



PHOTO BY EBRU YILDIZ

SOFT SOUNDS

Former Eugene musician Michelle Zauner returns to town with her project Japanese Breakfast

Michelle Zauner, who writes music under the moniker **Japanese Breakfast**, was born in Seoul, Korea, but grew up right here in Eugene. “I feel like I got my start there,” Zauner tells *Eugene Weekly* over the phone.

Zauner started writing music at 16 and took guitar lessons at Guitar Center’s Lesson Factory. She played her first shows, in a band called Little Girl Big Spoon, at Cozmic Pizza (now Whirled Pies) open mics, WOW Hall and South Eugene High School (where she attended school).

“My mom, for a while, kept all of my *Eugene Weekly* clippings,” Zauner says.

She moved to Pennsylvania at 18 to attend Bryn Mawr College outside of Philadelphia. There she continued writing and playing music, both with indie band Post Post and later with emo outfit Little Big League.

Terrible circumstances brought Zauner back to her hometown.

Her mother was diagnosed with cancer, and Zauner came back to Eugene to care for her. That experience, and her mother’s subsequent death, influenced Zauner to curate old material and create new, and from it Japanese Breakfast’s first studio album, 2016’s *Psychopomp* — which features an old photograph of Zauner’s mother as the cover art — was born.

“I was sort of stuck in Eugene and it took on this nightmarish quality of being trapped,” Zauner says. “My mom had cancer, and I was stuck in this house that I grew up in, but now didn’t have any happy memories associated with it.”

Zauner followed up *Psychopomp* quickly with her next album, *Soft Sounds From Another Planet*, which came out in July of this year.

Despite any preemptive expectations due to the inspiration for Japanese Breakfast’s albums, Zauner’s music isn’t tangled up in the muck of sadness or darkness, but rather steeped in resilience, reflection and personal growth.

Lyrically, Zauner undoubtedly dabbles in the harsh, claustrophobic dealings of the death of a close loved one, but musically Japanese Breakfast is well-structured and carefully put together; its emotional and authentic hurt is balanced thoughtfully by brilliant writing, perched gracefully on lush guitar, swirling synthesizer, dancing bass and the diverse spectrum of Zauner’s own vocals — from quivering heights to whispered, somber lows.

Both *Psychopomp* and *Soft Sounds* gained positive attention from various musical outlets and Zauner herself has had a growing fan base over the past 10 years from all of the bands she’s been involved with — and from the fact that Japanese Breakfast has been a supporting band on tours with up-and-coming artists like Mitski and Alex G.

“I’m sort of waiting for the trapdoor, for people to get tired of me and spit me out, but I’m hoping that doesn’t happen,” she says of newfound attention to her music. “I feel very privileged to be in this situation.”

For now, Zauner says, she’s taking a break from writing any new music. “They’re both largely related to my mom’s death,” she says of Japanese Breakfast’s two albums, “and I feel like I need to write something else for a while.”

She adds: “I want to take some time to figure out what I’m interested in. I have some other mediums I want to try out like directing [and] I want to write a book.”

Zauner also recently released an RPG browser game called “Japanese Breakfast” which features midi versions of all of her songs off *Soft Sounds*.

With the musical material she *does* have, though, Zauner and her bandmates in Japanese Breakfast are setting out on their first headlining tour, including a date in Eugene.

Catch Japanese Breakfast with openers Mannequin Pussy and The Spirit of The Beehive 10 pm Saturday, Sept. 23, at Hi-Fi Lounge; \$12 advance, \$15 at the door. 21 and over.

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