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"IT" GIRL

Brittany Howard Lets Her Mind Inspire Her



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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Photo-Illustration: by The Cut; Photo: Bobbi Rich

Brittany Howard helped define the music of the 2010s with the band she famously fronted, Alabama Shakes. Now, she’s making genre-defying music as a solo artist. Her sophomore album, *What Now*, weaves its way through soul, jazz, rock, R&B, and even a hint of house music — and creating it, she says, was a “natural” process. “To live in the South is an experience that’s not like the rest of the country. It’s a different vibe,” Howard tells me. “We have a completely different culture than the rest of the country, so I’m always gonna draw from

that.” It’s fastened together by the meditative sound of singing bowls, and when we meet in person, she appears as grounded as she sounds on the album, sliding into a velvety corner booth at Smith & Mills, one of Rockefeller Center’s many upscale establishments.

Since 2019, Howard has released her debut album — a vulnerable musical memoir called *Jaime* — and gone through a pandemic, a marriage, and a divorce. She has done the healing work required to traverse it all. Her energy is calm and confident, no hint of a rush in her voice or mannerisms. She’s someone who knows she’s going to get where she needs to be, an “It” girl who has patience for herself and others.

How do you think living in Nashville has impacted your artistry?

I honestly feel like I could live anywhere. I’m inspired by a lot of things that happen inside of me, instead of what happens on the outside — even though those two can’t help but be connected, that’s where I’m coming from and how I see it.

Where do you go to get inspired?

Something that’s really inspiring to me is being outdoors all alone. I like to fish, so I’ll go to a river bend all by myself, and I find that’s where I can really connect with myself.

Have you been fishing your whole life?

Since I was 4. My dad taught me how to fish. He used to take us to a pay-to-fish place, and we would go there and catch catfish and then you go weigh up the catfish, and that’s how much you pay. And then we’d take them home and fry ’em up.

Now I like to fly-fish, so I go to quieter places: Duck River, Caney Fork River, Harpeth River. I go to Percy Priest sometimes — during the week only.

How would you define an “It” girl?

An “It” girl is somebody who is themselves, proud of themselves, carries themselves that way, and treats other people with kindness and goes about their business with — what is it? — confidence, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. You know what I’m trying to say. An “It” girl is unstoppable and is not looking in anybody else’s lane. That’s an “It” girl to me.

Who are some musicians you’d classify as “It” girls?

Tina Turner. Nina Simone. Aretha Franklin. Angélique Kidjo. There may be more. I’ll stay there for now.

What makes them “It” girls?

Well, it’s amazing to me, Nina Simone’s popularity as an icon today. But how she was treated when she was alive says something else. She always was a great performer and pianist. First and foremost, she always worked on her craft. It’s interesting, watching old footage — how people were curious about her but thought she was problematic. Maybe that’s true. But she was her. And she made great music, and she stayed true to her artistry.

I’d say the same thing about Tina — how many times Tina had to come back, how many times Tina had to fail and get back up again or was literally beaten and had to restart her life over again. What an inspiration it was for her to tell her story, to have a comeback, and what that

meant for all the women out there: You can be strong enough to not only escape your abuser but to be much, much, much greater.

When it comes to Angélique Kidjo, she does so much for the people of Africa — all the different countries, all the different walks of life. She's performed in front of the U.N. She's someone who's politically engaged, but she's a humanist. She represents people who are going through it. I also see the way she carries herself with so much strength. I think she's "It."

Is she someone you're looking to collaborate with?

If it makes sense to do that in the future, I'd love to. Maybe the right thing will come along. But for right now, I'm just gonna admire her. She's an incredible artist.

Do you consider yourself an "It" girl?

Absolutely. I fulfill all of those qualities. Yeah. I think, by accident, I may have created an unlikely famous person.

Say more.

I wouldn't be a likely candidate for someone who goes up there and wins five or six Grammys, and leaves a very popular band, all in the name of art — and is unfazed by what the industry chooses to do or not do with her. I'm just gonna do my thing. Because this is what I was put on earth to do, and I just would hope that I'm guided by angels.

Who or what has inspired your style?

I really like Sun Ra. I think the fashion's so incredible. I don't walk around looking like that, but I mean onstage. As far as how I walk around, my daily look, probably an Australian-zoo tour guide. That's usually the aesthetic I like to give: some sort of tour guide.

Have you been to an Australian zoo?

Oh yeah. Terri Irwin herself gave me a tour of the [Australia Zoo](#). One of the best days of my life.

You always have incredible eyewear. Where do you find your frames?

It's lots of different places. I just talk to people — when they show up with cool frames, I'm like, "Oh my God, where did you get those?" And I go see if I can find some for myself. It's not always designer frames; it's just whatever looks cool. But what I'd love to do is start my own eyeglasses line.

How has your style and self-presentation evolved along with your internal identity and your relationship to yourself and your queer identity?

Here's the thing: I'm actually really inspired by Generation Z at the moment, because they just walk out wearing whatever the fuck — but it's the confidence. I'm actually gonna start doing that. Whatever I want. I'm envisioning — you know those workout pants from the '90s? That. And then some sort of ... What do you call it when someone illegally prints a brand?

