

Snail Mail Wants to Feel Alive

DEK: Lindsey Jordan gives us a peek at her inner psyche, sharing how trading yearning for an existential crisis led to a breakthrough with *Ricochet*.

This is the first time that Lindsey Jordan—who performs as Snail Mail—and I are chatting as adults. In college, my friend Shawn Durham invited me to catch her play drums and our friend Ryann Vieira on bass in the first-ever full-band Snail Mail show, as part of U+N Fest at Baltimore's Ottobar in 2015. Jordan, then a teenager with striking jet-black hair, performed what would become her debut EP, *Habit*, with the comfort and self-assurance of a seasoned musician rather than that of a 15-year-old just getting started.

Though Snail Mail was the opener of the festival, it didn't take long for Jordan's project to become bigger than the U+N Fest's headliners of the night, Screaming Females and Priests. She has since entered the pantheon of a new generation of queer stars through both Snail Mail and her starring role in Jane Schoenbrun's *I Saw the TV Glow*. And now Jordan is preparing to enter a new era of Snail Mail with her upcoming album, *Ricochet*, showing how much she's grown a decade after *Habit*. Needless to say, a lot has changed in the 11 years since we initially met.

When we catch up in a side room of the photography studio for this interview's shoot, Jordan dives into the period of immense change following her sophomore release, *Valentine*. In the late fall of 2021, Jordan had to reschedule some of the dates of her tour in support of *Valentine* after having “massive polyps” in her vocal cords that required surgery to prevent permanent damage to her voice. “I was learning how to sing and speak again in order to be able to tour, which was really scary,” she recalls. But by the time she began recording *Ricochet*, her vocal surgery came as an advantage. “I have more of a range now by a lot. I didn't have any falsettos before,” Jordan says. Though her voice had always benefited from its raspy yet dulcet quality (one that recalls other indie pop greats like Liz Phair and The Raincoats), on *Ricochet* she can *belt*.

“It's so much less of a scary thing now to be doing sessions,” Jordan admits. “That was always such a big point of anxiety, because I was beholden to whatever state my voice was in that day, and on tour, particularly, you get sick a lot. Stuff like that affects it.”

After her *Valentine* tour got rescheduled to 2022, Jordan began writing *Ricochet* on the road. But instead of penning the lyrics first, as she was prone to do on previous albums, she challenged herself by starting with the instrumental arrangements and vocal melodies, leaving the lyrics for last so they could come out naturally. The result is Jordan's most vulnerable album yet, one that lets you enter her psyche as she processes the anxiety of mortality, imposter syndrome, keeping up with a corrupt industry and being terrified of losing the few close-knit relationships she's retained during her rise to fame.

For *Ricochet*, she also wanted to shed the limiting and sexist confines of the “sad girl” trope. It's a label that many of the women who rose alongside Snail Mail, like Angel Olsen and Lucy Dacus, who are also known for penning scorches about heartbreak, have tried to move past.

“I had this feeling after *Valentine* was done that the next record, no matter what was happening in my life, I really wanted to just attack it from a different angle, just because I don't want to be a one-trick pony, and I wanted to see what else I could do,” Jordan explains. She carefully constructed a connective thread between the songs so they would feel like they were tied to their own world, rather than each contained in its own world.

When it came time to build the lyrical world of *Ricochet*, Jordan was laser-focused on perfecting the words, putting her social life on hold. “I didn't go to my parents’ for Christmas, nothing like that. I was just in my house, writing and creating this lyrical universe,” she says. “It's been a long journey. Some songs I've been writing for four or five years. I tend to

agonize over being a perfectionist with melody and with all that stuff, and gave myself way more time to be worried about that. Then, [with the lyrics], it felt like [*Ricochet*] got to be its own new type of project.”

Much of *Ricochet* finds Jordan confronting the sacrifices that come with dedicating herself to her work, reflecting on friendships put in jeopardy by a lack of time to nurture them, and being terrified that the close bonds in her life—including her romance with Momma co-bandleader Etta Friedman—have an expiration date. But it's not the possibility of a breakup that's plaguing Jordan's thoughts. Rather, it's mortality and the fleeting nature of life that have burdened her.

