says emphatically. “And when I started writing, I had a very clear idea of what I wanted.”

His self-imposed challenge was to write impactful, socially conscious lyrics that deal honestly with some of today’s thorniest issues. *Sea of Noise* broods but also has the musical depth that comes from the sweat and spit of a road-tested outfit. The horns haven’t disappeared, but they’re muted and layered with sweeping string arrangements as well as the divine vocals of the Tennessee Mass Choir, who sing on a number of tracks, including the album’s first single, “All I Ever Wonder.” On the song, Janeway attempts to reconcile his own feelings of apathy amid the modern overload of information. “It’s really easy not to care,” he says, “just seeing all the shit going on and trying to figure out how do I fit in this?” Adding to the disorientation is that news and events are today so often reduced to a fifteen-second scroll or 140 characters. “I think a

lot of the record is ‘Can we have real moments?’” he says. “Is that even possible with all this digital garbage that gets accumulated?”

“I’ll Be Your Woman” tackles traditional gender norms, with the male narrator wanting to be supportive of a lover while struggling with his own gender identity. Janeway wrote the lyrics well before the North Carolina legislature passed the controversial HB2 law requiring that people use public bathrooms based on their gender at birth. “There’s a lot of foreshadowing on this record,” he allows. “So it’s obvious I’m not the only one thinking about these things.” Janeway says he had a difficult time talking about the song with his mother. “She just couldn’t get it, and it’s scary to her. I love my family, and it’s not like she’ll never talk to me again, but it’s tough.”

Phillips says much deliberation went into the album’s sequencing, and the later tracks indeed build toward a crushing finale. “Brain Matter” addresses the hypocrisy of someone who professes to love Jesus while being a racist. “Burning Rome” is a lament by a subject who has lost faith in God but comes to a realization that his faith hasn’t vanished, it’s just transformed. And on “Is It Me,” Janeway wrestles with what it means to be from the South, with all its periods of strife. “Jesus is stuck inside my TV screen, giving all the answers but never holding me,” he sings nimbly over a delicate guitar part and strings. “Heaven is too far away and I can’t find no peace. Is it hell, is it home, or is it me?”

Janeway admits that tension among the group members over the lyrical content has at times compelled him to be a bit of a benevolent dictator. “I try to be sensitive to it to a degree, but I have to be true to myself,” he says. “We’ll sell less records. There will probably be some blowback from fans. But I’m willing to take it on. It’s something I had to do. If it ruins our career, everyone can blame me.”

“They’ll blame him no matter what,” Phillips quips as Janeway cracks up.

A voracious reader, Janeway cites Bryan Stevenson’s powerful 2014 memoir, *Just Mercy*, as part of his inspiration for wading into heavier storytelling. A Harvard-grad lawyer turned activist, Stevenson formed the Equal Justice Initiative, dedicating himself to fighting for the rights of the poor, disenfranchised, and wrongly accused, many of them African Americans caught in the labyrinth of the criminal justice system. “I was reading in bed next to my wife, crying because it hit me in such a profound way,” Janeway says. “I’m doing this music thing, but what am I saying, what am I doing with life? I have to make that shift.” Janeway eventually ran most of the album’s lyrics by his wife, Caroline, the associate director of an honors program at Samford focused on civil service and human rights. For a second opinion, he sent them to his wife’s boss. “I didn’t want to embarrass myself, trying to say something and looking stupid,” Janeway says with a grin, adding that although his words passed

muster, “we’re not including the lyrics for people in the liner notes.”

Soul and funk music have a rich tradition of tackling social issues, and some of the greatest records and songs in history emerged from times of tension. Sam Cooke’s 1964 classic “A Change Is Gonna Come” is the gold standard. Curtis Mayfield made a career of “message music,” painting sharp descriptions of life in the ghetto while imploring his fellow citizens to fight for racial and social justice. Marvin Gaye broke free from the constraints of the typical doo-wop Motown sound to record the seminal *What’s Going On*. Not to mention James Brown, Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, and Mavis Staples (Janeway’s dog happens to be named Mavis). Both Phillips and Janeway credit the Syl Johnson songs “Concrete Reservation” and “Is It Because I’m Black” as the touchstones that most resonated, and Janeway’s singing bears a strong resemblance to Johnson’s rollicking voice.

Janeway is a worrier, and he freely admits that he’s “nervous as hell” about the potential reception to *Sea of Noise*. But he’s adamant that he and the band have a responsibility not to remain silent. “If we sit here as a bunch of white guys from Birmingham, Alabama, and don’t address it, we’ll get called out and we should,” he says, tapping the table with his index finger for emphasis. “I just don’t think, in good conscience as an artist, you can ignore what’s going on today. We’re going to take this head-on and see where the pieces lie.”