

Jesse Boykins III is making himself whole. Through four independent albums that are beloved by his cult following, he's mined past experiences to make songs that chronicle a man navigating his way through the world and his psyche—building a reputation of being charming through his candor. But entering a new phase in his life, Jesse's new album (and debut on Def Jam Records), *Bartholomew*, finds him using his art to become his best self.

"The people who are my fans, I'm sure that they'll understand the sense of progression," Boykins says to his fifth set. His is an alt-R&B sound and style (think luxe bohemian) that the industry just now is catching up to. "I've never been the type of artist to regurgitate anything or be one type of way. I just like to challenge myself." And what he achieved is a concept album where he stars as Bartholomew, his ideal Jesse.

"In order to accomplish certain things, I think that you have to look at yourself as a hero," Boykins explains. "Someone that you would look up to. That's pretty much the psychology behind it. I finally caught up to that." *Bartholomew*, the man, is as blunt as he is dreamy and explorative.

"*Bartholomew's* like, 'Damn, nobody lives life the way I do. So, I must not be from here; I'm from Never Never Land. I'm a lost boy. Oh, and I like to invent shit. So I must be a descendent of Captain Nemo. And I'm very fascinated with astrology, so I have to work at NASA. And I'm okay with being in the friend zone, meaning I'm not desperate and I'm never going court a girl or make her feel super special if I don't genuinely feel like that, just to get my way with her."

*Bartholomew* is just a part of the project's package. *Visual Expressions* and its companion short film finds its lead dating both Desdemona Telly and Luna, strong women whose values—and attitudes—help push Bart' to become a better person.

Vocalists Willow Smith and Syd of The Internet are featured on a track called "Vegetables." As Telly and Luna do in the film, Syd and Willow demand that Bart' get his mind and soul right before they can see him as anything more than just another man undeserving for their energy. "When I wrote Willow's verse," Boykins notes, "she talks about stones, meditation, and spirituality. And Syd's basically saying, 'I know you see the glow in me, but I don't see it in you. I'm not sharing my glow with you. Not until you match my shit.'"

Crooner Luke James, TDE rhymer Isaiah Rashad, songstress Bridgette Kelly and Dej Loaf also lend their talents to *Bartholomew*. But it's Jesse's hands that steer the audiovisual experience, one that involves more than just his perspective.

"I don't really like when I hear songs where it's just about the artist and not about the experience of the two people together," Boykins says. "When I wrote my script, I could've just wrote the script and sold it based on Bart'. But without others in my story, there'd be no inspiration."

On "Solar Sisters," Jessie sings of having multiple lovers. "No Worry" is where he points out the good and bad about himself and his lady—the most intriguing thing about both best and worst traits being how they wouldn't exist without the other.

"That thing they love about you ends up being the thing they hate about you," he says about the dating dichotomy. "Or vice versa." Speaking of the strength and pride of his love interest, Boykins sings, "You're the type to want to write over the bible so all the women would win/ I always knew you and Eve would be the coolest of friends."

Speaking this freely, with comedic wit while being relatable is what Boykins is most proud of. "It's not like it's the craziest abstract thing," he says. "It's actually me being more human than I've ever been in my music or even in my artistic expression, and more raw. It's funny that I had to become very whimsical, in a sense, to reach the most real me." And all he had to do was ask himself one simple question, which yielded an immediate, fulfilling answer:

"You're trying to be your better self," Jesse starts, "and you think, 'What would your better self do?' Be as real as fucking possible."