As someone with “Pure O” Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—the type that, instead of fixating on germs, brings intrusive, obsessive and uncomfortable thoughts nonstop—I could recognize how the disorder, which Jordan also has, bled into the writing. With OCD, you ruminate over past mistakes to the point where the memories feel physically painful, blaming yourself for shortcomings that might not even be real, as Jordan does in the ultra-catchy track “Agony Freak.” There is also a switch with OCD that happens when you enter a relationship with someone you genuinely love: Instead of fixating on whether you're bound to call it quits, you begin to ruminate on whether your loved one will meet a tragic demise and not be able to grow old together, which Jordan addresses in “Light On Our Feet.”

When I tell Jordan that I picked up on this, she jokes that *Ricochet* is “OCD music.” She explains that about five years ago, she first watched Charlie Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York*, in which Philip Seymour Hoffman's character, Caden, is obsessed with death and tries to grapple with his life as it falls apart by directing a play based on it for no audience but himself. Caden becomes so enraptured with controlling his life in the play that he forgets to give in to fate and let the universe take him where he needs to go. It stuck with her, activating “this intense thing for me as a person with intense OCD,” reaching extremes where her fixation on death was ruining her quality of life.

By the time she began writing the lyrics to *Ricochet*, she had gotten to a better place with her OCD where it wasn't actively affecting her, but she now has a "new hypersensitivity around the preciousness of animals and loved ones, and it's like the most devastating thing to me in my life, how much I love my dog." She mentions looking at her dog and "bawling [her] eyes out," becoming so overcome with emotion that she has to stop talking about it before she feels it too intensely in this moment (the gentle stuff "just kills" her, as she sings in "Nowhere"). It's something I know too well, as OCD doesn't allow you to blissfully enjoy someone's company, but rather makes you feel helpless while preparing for a painful experience, even if it's still far into the future.

"I feel like a lot of my emotional energy in going from being a teenager into an adult went away from love and yearning, and more towards being existential all the time," she reflects. Even though her OCD became more manageable, Jordan wanted to touch on it for *Ricochet*. It had become such a big part of her life that it was impossible to ignore while reflecting on who she's become since *Valentine*.

For Jordan, it took a while to figure out what perspective she was going to share about her obsessive thoughts about death and the afterlife. "Because I was talking about life, religion and spirituality, I was thinking I could run the risk of either just sounding completely nihilistic, or sounding like a sage, religious expert," she says. This line of thought led to writing "My Maker," a song about wondering whether, despite the hope of being reunited with loved ones in the afterlife and spending eternity with them, there might be nothing there.

But even with moments that appear fatalistic, Jordan also wanted to capture some of the more positive moments in her life. In the fall, it'll be Jordan and Friedman's 4-year anniversary. Jordan wrote two songs about her relationship with Friedman: "Light On Our Feet," a stunning ballad with soaring strings about being scared of dying and being apart, and "Reverie," a middle finger to the music industry, where Jordan declares that while seemingly everyone sucks, Friedman is her rock. "To me, finding a

connection and something special and genuine is way more of a special thing because everything is so fried,” she says.

Jordan's past work detailed being enamored of someone, only for the relationship to end in turmoil. Because her songs about previous relationships tend to “overshadow” her other work, she wanted to make sure that, while it would be inevitable to write about Friedman (who also designed the album art), the focus for *Ricochet* wouldn't be on her romantic life. “People think it's just heartbreak and yearning songs. I just wanted to get far away from it,” she explains. “I feel like I'm good at doing that. I can let it rest. It would feel dishonest [to not write about that at all in *Ricochet*], but I also don't want to be making breakup songs.”

This version of Jordan is different from the one who was a “sucker for the pain” in *Valentine*; it's healthier and stable, even with the anxieties that sometimes overwhelm her. When I mention this, Jordan agrees, noting that it's a natural progression as she's now in her mid-20s and has different priorities. “Once you can get to a healthier place in your life, you can spend more time worrying about your goals and your morals,” she notes. “There's a lot of moral value conversation on the record, too. Because I feel like I found a lot of myself after *Valentine* got done. I've just aged from 21 to 26 [between albums]. I've had more space in my head to really get to know what I value, and who I want to be and what I care about. And I feel like that has just changed my perspective on everything.”

Besides finding a life partner in Friedman, Jordan also formed a close bond with Momma bassist and producer Aron Kobayashi Ritch. The friends had talked about making an album together for years before *Ricochet*, sharing a playlist with sonic inspirations that featured an eclectic mix of Madonna, The Verve, Radiohead, and Cibo Matto. While speaking with Kobayashi Ritch over the phone days after meeting up with Jordan, he tells me that they had been working together on *Ricochet* for “a little over two years,” fine-tuning the ideas for the record. “We did a few feeler sessions to see

what it was like working together and they went really well,” he recalls. Once they realized their professional relationship worked as well as their friendship did, they found comfort in freely sharing their ideas for the album. The producer would have regular check-ins with Jordan to gauge her thoughts on his production touches and found that they often agreed on the vision—and even when Jordan would gently push back, she knew Kobayashi Ritch would be understanding.

