

Jake Isaac's new album is called Benjamin for a simple reason: it is his middle name. He hasn't told many people that before. This album, however, is all about revelation

"Complete transparency: my musical journey has been long-winded," says Jake Isaac, who was playing drums in church aged three, became a session artist and songwriter for everyone from Blue to Gabrielle by his late teens, worked as the musical director for Duffy, and held down a day job as a marketing manager in his early 20s before becoming an artist in his own right. 2021's *Honesty* and 2022's *For When It Hurts* put Isaac at the forefront of a British soul renaissance, along his journey playing Glastonbury Festival and endorsements from such luminaries as Sting and Elton John. Benjamin is the album it has all been leading up to.

"I've been figuring out what I'm into and who I am and this record reflects that," says Jake, a cheerful South Londoner who, when he isn't crafting modern soul epics, deals with the busy life of being a husband and father of three young children. "My background is in doing live arrangements for artists I work with so I thought: let's go all out with a live recording, and I'll call it Benjamin because I'll display the sides of me no one sees, leaning into the spirituality that has always been a part of my life."

The result is a beautiful album, grounded in faith and identity, which runs the gamut from deep soul to gospel to classic pop, all with a vibrancy that comes from being captured in the moment. Jake Isaac recorded 'on the floor' with a handful of top session musicians, doing takes at Eastcote Studios in West London with a minimum of overdubs. The band includes Junior Kirton, drummer for the Jackson Five and Leona Lewis; Gavin Powell on the organ, who plays for Emeli Sandé and Stormzy; and Kat deal aka litening, a songwriter, producer and backing singer for Fleur East among others; virtuosos all.

Benjamin opens with *Selah*; an instrumental piece that brings to mind David Gilmour's more reflective guitar moments, but filtered through the prism of the church experience: Pink Floyd gospel, so to speak. That certainly hasn't been done before.

"Selah is a Biblical term, meaning to pause," says Isaac. "In the Bible you have the psalms, at the end of which you have Selah: to pause, to reflect, to meditate. I thought a great way to start would be to create a piece that would create that moment, before you enter into the musical landscape."

From there we're into *Fools For Love*, a bittersweet love song written with the album's co-producer Ian Barter. "He's worked with Amy Winehouse, Paloma Faith, and he's great, a real O.G. He has perfect pitch and he's a musician's musician, with an old school vibe."

*Black Or White* is a soul stirrer with shades of Bill Withers and a touch of gospel, designed to get the party going. As Jake puts it: "You want to dance when you hear it so that's the good times one." As is *Ever Yours*, a love song for the summer, while *Okay* is the big ballad, a piano-led piece with an element of searching in its central line: "Find me in the middle of the water."

"It was ten o'clock at night. I was sitting by the piano, playing a few chords, and I had been going through the feeling of knowing where I wanted to get to, but the journey was making it seem impossible," says Jake on the inspiration behind the album's deepest, most reflective cut. "It was a way to find reassurance that the night doesn't last forever so it is a

song for myself, to be honest. Every artist has songs they write for themselves, without knowing whether they will deliver it to the world or not. I played it to my mum and she said: 'Jake, it feels like someone's dying.' Thanks Mum! But as long as it impacts, I'm cool with it."

It isn't all dark nights of the soul. *All I Need* is a fun, positive R&B song. "It is about the constants in my life: friends, family, spirituality, faith. As long as I've got them in my life, I'm good."

Talking of which, *Good Man* is about Jake's pastor father and, in a wider sense, the entire Windrush generation. "In our grandparents' generation the term 'good man' spoke of family constructs, community, resilience... in the Windrush Generation there were a lot of people who had to work out to be good men and good women to survive. My dad is from Antigua and my mum is from St Kitts, so the song speaks for those West Indians who set life up for our generation."

The Bible's Psalm 23 has been used in hip-hop, even thrash metal, countless times. We all know the line about walking through the valley of death. Jake wanted to know what the psalm meant for him today, so he interpreted it in 23. "My father is a minister, I was born into this way of life, so what does it mean for me today? Do I believe in it, what is my identity in the midst of it? Now I realise it is a privilege to have a mum and dad who had core values, rooted in community, who celebrated the arts, because not everybody has that. I'm grateful to the spirituality our parents showed my siblings and me when we were growing up."

*Sunday Morning*, something of an interlude, harks back to that gratitude. "In our childhood, Sunday was a day to chill out and reflect, even if you weren't going to church. Now you can go to Lakeside and go shopping. *Sunday Morning* isn't about religion. It's about pausing, reflecting."

Jake's ultimate goal with Benjamin was to make an album to last the ages, an album his kids can listen to one day and know their father through it. "Paul Simon recently made an album called *Seven Psalms* and it goes deep into who he is," says Jake, citing one of his key influences. "I listen to a lot of Billie Holiday, Etta James, Otis Redding...you get a sense of who they are through their music. I want to do the same."

Benjamin ends with *Why*. Led by acoustic guitar, it is a moving piece with shades of Marvin Gaye that leaves the listener with an open-ended question. "In the song, I'm asking some of the questions we all ask ourselves... just not in public."

It all adds up to classic soul for the modern age. "Number one, I hope that people get to know me better," says Jake of Benjamin. "I sang with a patois accent on *Good Man* because that's who I am, where I'm coming from, and I want to give people permission to celebrate their own journeys. Celebrate where you're coming from. Don't just shout about where you're going."

There's one more thing to say about Jake Isaac: he has a seriously good set of pipes. You imagine he must have been one of the star singers back as a kid in church.

"I wish! I was the worst. That's why I learned to play drums. It wasn't until I was 19 that I

realised I could sing simply and mean what I say. Bill Withers is the most basic singer, but he has so much soul, which proves that if you have the right message you don't need vocal gymnastics to get it over. So yes, the imposter syndrome is loud right now, but I think I've said what I need to say."