Dupes?

I want to wear a lot of duped stuff, like a fake Louis Vuitton rain jacket. Stuff like that would be cool for me. I guess what I'm saying is that the older I get, the more confident in myself I get — the less I care what anyone else thinks about what I'm wearing. So therefore, anything

goes. I think that's fun. You wake up in the morning, you're just like, *Who do I want to be today?* Most of the time, lately, it's a schoolteacher or a park ranger. I'll put on those outfits.

Where do you like to shop?

There's a Nashville designer, Elizabeth Suzann. I really like her stuff. This is her jacket. I've got her pants on too right now. I like supporting smaller labels. I'm definitely an online shopper. Reformed. It was getting out of control. I just had to clean my closet out; somebody at Goodwill gon' be very happy, I'm sure. Good American has some pretty good denim — reasonably priced.

Do you have any early memories of something you heard or saw that was really generative for you as an artist — that made you want to sing or want to play the guitar?

When I was 11 years old, in fifth grade, we had a music teacher. Her name was Miss Mosley. That was the first time I saw a woman play guitar; I had never seen a woman play guitar. As soon as she picked it up and started playing — it was a Beatles song, "Blackbird" — I was immediately like, *Okay, that's what I'm doing. I'm going to get a guitar.*

Where do you like to go out?

I don't. I like to stay in. I like to go to the movies. I like to go to the outdoors. Every once in a while, I'll do something absolutely extreme like play the Kennedy Center or play in Thailand or, once upon a time, play at the White House. So I'll do that and then I just want to be home scooping the litter box, standing on my deck, planting flowers. Pretty basic.

What is an ideal night in for you?

Lying on the couch with my girlfriend, watching a movie like *Raising Arizona*. Something funny and nostalgic like that. I got my cats to my left, my puppy dogs to my right. Everybody's peaceful and sleeping. I got my BC5000 vape, fuckin' blazin' up. And I got a pizza in the oven. That's a pretty chill night.

How many pets do you have? What's your pet journey?

Three cats, two dogs. I lived on a farm. I think I started off with dogs, and we had geese and chickens and ducks and turkeys. And pheasants and guineas, peacocks, goats, pigs, and cats.

Now I got an old weenie. Her name is Wanda. I got a brand-new weenie; her name is Wilma. She's a terror. I got an orange cat named Arthur, an orange cat named Bobby Brown, a gray cat named Etta James.

Is there a movie theater you like for those rare movie nights out?

The Belcourt. That's all we got, as far as art-house theater goes. I just went to the Opry Regal. We went and saw *Love Lies Bleeding*. It's kind of iconic. There's gore.

What are some "It"-girl essentials that every "It" girl must have?

At all times, ChapStick. You gotta have ChapStick on you at all times. Another essential, integral item would probably be a blue-raspberry vape. Or watermelon ice. Those are both kind of "It." I'm just playing with you.

As an earth sign, I have to ask you about the album's opening track, "Earth Sign." It's such a gorgeous, meditative song. Why did you choose to start with that one?

See, I'm trying to do a magic spell. I wanted to put it first because I know that at least that one

will get played, the first track. So it’s a mantra. At the time, I was single and I was trying to call in the long-term relationship. Because I’m just like, *Goddamn, I can’t go through it again*. So “Earth Sign,” to me, is like a spell of conjuring in this person. I thought I was being clever with it.

Were you trying to date an earth sign? Or was it more like, *This is a sign for the earth*?

I needed somebody with earth-sign energy. I’m seeing someone now and they’re an Aquarius — but with Capricorn and Taurus. I’ll take it.

The sound bowls throughout the album are so grounding. Do you meditate?

I do. In 2022, I learned how to do Transcendental Meditation. So I kind of broke off into that. I do that twice a day to become a functioning human being. Not gonna say *normal*. But yes, I think it’s important. *Meditation* is a word that gets a certain type of reaction from people. It’s intimidating — it’s for goo-goo gaga people or whatever. There’s lots of things that are meditative. Where I come from, some people like to work on their car and have nobody disturb them. For a long time, I went fishing and that was my meditation. Any time somebody can find stillness, that’s okay.

Your voice became a defining sound of the 2010s. How do you think about that time as you continue to evolve as an artist — is Alabama Shakes something that you feel is still with you? Is it something that you’re leaving behind as you evolve beyond it?

It’s wonderful, wonderful music that I made, and in some cases we made together, and I’m really proud of it. I love those songs. But also, I’m an exploratory, curious person. I believe that life is a “choose your own adventure.” *What would happen if I didn’t have any safety net and I just created all on my own? What would it sound like? What would it be like?* I’m so curious, and it’s my life. As far as I know, you get one. I don’t know. Yet to see ... Or maybe I do know.

Are you saying you’ve had psychic experiences?

No, I’m just saying maybe reincarnation is real. Who knows? I definitely believe in more going on than meets the eye. That’s for sure.

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