“He’s such a great friend and we really understand each other,” Jordan says. “It’s nice to be known so much by the person that you’re producing something with. I felt like the fact that we both really respect each other, we’re the same age, and we’re both just big music fans, it makes it easy to be coming from the same page.” The comfort in knowing that she didn’t have to “feel nervous to say something dumb” or “make the wrong call” was a refreshing working dynamic for Jordan.

While Kobayashi Ritch and Jordan were already friends before making *Ricochet*, the experience of creating the album brought them closer. Because most of *Ricochet* was made in North Carolina, where Jordan has lived since 2024, recording the album required Kobayashi Ritch to stay in her home for weeks, allowing them to spend quality time alone together. “Us forming a relationship outside of touring, outside of Etta, and having it be a friendship between us was a lot of fun,” says Kobayashi Ritch. “[We got to] grow the relationship throughout the album, but have also known each other for quite a while beforehand, so it didn’t feel like times when you start an album with random people.”

Coming up in her teens, Jordan saw the dark underbelly of the entertainment industry. She confesses that she often feels “too jaded” for her age and often checks in with herself about why she wants to continue making music. “I have to always ask myself what the fuck I care about at the beginning of every Snail Mail thing,” says Jordan, “because I do love songwriting. I love being here. I’m super grateful. I definitely have,

sometimes, an automatically jaded outlook on stuff where I have to consciously get myself back into feeling present and optimistic, which I think is also a powerful exercise.”

Looking back at the start of her career, Jordan recognizes it felt easier then because there was a sudden boost for women in indie rock that allowed for an equal playing field. Too many talented artists emerged during that time for them to be ignored, and as rock musicians embraced their female fan base, labels finally realized that women in indie rock were profitable.

“I feel like during the time when Snail first started popping off, when there were so many women in music that were being catapulted into the sunshine, which is dope, but I think a lot of people took that as, ‘everything’s fine now.’ And the dial is back,” she says. “The media isn’t pushing super hard for women in music the way they were during that.” She clarifies that she isn’t specifically speaking about herself, but rather making an observation of the industry as a whole. Jordan feels that the period where women were getting more opportunities was “a little bit deceiving” because “everything is pretty much back to ‘normal’ now.”

“I think we’re back to women still having to be extra entertaining,” she adds. “No mistakes. Funny, charismatic, nice, look like you’re having fun.” Jordan points out that for every comment denigrating her work, there’s another praising a band made up of men for the “exact same” thing. It’s something she hints at in “Reverie,” as she calls out men who think they’re superior in the music industry while “playing rock star with his daddy’s cash.”

“This record is super ‘fuck the industry,’” says Jordan. “I can count the people I’m friends with in bands on one hand. I think the entertainment industry in general is very every man for himself. If you are finding a lot of meaningful connections amidst all that, that’s awesome. But I oftentimes feel a little bit jaded for my age and for my position to be like, I’ve been in this for so long, and it’s really hard for me not to feel pretty down on stuff.”

Jordan has been trying to build a peaceful life outside the industry, where she can be in isolation and focus on self-care. In 2024, she bought a house in North Carolina, only a 6-hour drive from her parents' home in Ellicott City, Maryland. “[It’s a place where] I don’t know many people, there’s not a lot of traffic, and where I can focus on my writing and have a lot of land,” she says about why it turned out to be the perfect home. She wanted to be somewhere quiet, where she could properly recharge in between tours. While she has the perk of staying with Friedman whenever she misses the city, she enjoys the relaxing hobbies she can pursue back home. Recently, she took up sculpting, making candelabras, ashtrays, incense trays and a plant holder for Friedman. She’s also gotten into DIY-ing her clothes, including a pair of brown pants she wore for this *ANTICS* shoot featuring pinstripes, and has been “obsessed” with building Japanese model kits.

With *Ricochet* done and ready to be shared with fans after a nearly 5-year hiatus, Jordan is relishing having closed the chapter on yet another labor-intensive project—but while enjoying her downtime, she’s ready to face her next artistic challenge. “I love the feeling of letting one of the pressures go, and moving on to the next one,” she confesses. “It keeps me going.”