
Review: Haim - Something to Tell You

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Haim is one of those acts that comes around once in a generation and sticks out like a unicorn in a haystack. The three sisters have the kind of mutual synergy, technical chops, and songwriting ability that could only come from years of playing with each other and honing their skills. It's hard to overstate how unusual their debut album was when it dropped in 2013. Rock bands are a rare breed in popular music these days, so it was truly something to see a fully-formed, highly polished one pop up out of nowhere and dominate the way Haim did, immediately embarking on world tours and palling around with the likes of Taylor Swift. What makes Haim's music great is that they have the fundamentals down to a science: sharp instrumentation, precise percussion, layered harmonies, and powerfully catchy hooks. Needless to say, I had high hopes for this album.

And while I think their sophomore effort is still a very good record, I think there's signs here that Haim has not yet unleashed their potential. The album introduces some of Haim's best work yet, but also finds the trio noticeably treading old ground with a sound that hasn't evolved as much as four years of touring and life experience wouldn't suggest.

The album kicks off with *Want You Back*, a single that I've been playing nonstop for about a month. The heartfelt pop epic was pretty much the best comeback for the trio you could ever ask for, with layers of summery acoustic guitar licks, tasteful slap bass, and punchy drums that would make Fleetwood Mac proud. The chorus is honestly one of the catchiest I've heard in 2017, period, and the bass playing is phenomenal. Don't watch the live version on SNL unless you want to spend the rest of your life wishing you could turn up Este in the mix on the album cut.

After the opener, the album segues into the catchy but fairly safe *Nothing's Wrong*. Like all of Haim's songs, the lyrics vaguely paint a picture of emotional distress from the perspective of a scorned and neglected lover. It really does feel like a B-side to *Want You Back*, not that that's a bad thing. It's got its fair share of tight harmonies and sharp guitar riffs. If you've listened to Haim before, you'll know exactly what to expect.

The third track on the album, the doo-wop anthem *Little of Your Love*, is all but guaranteed to be a huge hit. Kicking off with a confident drum fill and a piano glissando, the track has flavors of country, featuring a quick tapped guitar riff in the hook that

sounds almost like a banjo and a huge Nashville kick drum looming throughout the song. The backup vocals mostly consist of perfectly timed “oohs” and “aahs” that you’ll find yourself involuntarily singing along to, and the bridge (strangely ornamented by a women’s choir, which somehow works) in the background is one that you know will get the crowd clapping on the two and four every time without fail. It’s just good songwriting.

Please watch this music video.

The first highlight of the album comes halfway through with *Ready For You*, a densely layered pop epic owing equally to The 1975 and Madonna. The absolute best part of this track is the drum loop (apparently made with the same drum machine Prince used), an organic cacophony of syncopated clicks, snaps, gated snare drums, and hi hats which proves once again that Haim’s strongest quality is their ear for infectious rhythms. In interviews, the sisters say that they all learned to play drums before their respective instruments, and it definitely comes through in their songwriting. Even the guitar sounds percussive, popping in sporadically with perfectly timed riffs throughout; and I haven’t even mentioned the eminently chantable earworm of a hook (I wa-sn’t rea-dy for you). About two minutes in, the reverb gets turned up to eleven and we’re suddenly in a Prince or a Madonna record, surrounded by the sustained background vocals of Alana and Este Haim. But then comes a sudden breakdown out of nowhere. Danielle’s voice stands alone out against the minimal percussion while her sisters chime in with an increasingly distorted dissonant refrain sung through a prismizer, until the track grinds to a halt.

The silence lasts for about a full second until a single strumming acoustic guitar comes in to revive the song like a shock from a defibrillator. The final, triumphant chorus is an incredible wall of sound and everything you’d want from a Haim hook. This is the exact kind of breakthrough songwriting I wanted from this album. Haim is a band that wears its many influences on its sleeve. It would be cool to see them to make more songs like this which recombine familiar pop elements to create something entirely their own.

Unfortunately, after this stellar track about halfway through, the album falls into a slump with the next three or four tracks. *Something To Tell You* is probably the worst song on the album, which other than a sparse bassline feels pretty under-written. I understand the idea of creating a song with space, but Haim’s at its best when there’s as little space as possible, when every second is filled with catchy riffs and harmonies. *You Never Knew* is co-written by Dev Hynes, which you can tell by the hazy detuned synth chords, but other than a powerful descending bassline in the hook (again, Este never disappoints), the song is kind of underwhelming. *Kept Me Crying* borrows the prismized vocals from *The Wire* off the band’s last album but trades that song’s driving tempo for a sluggish bass line that lacks momentum. *Found It In Silence* features a

Carly Rae Jepsen-style strings section and a soaring choir and is a solid addition to the tracklist.

Este Haim's bass face. As a bass player, I understand, Este.

The rhythm of the album changes up with *Walking Away* near the end, another standout track that proves that Haim can write interesting songs outside their comfort zone when they really want to. This track sounds nothing like the rest of the album, and that is a good thing. The sparse watery synths and staccato drums underscoring breathless, meandering vocals really create an odd atmosphere that reminds me of *My Song 5* from their last record (one of my favorites). The harmonies are wonky, too, not what you usually see from the trio. When the heavy sidechained synths kick in during the hook (backed by eerie whispering background vocals), it's hard not to bob your head. This sounds more like Marian Hill than Haim, and I love every second of it. The real star of the track, however, is once again the bass, which waits to come in for about a minute and a half. Este Haim absolutely kills it with a syncopated slap groove that just does not let up. Props to you, Este (call me). I would love to hear an entire Haim album with this sound.

The second to last track on the record is its second single, *Right Now*. I didn't feel the need to return the song when I first heard it, but I will admit that in the context of the album it makes a lot more sense. The song really works as a summary of the album so far, with an agonizingly slow build that lends its final moments a lot more impact. Finally, we transition into *Night So Long*, a solid but unspectacular closer which features an ethereal atmosphere, a slow pace, and really heartfelt vocals.

I like this picture, but I don't really know why.

Overall, the album definitely has some highs, as it sees the band taking its sound to new places on tracks like *Ready For You* and *Walking Away*. It's also got quite a few examples of the stellar, consistent pop songwriting you expect from a Haim album (*Want You Back*, *Little Of Your Love*, *Nothing's Wrong*). On the other hand, the Haim sound remains relatively unchanged four years later, and given their monumental debut a hopeful fan can't help but be at least a little disappointed. The subject matter and lyrical content of this album also still feels a little immature. Haim's lyrics are generally extremely non-specific and vaguely sorrowful descriptions of breakups, and while I can't fault a pop album for touching on these topics I can't help but expect more in a world where Lorde and Beyonce exist. I can't help but feel that while Haim's technical chops are as strong as ever, they're not even scratching the surface of their potential. But like I said, you just don't get many bands like Haim these days, and I for one am glad they're back.

Best Tracks: *Want You Back, Little Of Your Love, Ready For You, Walking Away*

Worst Tracks: *Something To Tell You, Kept Me Crying*

Score: 7.5/10
