

## Valerie June

Hed: push it, baby

Dek: valerie june shines in her boundary-blurring debut. by alana schindel. photographed by TK

Inside a modest Italian café in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Valerie June radiates a warm glow, her pale brown eyes piercing the dull, overcast light. Thick dreadlocks spiral loosely around her face as she takes a sip of tea and smiles. “This feels like Europe,” she says with a soft drawl. And the native Tennessean would certainly know the feeling, having recently toured the continent with Jake Bugg, and now gearing up for a number of overseas festival dates. As June awaits the U.S. release of *Pushin’ Against a Stone*—her fierce, dusty, moonshine-drunk, and devastatingly honest debut album produced by the Black Keys’ Dan Auerbach, Kevin Augunas, and Peter Sabak and out this month—she’s hoping audiences on her side of the pond will be equally receptive. “There’s a lot of stuff in the air,” she says, “and because it’s all up there, I don’t know exactly how the pieces are going to fall. It’s kind of uncomfortable, but when everything surfaces, hopefully I’ll enjoy it.”

The eldest of five children, June grew up in Humboldt, Tennessee, a town just shy of 8,500 residents, halfway between Memphis and Nashville, and known locally for its annual strawberry festival. Money was tight, but she came from a long line of self-motivated entrepreneurs who encouraged her to make her own opportunities and not wait for anything to be handed to her. “When I first started playing music, I was booking my own shows,” June says. But her father, the owner of a construction company and part-time R&B and gospel promoter, had some advice. “He was like, ‘What you need to do is get you one of them good, good, *good* R&B or blues songs, and then you’ll be famous,’” she says. “But that’s not what it was about for me.”

What June *is* about is an enchanting blend of folk, blues, soul, Appalachian, and bluegrass, topped with complex, emotionally searing lyrics. “It’s moving through me,” she says of her music. “It’s something that I’m tapping into and channeling and allowing to move through my body, all while trying not to judge it.” To June, “pushing against a stone” is about the struggles of everyday life, and the long, slow, sometimes excruciating journey toward realizing your dreams. “I was pushing the stone up a hill, but I’m still living with the stone,” she says. “I’m going to learn how to sit on top of it and be with it.”

Although *Pushin’* is June’s proper debut for a record label, she’s got three self-released efforts and countless gigs at small cafés like the one we’re sitting in now under her belt. And at one of those performances, she managed to win over an initially resistant fan—her father. “I quit trying to explain to him what it was about for me, long ago,” she says, stirring her tea. “But then one day he came to a show, and he was like, ‘Man, people really respond to your sound.’ And he said, ‘You know how I used to tell you to get a good R&B and blues song? Don’t you change a damn thing. Just do what you do.’”