



gallant

MEET THE GENRE-

DEFYING ARTIST

YOU'LL BE HEARING A

LOT ABOUT THIS YEAR

BY DARGAN THOMPSON

TO say it's been an explosive year for alt-R&B singer Gallant would be an understatement. After all, it's not every day a new artist gets a shoutout from Elton John.

"I went crazy when I heard it," John said of Gallant's remarkable single "Weight in Gold," before debuting it on his Beats 1 radio show. "Gallant is an artist to watch. He is going to be huge."

It seems that bold prediction was right on. A month after John's endorsement, Gallant was touring with Sufjan Stevens.

He was racking up millions of listens on Spotify. The soaring falsetto, sleek hooks and deep songwriting on his *Zebra* EP caught the attention of music critics, producers and artists like Skrillex (who attended one of Gallant's sold-out shows in Los Angeles).

"I feel extremely surprised and humbled that [Elton John]—or anybody—would pay any kind of attention," Gallant says.

"It was reassuring, and really surreal to see it get that kind of response. It was validation of my being uncomfortably honest in the stuff I say in my music. I'm

eternally grateful."

With Gallant's debut full-length album on the way this year, buzz is only increasing. But things didn't always seem so hopeful for him.

BOY TO MAN

Growing up in Columbia, Maryland, Gallant listened to artists like Toni Braxton, Brandy, Babyface and Boyz II Men.

"Nineties R&B had a specific melodic comfort attached to it for me," he says. But soon, he was ingesting an "eclectic mix" of music—everything from Japanese pop to



WEIGHT IN GOLD
Gallant's breakout single was hailed by many critics as one of the best songs of 2015.

Brit-rock to '60s-era Chicago blues.

He "dabbled" in electronic underground for a little bit, and also found himself drawn to the "cryptic honesty" of prog-rock lyrics, which "feel like they're coming straight out of someone's journal."

Starting in middle school, songwriting became a journal of sorts for Gallant.

"I felt like I was keeping a lot of stuff inside," he says. "The only way I could really express it was to have a mic and write whatever I wanted at the time."

"They were horrible, horrible, awful songs," he continues, laughing. "But it made me happy to listen back to it, even though I didn't necessarily want to share it with anyone else."

Later, as he was studying music at New York University, Gallant continued to draw on all the different genres he loved as a kid. Lyrically, he aimed for the vulnerability he heard in rock. Musically, he wanted to include "all that '90s R&B candy," but also mix in elements of other genres.

"I just subconsciously pulled from all of those different types of things I was hearing," he explains. "I wanted to try to put them together, kind of like a puzzle."

He adopted his last name (pronounced guh-lahnt) as a stage name (his first name is Christopher). He was ready to share his music with the world.

GENRE CONFUSION

In today's musical landscape, Gallant's mix-and-match of influences makes sense. In the last few years, musical genre has mattered less and less as artists defy categorization. Sufjan Stevens can set aside his acoustic guitar and call Gallant onstage to perform a cover of Drake's "Hotline Bling"—and audiences eat it up.

But in the not-so-distant past, definitions were a bit more rigid.

In New York in the early 2010s, Gallant's sound confused music execs, who couldn't figure out

where to place him. His creamy falsetto sounded like R&B, but his backing tracks were too experimental. His lyrics were too raw—if he wanted to make it as a pop star, they said, he needed to sing about sex and partying.

But Gallant wasn't willing to change his sound to fit into a genre. He describes his music simply as "soulful."

"All the music I like has some type of soul in it," he explains, "some type of honesty and vulnerability and humility that I'm really drawn to. I focus on that more so than exactly what type of genre it might be."

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Discouraged by the walls he was hitting trying to make it in New York, Gallant moved across the country to LA. Soon after, things started to pick up.

EMOTIONAL WEIGHT

When it came time to work on his upcoming album, Gallant wanted to push himself—to let his music express the full range of emotions.

While writing songs with LA producer Stint, Gallant let loose, abandoning his quiet falsetto and opting to scream into the microphone instead.

"While I was screaming, the message and the meaning of the lyrics just kind of popped into my head," he says. "We started with that chorus and then the verses naturally flowed somehow."

Three and a half hours later, they had written "Weight in Gold," a song hailed by many critics as one of the best of 2015—the song that made Elton John go "crazy."

"It was, at the time, the most different song we had done together," Gallant says. "But it felt the most special. It was surreal to

go in having nothing and come out three and a half hours later having something that felt like one of the best things I'd ever written. That was a huge moment for me."

While his music is forceful and emotional, Gallant describes his personality as "calm and kind of muted." Music is a way to work through what he's really feeling. And he's getting comfortable baring his soul in front of audiences.

"It's almost like I'm meditating," he says of performing. "It's extremely cathartic to finally release all of the energy onstage. It's similar to going to the gym and just beating a punching bag

after you've been keeping something inside for a while. It feels like a release."

SPEAK OUT

In confessing his own insecurities through his music, Gallant's ultimate goal is to encourage audiences to share their stories, too.

"There's so much suppression and people trying to dictate how other people should feel, or what emotions are 'good' and what emotions are 'bad,'" he says. "I hope [my music] lets them know that whatever they want to say is valid and deserves to be said."

Gallant has already come far on his journey, but, more than recognition, success to him means continuing to grow and make music.

"Being able to sit and listen back to hours and hours of material that all meant something to me will feel like an accomplishment," he says. "I've come so far and have so far to go." **R**

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