

Danielle Ponder

Some of Us Are Brave



Bravery can take many forms. For Danielle Ponder it took the shape of a leap of faith: leaving her successful day job working in the public defender's office in her hometown of Rochester, NY to devote herself full-time to sharing her powerful voice with the world.

The singer-songwriter's mesmerizing eight song debut *Some of Us Are Brave* reinforces that her faith was not misplaced, and her leap has been rewarded with a safe landing.

Written and recorded over three years, the album is a refreshingly original, shiver-inducing mix of pop, R&B, blues, rock, and moody trip-hop topped by Ponder's celestial voice—an instrument that can plumb melancholy depths with a heartsick murmur and scrape the sky with hurricane force wails.

The sixth of seven children, Ponder had always been musical but chose to pursue a career in law after her brother received a 20-year sentence due to a “three strikes” law. But even as she became a tireless advocate for justice in her community—first as a public defender and later as a diversity, equity, and inclusion officer in that same office—the music was never far from her heart as she played in bands and wrote songs, first between classes, then between cases.

“I loved being a public defender, I loved standing next to my clients and advocating for them,” says Ponder. “But it came to the point where I had to choose.” And so, she leapt.

Was your family musical growing up?

Yes, my dad is a pastor, and he plays piano and sings. I didn't really sing in church, I spent most of my time sleeping on the back pew. But, we had a raggedy yellow piano on our porch, and I loved playing that piano! I didn't see music as a career until much later, but it's always been something that's made me feel good.

Who were some of your influences?

We couldn't listen to secular music so I was listening to a lot of gospel early on, like Shirley Caesar, John P. Kee, the Blind Boys of Alabama — a mix of old and new school stuff.

I really think that not being allowed to listen to pop music is a little bit of where my songwriting came from. I would pretend to know secular music. In school I would say to my friends, "Did y'all hear that new Mariah Carey song?" And then I would just make up words to the little bits and pieces I heard. *[Laughs]*

As I got older, my father became less restrictive about the music we could listen to. So, in my teenage years I purchased music through the Columbia House record club. You could order 10 CDs for like 99 cents and next thing you know you owe them a million dollars. *[Laughs]* I got Pearl Jam, Alanis Morissette, Lauryn Hill, The Roots. I fell in love with alternative rock and hip-hop.

However, the blues is where I really developed a desire to sing. Listening to Big Mama Thornton and Koko Taylor, I wanted to know how to do that.

What was the catalyst for finally pursuing music full time?

We formed a family band when I was 16 and when I would come back from college breaks I would play with them. I was in a band in law school too and part of me knew that I loved being on stage. But I always had this fear of being a starving artist. I grew up with a father whose income wasn't always stable so I wanted a solid job.

But through law school and even practicing, I would still play. I can't believe how much I was doing. I would do a small tour in Europe, come back, and on Monday I'd be in court like nothing happened. But it just got to the point where I was like, "Man, I can't do both." And the choice could never be giving up music, I am absolutely in love with the stage. I knew it was time to completely surrender. This is what I need to be doing."

How did you begin to take the next step?

In 2018 when I initially left the public defender's office, my focus was on writing a new album. I'd been writing songs with my friend and keyboardist Avis Reese and working with a local producer Dave Drago, but I wasn't sure what I wanted my sound to be. Even though I had been performing and writing for so long, I still had these insecurities. I felt that my voice sounded like an old lady, and the production I was interested in was modern. I felt to fit the vibe I had to sound "cuter." *[Laughs]*

I was hitting a brick wall. Dave told me, "You have it within you. I think you know the songs you want to write. Take this keyboard and go home and figure your shit out." And so I did! I tried to get out of my head about what the sound should be and just write. I would call Avis over and she is great at helping me get the songs to the finish line.

For the most part these songs lived in my laptop. In February 2021 Chris Douridas, who is now my manager, called me and asked that I send him the music I was working on. I was hesitant to send him what I felt was just my bootleg attempt at producing, but he loved the songs! Chris brought in my co-manager Tom Windish — an agent who has worked with artists like Billie Eilish and Lorde— and since then my life has not been the same. We met with a lot of labels and signed with Future Classic.

