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**DONT LOOK BACK**

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**jenny olivia johnson**



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## **MUSICIANS:**

**Megan Schubert**, vocals (Dollar Beers, Cutter, & The After Time); **P. Lucy McVeigh**, vocals (Pilot & Starling); **Amanda Crider**, vocals (Pilot & The After Time); **Jessica Schmitz**, flutes; **Eileen Mack**, clarinets; **Andrew Delclos**, bassoon; **Todd Reynolds**, violin; **Peter Gregson**, cello; **David Russell**, cello; **Melinda Menezes**, cello; **Lisa Liu**, guitars; **Dan Kozak**, electric guitar and didgeridoo; **Isabelle O'Connell**, piano; **Elika Akahori**, piano; **Jake Penn Kozak**, piano; **Jude Traxler**, percussion; **Jenny Olivia Johnson**, electronics, percussion, and synthesizer; & **Nathaniel Berman**, conductor. Spoken vocals in "Starling" by **Adam Weiner**, Professor of Russian, Wellesley College.

**DONT LOOK BACK:** Produced by Jenny Olivia Johnson with Ryan Streber

All tracks mixed and mastered by Ryan Streber at Oktaven Audio. All tracks recorded by Streber except "Pilot" (recorded by John Anderson) and "Starling" (recorded by Jenny Olivia Johnson).

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**DONT LOOK BACK** is dedicated to my Mom and Dad, and to the loving memory of Blackjack (2013-2014).

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“How do you forge a path?”

This is the question Jenny Olivia Johnson poses when considering her journey as a composer. It is also the fundamental question asked of the protagonists who take center stage in her songs. Faced with resistance, heartbreak, and sometimes outright oppression, they are tasked with turning their particular source of pain into a source of energy.

“Dollar Beers (Redondo Beach '96),” which includes the lyric from which this album takes its name, is a seminal piece in the composer’s oeuvre, marking a turning point in the way she approached the process of creation. Prior, Johnson used pencil and paper to compose, in part because she was advised in earlier days of compositional study to avoid technology. But Johnson found herself drawn to the elasticity that digital tools provide, and made the decision with this piece to ignore the admonitions, follow her instinct, and forge her own path. It was a fateful decision, hurtling Johnson into a far more textured, sophisticated sound-world — one which has only continued to deepen and intensify over time.

“Dollar Beers” is seminal, too, because of the subject matter it tackles — establishing themes that continue to remain central to Johnson’s work, both as a composer and scholar. Inspired by a young adult novel called “On My Honor,” the piece is a devastating examination of the limits of comprehension, the tension between our sense of control and the inexplicable forces that dismantle it, the lasting and multi-dimensional impact of trauma, the strange mutuality of pain and euphoria, the effects of intoxication (both literal and figurative), shared vs. isolated experience, human fallibility, and — perhaps most significantly — the problematic relationship between looking back and moving forward.

If that sounds like a lot, it is. Johnson’s work is nothing if not challenging. But it is also supremely elegant, best exemplified in not only the carefully elongated, glass-like crescendos of “Dollar Beers,” but also the heady, whole-tone-stained swirl of “Pilot’s” impassioned middle section, the fragile interplay of voice, cello and electronics that announces “Starling,” and the stunningly stark denouement of “The After Time: Falling.”

Johnson has been asked why her music “is so beautiful, when it’s about these terrible things? Why does it rely upon harmonic structures that we tend to associate with closure, completion?” While her work is indeed inspired by popular music forms (listen for direct quotations of Metallica and strong shades of the Beatles and Sonic Youth, among other rock influences), as well as the more Romantic and Impressionist elements of classical composition (Wagnerian emotional grandeur, Debussy-tinged melodic tonality), its power lies in the very fact that these sometimes familiar, sometimes comforting references refuse to coalesce into neat or expected packages. In fact, most of **Dont Look Back**’s pieces disintegrate and disperse — rather than truly conclude — through extended sequences of false endings, the repeated delays allowing these songs to skirt the longed-for closure invoked by those “familiar” harmonic structures.



Perhaps that's what makes, "Falling," the final segment of still-in-progress opera "The After Time," begun in 2013, the most shattering piece on **Dont Look Back**: from a musical standpoint, at least, its conclusion feels wholly definitive. But its storyline is left unfinished: while our narrator seems fated to relive a memory she "can't unsee," her role in the death of a classmate with whom she spent a passionate, drunken night remains troublingly unclear. And it is this sharply-defined contrast between the form and the substance that leaves the listener as haunted, and as compelled to look back, as so many of Johnson's protagonists.

Johnson, who has studied the role of music in triggering traumatic memory, wonders, "What happens when you keep looking back, when you get stuck looking back?" The album's title is, of course, "deeply ironic," not only because it acts as a mixtape of the last five years of Johnson's life, but also because several of its tracks revolve around events that have occurred in the past, around characters attempting to get closer to a moment in time that is always receding. But, as Johnson notes, there's a transformative power that can come from recontextualizing our experiences and disrupting our rituals of reexamination.

While repetition is a device Johnson strategically deploys to convey both obsession and paralysis, there must be room for transcendence, for growth, for "repetition with a difference," and Johnson finds it in the strange exhilaration of the unknown. Whether musically or from a narrative stance, Johnson embraces the inherent power of living outside the range of so-called "normal," classifiable experiences. Acoustic instruments are coerced so far beyond their customary operating confines as to sound electronic and otherworldly —sometimes nearly indistinguishable from actual digital effects and even the human voice, as at the end of "Cutter" — while acrobatic, almost untenable vocals push, often uncomfortably, to defy underlying instrumentation, creating a palpable sense of unease, yes, but also hard-won liberation.

Johnson says that "Dollar Beers" embodied her "first feeling of the ability to be free," but her many subsequent, uncompromisingly bold explorations of the interface between artificial and organic colors and timbres, between popular and classical tropes, between the limits of the human voice and the human experience, and, ultimately, between what we can hold onto and what we can't, represent a continued striving to break free of traditional strictures and expectations. It is a hard-won freedom, and it is exhilarating to bear witness as Johnson, and her characters, forge their own paths.

-SUE VISAKOWITZ



