

BATS OUT OF HELL

FRUIT BATS FLY AGAIN ON THE DEVASTATINGLY MINIMALIST 'BABY MAN'

The creative force behind the collective, Eric D. Johnson, didn't set out to make a new Fruit Bats album but celebrates the happy accident

By **DANIEL KOHN**

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Eric D. Johnson is the creative force behind Fruit Bats and the new album 'Baby Man.'

CHANTAL ANDERSON*

Sitting in his L.A. home earlier this year, Eric D. Johnson, the leader of shapeshifting indie-rock band Fruit Bats, kicked around the idea of making a short EP that would serve as a “mid-term project” between his last album, 2023’s *A River Running to Your Heart*, and the next full-band Fruit Bats record.

Initially, he was going to include a number of B-sides, but Johnson says he “accidentally” wrote a few songs that kickstarted a songwriting hot streak. The tracks he had planned to simply lay down in his guest bedroom were brought to longtime co-conspirator, producer Thom Monahan, and unexpectedly, Fruit Bats had a new album, *Baby Man*, released last week.

“I don’t like mandates when I’m making a record,” Johnson tells *Rolling Stone*. “But I wanted a sense of minimalism and also a sense of immediacy. With Thom on board, it’s kind of like maximalist minimalism.”

For an artist whose career got off to an admittedly slow start, Johnson has used the second half of his career as a creative rebirth. Despite being signed to the culture-changing label Sub Pop for four albums in the 2000s, Fruit Bats never achieved the same level of acclaim as many of their labelmates, like the Shins and Sleater Kinney, and Johnson disbanded the collective at the end of its 2013 tour.

After a few years on the sidelines, Fruit Bats returned and dropped a series of well-received albums through venerable North Carolina indie label Merge Records, including a 2020 cover of Smashing Pumpkins’ complete *Siamese Dream* album. In between Fruit Bats albums and tours, Johnson formed Bonny Light Horseman too, the folk supergroup with Josh Kaufman and Anais Mitchell.

Now, with *Baby Man*, he’s further celebrating the simple beauty of folk. The album is a stripped-down 10-song effort that was knocked out over a week in February. Unlike full-band Fruit Bats albums, Johnson leaned hard into sparseness, particularly on the piano-driven title track. “I’m dumber now than I was as a baby,” he says of the self-critical song.

Lyrically, *Baby Man* is a departure from previous Fruit Bats material. Johnson says his writing on past albums has been somewhat autobiographical, while here, he aimed for a “snapshot of a week in the life,” ultimately finding something rawer and more personal than he’s ever been. “This one is a little close to the bone for me,” he says.

But according to Johnson, elements of what *Baby Man* addresses, the way it was recorded, and its minimalist approach, caused folks around him to ask about his well-being. He admits there's a lot of regret on the LP. Specifically, he cites "Building a Cathedral," inspired by Johnson's first tarot card reading ("The work you leave behind is your cathedral, but what size of it is important?" he wonders), and "Moon's Too Bright," where he's "sleeping bad because I'm mad at myself."

There were spontaneous, albeit not as profound, moments when specific phrases in conversation turned into the impetus for a song. "This dog's been barking outside my window every night," inspired "Creatures From the Wild," in which Johnson honors his late dog, while an aside he said to Monahan ended up on "Puddle Jumper."



"That last one came together when Thom asked me what I was doing on that day and I said, 'I'm just trying to write a couple more songs,'" Johnson recalls with a laugh. "I've had a long, bumpy career, so you have to treat everything like it's the biggest thing you've ever done, or that no one will hear it, which is always possible."

While *Baby Man* was the product of that low-key creative surge, Johnson says that the next Fruit Bats record, already in the can, is a “rip-roaring pop record” that serves as a companion piece. Johnson is going to be busy for the next few years: Along with Fruit Bats, his Bonny Light Horseman bandmates are thinking about a new album.

“I’m still gaining confidence and chops; I’m a late bloomer,” Johnson says. “I always have been for everything for everything I’ve done, which makes this all new to me.” ®

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