The album has such a gauzy, enveloping vibe musically. Where did the idea to marry so many sounds come from?

This is a vibe I really resonate with. I think my sound is just an intersection of all the sounds I grew up with. I love the heavy beats of East coast '90s hip-hop. I love the moodiness of the blues, and the guitar sounds of alternative rock. My influences range from Portishead to Aretha Franklin. And I think somewhere I realized that I didn't have to choose a sound.

"Only Way Out" will probably resonate with a lot of people as you sing a lover's lament about a one-sided relationship as one person is the giver of unconditional love and the other purely a taker. Where did that song come from?

I wrote these lyrics so long ago, when I was in a situation that was so stupid. One of the ones where the man is with somebody else. And it's funny, I tell the story at our shows, and people look at me sideways. And I'm like, "Well listen, people having affairs out here. So, one of y'all in this room going to have one." *[Laughs]* But this was years ago, in my mid-20s and that line, "a broken heart is the only way out," was just true.

I knew that was how it was going to end. It's not going to end with him getting rid of his girlfriend. It's going to end with me crying. That's definitely not a present-day situation. But I've had a lot of those moments in my love life where I was just chasing the wrong thing.

On the other hand, "So Long" is this powerful anthem of resilience, you are simply immovable.

I wrote "So Long" when I was recording in LA. For the first time in my creative space there were multiple people and many opinions, which is how it works. I have the greatest team. I really love working with them, but I was just finding myself lost in "What do I want?" I wrote the song I needed for the moment, the song that I needed to get through the situation, which was like, "You know what? I don't know who these motherfuckers are. I know who I am, and I'm going to write my songs the way I want to write them. I'm going to sing them the way that I want to." It wasn't because people were saying "You can't do this." It's because I was letting myself get confused by all the suggestions and worried that people would be disappointed in me. I wrote it for my inner voice to tell myself "You got this, don't be afraid!"

Then "Fray" has this bone deep sense of exhaustion and raw nerves that will likely feel familiar to everyone given what's been happening the last few years.

"Fray" is probably my most personal song on the album. I have been reflecting a lot on my struggle to receive love and where that resistance comes from. When being loved doesn't come easy, there is a sense of always being on the edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. To me writing "Fray" was a step toward healing that part of myself.

Where did the title track come from?

I read a book in law school *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Are Brave*. I first fell in love with the title, I immediately felt seen. The book is essentially one of the first to address intersectionality. Often when we talk about feminism, we forget the issues that uniquely impact Black women and the same when we speak about race. The book is a collection of Black women writers pushing against invisibility, speaking loud and clear and telling our unique story. To me, this song was just a moment to pause and pay homage to Black women. The album is named that because that's where I get my biggest inspirations. My biggest cheerleaders are my sisters, my mother, Black women. And I think bravery is what I've needed to become a full-time artist.

Given your background as an attorney and advocate some might expect that your songs would concern themselves with social issues but *Some of Us Are Brave* really delves into romantic and emotional spaces.

Sometimes it is in my music, like the song "Darker Than Blue." But I don't feel a burden to write conscious music. I am passionate about my activist work and work around criminal justice reform and I have many ways to express that. I was going through a lot of personal shit these past couple of years, lots of introspection and trying to understand my heart and find my footing in relationships. I write the songs I need to survive the situations I am in, and these are those songs. There was a time in my life I wouldn't write about relationships because I felt it wasn't righteous enough to be talking about, "You broke up with someone? Who cares, girl? People are in jail, write about that." But Nina Simone is one of my favorite artists, and she's really given me the permission to write whatever I feel. She said, "Don't put nothing in it unless you feel it." So, she sang about heartache, but then she would also record a song like Randy Newman's "Baltimore." This is where I am right now.

What do you hope people take away from *Some of Us Are Brave*?

I want people to take away whatever they need at the moment. I think these songs can mean a million different things to a million different people. But I hope there are songs that make them feel encouraged, songs that make them feel brave, songs that help them feel seen and even songs that they can just cry to. That's what this album has been for me, a collection of sounds and a collection of feelings, but all me.

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