

ALBUM REVIEW

# Low-Key, High Impact on Future Classic



LAEL NEALE  
**Altogether Stranger**

★★★★★

/ SUB POP / PLAYGROUND MUSIC  
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## An outstanding third album cements the indie artist’s talent for brilliant pop songwriting

BY **NICOLAJ ROOS** / PHOTO: ALEXANDRA CABRAL  
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If your musical tastes lean toward the hyperreal, market-optimized universe of sex-as-power — as championed by Charli XCX, Dua Lipa, and Nicki Minaj — you can probably skip this review.

American artist Lael Neale makes music. That’s about the only thing she has in common with the names above. She exists in the same cosmic sisterhood as Weyes Blood, Angel Olsen, Grouper, and Aldous Harding — artists who move slowly, favor lo-fi and organic textures, and often operate firmly in the DIY sphere.

Born and raised in Virginia, Neale debuted in 2023 with *Acquainted With Night*, a bedroom-produced record captured in Los Angeles on a four-track cassette recorder, with the help of longtime collaborator and producer Guy Blakeslee (The Entrance Band).

Last year she released a non-album single, “Electricity.” It says a lot that she didn’t just hold it back for this new album — *Altogether Stranger* — because it’s *that* good. The kind of song that brushes up against evergreen status. Curious listeners should also seek out her 2023 single “I’ll Be Your Star”, another track with instant classic potential.

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*Altogether Stranger* is a cohesive, minimalist collection. The title — which could just as easily be interpreted as “Completely Alien” — sits comfortably within Lael Neale’s personal terrain. Throughout the album, you’ll hear echoes of The Velvet Underground (the stripped-back songwriting, poetic lyrics, and long drones), and Weyes Blood (whom Neale has supported on tour), sharing a similar nostalgic gaze, albeit with Neale leaning even harder into lo-fi. There’s also a likely nod to Françoise Hardy, especially her early work — emotionally stark, minimal chansons with barely-there instrumentation (which, admittedly, was more *comme il faut* back then, than it is today).

In parallel with the album’s release, Neale also unveiled a film containing nine music videos — one for each track

*Altogether Stranger* sits as a natural continuation of Lael Neale’s previous album *Star Eaters Delight* — only with sharper focus, pared-down elements, and an even more muted sense of rhythm. Neale’s voice can occasionally veer nasal, with a tone not unlike Joan Baez. Aside from the drum machine, you’ll hear almost no drums at all on this album. And thank God for that.

The album is mastered by Chris Coady (TV on the Radio, Beach House, Grizzly Bear). A big name for such an unpolished sound — but even lo-fi needs gravitas.

Lyricaly, Neale flirts with subtle environmental commentary (“And the ocean is a trash can,” “I’m heavy as plastic – in the belly Atlantic”), dry humor (“And grave as the bread that was left with no twist tie”), wordplay (“I buy any true lie – I lie with my hands tied”), resignation (“I hide until it’s time / To sleep through the long night”), and, ultimately, despair (“Beauty doesn’t last / It never promised that anyway,” “I eat but I’m always hungry,” “I want to go somewhere sunny and clear / But I’m sad as the last unsold souvenir”).

Opening track “Wild Waters” rides a rhythm box over a backdrop of what sounds like vintage Suicide-era organs. The producer deserves a standing ovation for letting the drum machine carry the song all the way through without succumbing to the urge to throw in big stadium drums after 20 seconds — something that ruins far too many tracks. There’s lo-fi surf, handclaps that crackle like old vinyl, and around 2:06 we finally hear backing vocals for the first time.

“All Good Things Will Come To Pass” introduces a Dirty Beaches-like cassette vibe, complete with xylophone and tambourine. The simplicity of the music here is so striking, that a classic American country artist like Hank Williams comes to mind (incidentally used to great effect in the equally brilliant film *The Last Picture Show* — but that’s a story for another time).

“Down on the Freeway” shifts into a chant-like, droning territory — perhaps drawing on Indian ragas. The Farfisa organ makes another appearance, the BPM picks up considerably, and generous (but subtle) waves of feedback-laced guitars lend the song a trippy, Beatles-in-India kind of feel. Again, gorgeous backing vocals. The drum machine remains rigidly locked to a single pattern the entire time — and it’s all the better for it. An Omnichord pops up just before the song slips away.

“Sleep Through the Long Night” is stripped down to its barest bones. It’s just Neale’s voice and an Omnichord. No chorus. Just verses. A slow, droning hymn — not unlike Elvis Costello’s “I Want You.”

While I’ve already called “Electricity” a future evergreen, “Come On” comes pretty close. Neale has an incredible ear for melody and is edging closer to the elite ranks of the genre — territory long occupied by Beach House (who she’s incidentally opening for at upcoming shows in Brussels and France). The track boasts sweet, charming backing vocals and synth percussion with tons of character.

With such simple — though not necessarily easy — chord structures, comparisons are inevitable. When I heard “Tell Me How To Be Here”, particularly the acoustic rhythm guitar, I couldn’t help but think of Grant Lee Buffalo’s “Fuzzy”

The song features wonderfully warped synths and a subtle sense of ambient drama. The whole soundscape is handled gently, except for Neale’s vocals, which remain lightly crackling yet crystal clear throughout the album. Here, she even sets a new record for herself: backing vocals don’t enter until 3:23

And then there’s the gem: “All Is Never Lost.” With Mellotron flutes and xylophone, the song has what I can only describe as a touching Disney vibe. Super simple. Super beautiful

It’s rare for me to feel transported the way I did with this album — as if entering a small, parallel world, like a nine-song short film. I’ve used the word *Technicolor* to describe music before, and rarely has it felt more appropriate — even if Lael Neale’s film would paradoxically be in black and white. Twenty years from now, I believe *Altogether Stranger* will be considered a classic, on par with *The Velvet Underground & Nico* and Françoise Hardy’s *Tous Les Garçons et les Filles*.

Lael Neale’s two previous albums were clear warm-ups — the first, handcrafted and charmingly uneven as debuts often are, and the second, more confident but not quite there. With her third record, everything falls into place. All the stars have aligned.

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