

Jesse Daniel Edwards

Violensia

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Not long after his last project – the brilliant and affecting album *Saudade*, released under the moniker Juni Ata – Jesse Daniel Edwards stumbled upon a new sound. It wasn't something he was necessarily searching for. It just sort of arrived, out of thin air, as the Muse often does.

"I have no idea what kind of music this is," Edwards says with a laugh. "I mean, I didn't know what was going to come out when I started writing, but I was pleasantly surprised by the songs. They were just so weird and dramatic and kind of operatic." He is characteristically self-effacing.

Edwards wrote the album in what seemed a quick burst, on piano, an instrument he had not played in years. The expressive possibilities of that instrument offer their own way into the writing moment, tapping into wellsprings of creativity that are not always possible with guitar – and what was coming out felt good to Edwards. The new material sounded removed from the strictures of the folk-based, more Americana type songs (something he has done well) that have flowed out of him for much of his recording career.

"If you wanted to split hairs, I think you could call it piano-based alternative indie rock," he offers.

While Juni Ata was a project borne out of the Covid pandemic, this album, *Violensia*, is about the next chapter in his story.

Violensia reads and responds to the challenges of these times through a lens that is personal, though not autobiographical. Its voice is a widescreen treatment of various characters caught in the grip of national traumas, the familiar shocks of the 5 o'clock news. There is suicide and murder. Drug misadventures and unplanned pregnancies. Yet none are rendered in self-pitying remorse; Edwards' musical response is a full-on effort to grapple with all of it, delivered in the life-affirming tradition that is rock and roll.

As Edwards sings over a thundering crescendo of drums and guitar on "Everything Makes You Sick" – "and to every broken heart that came before, I just called to let you know that I don't need you anymore. I'm gonna be ok, even though everything makes you sick these days" – the worried sentiments are transformed through the strength of the music. In rock and roll, we fight the hard times in order to sublimate them, harnessing their great and terrible powers to steal something back.

Here, on *Violensia*, there are echoes of the early '70s rock and roll touchstones. The melodic, dramatic offerings of Bowie and Queen come to mind, shot through with the deft melodicism of more modern masters like Rufus Wainwright and Ron Sexsmith. But it's all

done with an aggressive edge, and that's what makes this album unique. It is operatic rock dressed up in a leather jacket, brandishing a switchblade in some darkened alley.

Edwards says of the new sound, "I wanted to get heavier. I wanted to be more dramatic. And I wanted to really push back against this Americana kind of thing that was going on." Tellingly, *Violensia* is the first album Edwards has cut with a real-live rock band. He describes the musical collective as a true band of brothers, and not a mere solo kind of thing dressed up with backing musicians. The band came together organically, by happenstance one afternoon in East Nashville, and once these guys hit it off, there was no looking back. Such is the nature of true musical chemistry. Even on a studio record, the power of this dynamic shines through.

There is no doubt Edwards would know how to bring as much together. He has paid his dues in the music industry, working as a tour manager for Morrissey and Americana stalwarts like Jason Isbell and Lucinda Williams. Unlike so many of the musician characters you find haunting the clubs and bars of East Nashville, he is not one to seek out the limelight. His artistry springs from the quiet observations collected over the course of a peripatetic life; from growing up as a military brat in a deeply religious household among a large coterie of siblings to touring the world as part of the invisible road-crew for various A-list artists.

When it comes to his own artistic projects, Edwards insists that he often needs someone to nudge him over the finish line. Especially when it comes to presenting his work to the world. Yet despite his quiet, unassuming personal nature, this album is anything but – for this is the sound of a confident artist painting the canvas with bold, primary colors.

Album opener "I'm So Happy (I Think I Might Cry)" starts quietly as a seemingly introspective piano ballad that builds into a spiky, staccato-driven anthem with a soaring chorus. Next, it moves into the bouncy, jubilant "Backyard Party MDA," a Polaroid snapshot of a misspent afternoon that speaks to the alienation gripping the new lost generation ("Backyard party, Bear Creek Estates, I didn't know anybody, but they had MDA. Apparently, I told you what I really think"). The song "Drop Dead and Die" is a full-on post-punk assault, interspersed with sensitive, heartbreaking moments ("Now let them say he died, upon the mean streets of the East Side of a broken heart, they found her sitting in her car, smoke still dripping from the gun, she hadn't even tried to run"). With its difficult subject matter and sublime musical beauty, the song manages to walk the razor's edge between the horrific and the tender.

Violensia marks a bold, new chapter for Jesse Daniel Edwards, and it's his most compelling artistic statement to date. Thanks to a brave new sound, he's fallen in love with making and performing music again, and audiences and listeners this year will no doubt respond in kind.