

HED: Skullcrusher Rises From Her Own Maelstrom

DEK: The singer-songwriter details the turbulent period that her sophomore album, *And Your Song Is Like a Circle*, was written about.

Coming off the release of her debut album *Quiet the Room* in 2022, Helen Ballentine's relationship with her long-term partner ended. Having to leave her Los Angeles home that she shared with her ex, the musician, who performs under the Skullcrusher moniker, decided to make the best of her East Coast tour dates and move in with her mother in the Hudson Valley as she figured out what her future looked like. It was ironic timing, given that *Quiet the Room* had delved into her childhood trauma following her parents' divorce; now she was facing it head-on. "Coming back, it was definitely very difficult in a lot of ways to have this sensation of reverting back to some younger version of yourself," Ballentine tells me over coffee in her new neighborhood of Ridgewood, Queens, where she's lived since this past spring. She had grown accustomed to the freedom she had in California, but now she was reliving the confines of her teenage years, relearning how to share space with her mother and figuring out her role at home as an adult.

"There's this sort of disconnect that can happen between your inner child and the person who is then maturing away from that part of yourself," Ballentine reflects. "When you come back, it's like you're confronting that person that I think you were maybe trying to get some distance from. And I think there's a lot of reconciliation that can happen where you're reckoning with these two sides of yourself. There's a way to have a lot of healing." Despite the process not being easy, the move ultimately proved beneficial, providing some closure and healing for herself, her parents, and their own dynamic with each other. Ballentine was also able to spend time with her grandmother, who passed away in June. This experience of being back home allowed the singer-songwriter to examine patterns in her behavior, opening another door in finding closure and maturity within the confines of her new life. The goal was no longer to break free from the complexities of her dynamic with her mom, but rather to help them understand one another.

Ballentine didn't expect to be joining the slew of musicians who have called the artist-friendly neighborhood in Queens home. She thought her stay in New York would be temporary, hoping to return to Los Angeles and try to settle into a new home while navigating what life there would look like following her breakup. But a month into rooming with her mother, Ballentine's cat, Finn, became ill, and his odds of pushing through weren't looking promising. (He has since recovered.) Ballentine's veterinarian recommended that she try an experimental treatment, which, while legal, hadn't been approved by the FDA, requiring it to be administered by an underground group of women. She had built a life on the West Coast, with friendships that felt like family and a vision for her future; now she was grappling with the possibility of losing her lifeline during her most fragile state. For months, she dedicated herself to Finn's recovery, beginning to put the pieces together that would become her sophomore record, her first under Dirty Hit, *And Your Song Is Like A Circle*, written over the course of two and a half years.

The album didn't come all at once as the dust settled. It came in spurts in the midst of chaos, with Ballentine finding solace in her craft when existing felt like a burden. Even when she's been

unable to perform basic tasks like getting dressed as the heaviness of depression took over, she could still pick up the guitar or play the piano. Having left her previous label, Secretly Canadian, Ballentine was free of the confines that come when on someone else's timeline, allowing herself grace as she wrote this new batch of songs, at the time unaware that they would turn into her next LP.

*Circle* didn't bring Ballentine out of her hole; instead, it allowed her some space to confront the existential questions that plagued her. In the opening piano ballad, "March," she questions her purpose: "What do I live for? Who do I live for?" Meanwhile, in the hazy, guitar-driven "Living," she wonders, "Am I living? In the music, in the singing? In the wording? In the silence at the ending?" Though Ballentine didn't find the answers while writing, beginning to follow her philosophical thread led the pieces to fall into place. "The difficult parts of my life at the time felt more prominent to me than the moments where I was actually creating, but still being able to write was something that was helping me get through that time and offered me moments of release and moments of reflection," Ballentine says. "I felt very grateful to be able to have something like that, that I could do when everything else kind of felt hard."

Ballentine made *Circle* with her friend and former Strange Ranger member Isaac Eiger, who co-produced the LP and contributed much of the additional instrumentation, including guitar, banjo, bass, strings, drum programming and synths. While some of the songs were recorded in studios, both in Los Angeles and upstate New York, most of the album was recorded at Eiger's home, with one track also recorded at Ballentine's mother's house, retaining the intimate quality of the songs' writing. A standout is "Maelstrom," with drum beats that feel like waves crashing onto rocks, where Ballentine grieves the ending of a friendship. When you're isolated and have already faced abandonment with the end of a relationship, another loss can feel tremendously heavy—especially when it's the kind of bond that you haven't prepared yourself for severing.

