

Muna's Fresh Start

The indie-pop band was dropped by its major label early in the pandemic, then scored a TikTok hit with “Silk Chiffon,” featuring a verse from its new label boss: Phoebe Bridgers.



By Dani Blum

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The members of Muna kept calling themselves “impenetrable.” They were sorry about this, they insisted, as each lurched into the frame of a video call from a backyard in Los Angeles, ping-ponging inside jokes and rearranging themselves into different configurations.

The indie-pop trio of Katie Gavin, 29, Naomi McPherson, 29, and Josette Maskin, 28, operate on a frenetic frequency and have easy access to their emotions. By the end of the call to discuss their new album, out Friday, all three had teared up and begged themselves out loud to stop crying. The constant churn of promotion was adding up: “That’s why we’re chaos vibes,” McPherson said, dangling a whorl of curly hair over the screen.

Any album release brings some chaos. For Muna, though, sending its third, self-titled album into the world means starting all over again. The group played at Lollapalooza and appeared on Jimmy Fallon’s show before its debut album, “About U,” came out in 2017, then opened for Harry Styles and followed up with a 2019 LP called “Saves the World.” But its label, RCA, dropped the band months into the pandemic, citing cost-cutting necessities.

Muna was devastated. Then it went back to work. A friend of a friend, someone the members knew through what Gavin called “the lesbian Los Angeles support group,” rented them a studio in her basement for next to nothing, and the band started showing up every day. The songs it worked on there would become its most pop-oriented and propulsive yet. One of them became something the band had never had before: a viral hit.

“Life’s so fun, life’s so fun,” Gavin lilts on “Silk Chiffon,” which features Phoebe Bridgers and has caromed across TikTok, soundtracking cookie dough tutorials, hangovers and odes to crushes. The rest of “Muna” is filled with fizzy songs about twirling through gay bars and rollerblading through the night that barrel over slick, sputtering synths. Buoyed by the success of “Silk Chiffon,” the band is now on the verge of breaking out of its cult following and bringing its anthems about queer joy to a wider audience. But joy isn’t straightforward for Muna, either in its music or in its members’ lives.

“Obviously, everything is going really well,” McPherson, who is nonbinary, said, prodding a toothpick between their teeth. “Which is when the demon wants to punish you.”

Muna got its start at the University of Southern California, where McPherson spied Gavin biking through campus and murmured to their friend, “That girl is cool.” The feeling was mutual; they bonded, and Gavin introduced McPherson to Maskin at a party. Almost immediately, they started making music, workshopping guitar chords between classes. Gavin sings lead vocals, plays guitar and helps produce; Maskin (guitar) and McPherson (guitar and keys) work on production.

Nearly a decade later, one part of their songwriting process is the same: Muna knows when to stop. The band likes to put in what McPherson calls “princess work”; they tinker with songs for a few hours each day, and quit just when a track starts to click into place. “You try to retain the magic,” Maskin said.

The group spends the rest of its time hanging out — watching YouTube, doing bits. The easy intimacy, the way they finish each other’s sentences or can communicate with an eyebrow raise, is central to their process. It also takes work. Gavin and McPherson dated for years, and when they broke up, Maskin threatened to quit the band if they didn’t go to

therapy. (The trio has also gone to what they call “band therapy.”)



“The connective tissue is self-definition and agency and identity and interrogating those things,” McPherson said of the new album. “And also knowing that nothing is fixed.” Tonje Thiesen for The New York Times

Recording can be stressful. “I would record all my vocals alone in a closet if I could,” Gavin said, after the band relayed that it had to redo the song “Solid” five or six times because she kept cooing the lyric, “My baby’s so solid,” in a way that sounded like, “My baby’s a salad.” But Muna has learned to hype one another up and not overwork the music.

“At some point, you’re going to have song dysmorphia where you’re like, ‘I don’t know if this is going to sound good, you guys,’” McPherson said.

“Muna” is a shift for the band, a step further into glitzy, shimmering pop. “At RCA, we were like, ‘We’re staying true to ourselves, we’re going to make interesting, indie-pop music, we’re not here to make hits,’” McPherson said. “And then the moment we leave, we’re at an indie label and we’re like, ‘Here’s our poppiest song ever.’”

The small label is Saddest Factory Records, which is run by Bridgers, the indie-rock breakout star. The band refers to her as “Papa,” and she sings a giddy verse about straggling stoned through the aisles of CVS on “Silk Chiffon.”

Another indie powerhouse, Mitski, left fingerprints on the album, too. She had first met the band at a festival. “We just started chatting, which is rare for me, because I’m very introverted and don’t just ‘start chatting’ with people,” Mitski wrote in an email. “It’s a testament to how friendly and kind they are.”

Mitski came to McPherson and Maskin’s apartment in Highland Park and made them tea while they listened to disco. (Their downstairs neighbor kept texting them to be quiet.) “You have no idea/the things I think about you when you aren’t here,” Gavin sings on “No Idea,” the gradually building song that emerged from that session. “Mitski is the sexiest songwriter that I know,” she said.

Like most songs on the record, “No Idea” toys with the gap between perception and projection, the clarity and confinement that come with claiming a label. “She is not a mirror in which you reflect,” Gavin coos over a thrash of guitar on “Solid.” On the slower, Shania Twain-indebted “Kind of Girl,” she gets more explicit: “I’m a girl who’s learning everything I say isn’t definitive,” Gavin sings.

The album oscillates between dance-floor anthems and lyrics about meditation, coruscating synths and twinges of twang. “The album is kind of disparate sonically, disparate in terms of what the songs are saying, but the connective tissue is self-definition and agency and identity and interrogating those things,” McPherson said. “And also knowing that nothing is fixed.”





“We are who we are,” Gavin said, “but it’s the compassion we have for ourselves, the awareness we have.” Tonje Thilesen for The New York Times

While the band’s circumstances have changed, Gavin isn’t letting go of its past. “I don’t want this era to be, ‘Oh, we used to be one way, and now we’re another way, and everything’s great now,’” she said. “We are who we are, but it’s the compassion we have for ourselves, the awareness we have.”

Earlier this month, the trio returned to “The Tonight Show,” and Gavin felt some of the panic she had experienced when the band first played there in 2016. The band members spent the cab ride to the hotel after the taping processing their performance. They talked about the significance of doing the show, how Gavin was feeling, what they hoped the album could do for them, if it could help them keep making music for as long as possible “and not have as much existential stress as we have now,” McPherson said.

The driver eventually chimed in. “He said, ‘In my 20 years of driving, I’ve never heard people be so kind to each other;’” Gavin recalled. She and McPherson were wedged onto a bed in their hotel, beaming at a laptop screen; Maskin was in her room down the hall, packing and peeling a banana. “It just felt like the cheesy thing where — it’s a feat to do these big moments, but I do think that, like, the bigger thing —.” She paused. “I’m such a cheese ball.”

“Do it!” McPherson shouted.

Gavin rolled her eyes. “I do think that the bigger feat is having these friendships with each other.”

All three went quiet for a second. Then they started giggling, faintly and then furiously.