

# Album Review: Hazel English - Real Life



*Real Life* is the third album from Eleisha Caripis, who releases music under the name Hazel English. Well, it's number three if you consider 2017's *Just Give In / Never Going Home*, a compilation of her first two EP's, an album. Like that release, the new album is an "album" in ceremonial nomenclature only. The first five tracks are lifted directly from 2022's *Summer Nights* EP, while the remaining six are singles that were sprinkled throughout the past two years.

Like its spiritual predecessor, *Real Life* is a pleasant, but standard fare of teary-eyed indie pop achieved with the help of frequent collaborator Day Wav, who co-wrote and produced the entire album.

But here's the thing—if you've heard one song with Day Wave, real name Jackson Phillips, behind the boards, then you've heard them all. He might be the most talented one-trick

pony in indie music today. Phillips' ability to take the musical ideas already perfected by The Drums in their early career and squeeze every minute variation out of the style is genuinely impressive. We're talking carefully curated arrangements of noodly guitars, cutesy drum machines, and *just* the right amount of reverb to compliment a warm afternoon's daydream. His solo material under the Day Wave moniker is usually agreeable and sometimes plain boring, but Caripis' delightful vocal performances elevate his instrumental packaging to heights only achievable when the two work together.

Caripis and Phillips' collaboration is a welcome return to form after Hazel English's disastrous and final release on Polyvinyl with 2020's *Wake UP!*. For this album, Caripis separated herself creatively from Phillips to explore new musical territory. Frankly, Hazel English's original (and current) sound was (and is) a tired, dead end take on a musical movement that's heyday has been over for the better part of a decade. Trying something new at that point in her career was probably the right call. However valiant the effort, Caripis' foray into vintage pop country was a failure and, frankly, not a good fit. With *Real Life*, Hazel English has slotted back into the role of jangle pop's most palatable artist with such ease that *Wake UP!* will eventually be blissfully ignored or, better yet, forgotten.

The *Summer Nights* half of the album features some of Caripis' strongest songs to date. In fact, songs like the original EP's title track, "Nine Stories," and "Blue Light" are such a natural progression from *Just Give In / Never Going Home* that one has to wonder if her creative detour ever actually existed.

Regrettably, the "new" songs aren't as consistent. "Heartbreaker," the first track after the wonderful opening five songs, is a clear drop in quality from a songwriting perspective. The instrumentation can't be faulted when Phillips consistently provides a charming formula that he has had a firm grasp on for quite some time now. "Jesse" and "Goner" admirably steady the ship, but no amount of padding can account for the catastrophe of a closer that is "Hamilton."

The album's obvious outlier features a random venture into car commercial-ready electro production with spoken-word verses from Caripis, who recounts quirky dreams she had about her neighbor. "I guess the most interesting things happen when I'm dreaming," she says plainly. It's a nice sentiment to be sure, but the deadpan, uninspired delivery reveals just how forced Hazel English's music can feel when venturing too far from her bread and butter.

The lesson to be learned here is that Caripis is destined to churn out slightly different versions of the same thing we've heard from her since 2016—and that's not a bad thing. When up to bat, Hazel English usually hits at least a double and frequently scores a homerun. She has a long, long list of songs that could slot effortlessly onto any playlist built for coffee shops, long drives, or dusks spent alone. In fact, a good number of such songs exist on this album. It's just a shame that an otherwise solid outing is slightly padded and spoiled so mercilessly by the putrid aftertaste that is "Hamilton." Cut some fat from *Real Life*, and you're left with an excellent deluxe edition of an underrated EP.