"I think that experience was in a lot of ways much, much harder than going through a romantic breakup in a way," Ballentine says. "We have more language around that, we have more preparation. When you enter into a romantic relationship, there's a part of you that's always a little bit like, 'OK, this might end.' But with friendships, I don't know if I'm ever thinking like, 'Oh, this might end.'" Ballentine latched onto the imagery of a maelstrom, as she felt that she was being pulled into a whirlpool of despair. With the heaviness of losing yet another loved one, she fixated on an apparent pattern at play. In "Maelstrom," Ballentine wonders whether her tumultuous childhood is to blame for her relationships—romantic and otherwise—not working out, as she sings, "Born from a death, born from the lack of love/The lacking of family/Do you feel like yourself around me?"

"It's easy sometimes to feel like there's just something wrong with you that will not ever change because of maybe the circumstances of how you were born or something that was passed down to you," Ballentine explains. "I think I was really thinking a lot about like, 'OK, this is something about me that's just predetermined and there's nothing I can do to change things.' She clarifies that this isn't a belief she still holds, but rather was exacerbated by her depression, trying to find a thread through her apparent misfortune. "We kind of developed these

mythologies about ourselves or something where we're like, 'Well, because this happened to me as a child, I will have a hard time with this thing in my life,' or whatever," says Ballentine. "And that sort of becomes a mythology that feels really powerful."

The concept of a maelstrom—a terrifying tidal current that sucks everything in its path—fascinated her. It's the subject of fantastical storytelling, present in Norse mythology and in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "A Descent Into the Maelstrom," but it's also a natural phenomenon. A maelstrom is a reminder that sometimes, your biggest fears are plausible, but it's how to move past them once they come true that allows you to grow. With some distance from the situation with her old friend, Ballentine has found a new perspective: Rather than seeing it as an ending, she views the friendship as evolving. As humans, we are bound to change, and while our paths sometimes converge, it's inevitable that they veer in different directions, which can feel like a small death, but you can return to each other's lives as a more realized, mature version of who you once were.

While Ballentine is now at a stable place, having settled into her new life in New York City after leaving the Hudson Valley, confronting the heaviness of this stormy period took a toll on her. Before she left Los Angeles, the musician, who suffers from severe panic attacks that at times can even cause her to pass out, had been prescribed Klonopin by her psychiatrist. During the midst of Finn's illness and her overwhelming solitude, she developed a dependency on her medication, unable to function without it. Once *Circle* was completed, Ballentine realized her coping mechanism needed to change. Given that benzodiazepine withdrawal symptoms can be severe and oftentimes dangerous, she sought treatment at a rehabilitation center last winter, spending this downtime in recovery drawing, doing puzzles and having group therapy sessions discussing her emotions.

Ballentine acknowledges that there is a negative connotation associated with undergoing treatment for addiction, theorizing that it's perhaps because people don't want to be encouraged to find themselves in a situation where they have to be in a rehabilitation center, but the process of being able to connect with others who share your struggle had a "very funny, almost kind of wholesome, sitcom type of vibe" to her. "I've noticed that a lot of people can relate to [asking for help] being hard. I think it's harder for a lot of people than we think," she says. "Getting to meet a lot of really, really wonderful people, who were all super different, coming from really different situations, but we all kind of immediately just shared this commonality of having had a hard time, and we're all there trying to feel better, was a really good experience."

*Circle* isn't about her addiction, but rather about emotionally "spiraling out of control before seeking help." It doesn't offer answers on how to get through the darkness; instead, it gives solace to those in the throes of their spiral, reminding them that, one day, the despair of the songs will feel like a distant memory, as it does for Ballentine. "I feel glad that I have been able to move through all this stuff and happy to be where I am," she says. "Sharing part of that journey feels good because it reminds me of my own growth and my own resilience. It's a reminder, too, that everybody is more resilient than they might think."

