

Mahogany L. Browne & Sean Mason

CHROME VALLEY

“I want people to get FREE.” That was Mahogany L. Browne’s response when asked what she hopes people will take away from the album *CHROME VALLEY*.

CHROME VALLEY, is a musical essay where the subject matter is the Black woman in America. Co-written and composed by Sean Mason, it’s a manifestation of Black culture, not just the pain and trauma, but everything that it means to walk the streets as a Black person in this country.

Inspired by Browne’s most recent poetry anthology by



album artwork

the same name, *CHROME VALLEY* explores what it means to grow knowing the warmth of home and to confront the threat of existing outside of it. It marks the debut album for small, project based record label The Soapbox Presents.

The Soapbox Presents is a community first platform that

is dedicated to empowering Black and brown voices through art. Since 2020, the organization has curated programming, predominantly in Harlem, that celebrates the cultural legacies of Black and brown people. After being commissioned by Browne, *CHROME VALLEY* was first composed by

Mason and produced by The Soapbox Presents as a live multisensorial performance piece. It was then presented as a part of Lincoln Center's inaugural poetry residency.

Immediately following that performance, Browne and Mason knew the healing power of the words and music had to live beyond that moment. Mason spent the next couple of months further developing the piece and the duo, supported by an incredible ensemble, took to the studio to record the album in June 2023.

The album traverses several genres: spoken word, jazz, R&B, gospel, and is rooted in the blues...but not in a predictable way. "This whole album is about avoiding stereotypes. Too often, we as Black people are subjected to the blues offering that we bring to music. So I wanted to keep the integrity of the blues but remove the stereotype that all we can do is wail and sing our blues," says Mason.

The album starts with

Homer, Louisiana, a spoken word piece, that prepares us for a journey that is both inherently political as it speaks truth to power, but equally heartfelt, "This poem is my origin story. It reveals the underbelly of racism most Black Americans have survived. Each section is interchangeable because memories passed down from generation to generation challenge linear (re)memory. This poem is like river water; these memories return me to the source of my making" Browne says.

The unexpectedness of this album is one of its most impactful qualities. It takes what could result in trite, justifiably heavy music and presents it in a way that allows for new contemplation. One of the best examples of this is "Trivia". This song has a bounce to it that invites listeners to sing along with jovial frivolity. The contrast of the words to the melody demonstrates the duality that Black people are expected to house in their bodies

everyday. It is the expectation to carry on unbothered while being physically weighed down by the condition that is put upon you.

One of the things that makes this album singular is the relationship between word and song. When asked to compose his response to Browne's poems, Mason chose not to take the literal, linear approach of underscoring recitation on every track, "My task was to honor every word Mahogany wrote, ensuring each word was sung. The composition process felt like assembling a musical puzzle, reorganizing words into lyrics and song forms without knowing the final picture. Upon completion, I was filled with gratitude, not only because the puzzle was complete but because the "image" revealed itself, and I stood in awe of its beauty."

To compose each of the more traditional song tracks of the album, Mason read and re-read the original manuscript. Motifs from select poems became apparent to him.

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