**Sofía Valdés bio**

The word that jumps to mind when hearing Sofía Valdés’s music for the first time is “yearning”. The Panamanian songwriter makes pop music as a means of meditation; a way of navigating the world around her, it forces her to sit with her feelings. On her songwriting, the 21-year-old reflects: “You can hear the longing for melancholy and the past. It’s a constant thing throughout… Not on purpose, but it is there.”

Last year’s debut EP *Ventura* explores the turbulence of her emotions, unfolding with heartfelt expression, introspection and exploring her connection to her culture. Sofía’s upcoming EP is a natural progression. It reckons with the loss of a relationship, threaded together by stories of angst, healing and self-realization.

“I’m not *that* quiet,” she hesitates, “but I think I am quiet. If something bothers me I might just brush it off or stay quiet about it, or express it in a funny passive-aggressive but more passive-aggressive than funny joke, but it’s never to harm. I think music is where I really just like to push everything out.” This has become clearer over time, and more so than ever with her upcoming project as she finds catharsis in the process of songwriting. It's intimate, and in many ways serves as a release. Dabbling in familiar folk and bossa nova influence, Latin music, and the swirling neons of alt-pop, the set is a colorful canvas for Sofía’s emotions–detailing the ups and downs in personal strokes. “I don’t think that anyone likes to live in a box,” Sofía explains from LA, where she’s currently based.

The urge to live outside of the box goes back to Sofía’s childhood, spent in Panama up until she was 15. From a young age, Sofía knew that she wanted to create music. She’d make it work somehow, even if the path was not clear, and it’s this determination and intensity that has brought her to where she is now. Looking back, she remembers growing up on a wide range of music. Her great-grandfather was the legendary Cuban musician Miguelito Valdés, and her great-grandmother was Silvia De Grasse. Her mother had an affinity for 2000s radio hits–Gwen Stefani, Black Eyed Peas, Shakira and Britney Spears. Meanwhile, her Dad would have The Beatles in rotation, and they became one of her biggest influences. Later on she discovered Motown, bossa nova and Cuban music, all of which resonated deeply and melded who she is now. Surrounded by an eclectic and vibrant mix of sounds, Sofia unsurprisingly felt music’s pull from a young age, beginning to learn guitar at eight years old, and a few years later had written her first song (“It was about a ghost in my house; his name was Kevin”).

In many ways growing up in Panama was beautiful, but that’s something she’s realized increasingly over time. Sofía was surrounded by her siblings, music, and days spent in nature. “Now I think about it, it’s so strange because all we did was try to harvest food from different places, but we just thought it was fun,” she laughs. Yet other elements of her formative years weren’t so smooth. Her family had their own hardships to navigate, and though they were supportive and encouraging of Sofía’s passion for music, it still existed outside of cultural expectations. “Back home in Panama we don’t really culturally still see art as an option at all,” Sofía reflects. It was always “cute Sofía doing her music thing” until she moved to the States. “When I left I think they were like, ‘cute Sofía… Why’s she over there?’”

Headstrong and both inspired and shaped by her upbringing, Sofía is determined to uplift women from her culture. “I want girls from Panama to look at me and be like oh, I can do this type of music. It’s giving space for other people to do whatever they want,” she says. “I hope I can also inspire other people from where I'm from to see that it is possible to make a living from it. That it’s not easy but it can become possible.”

At 15, she moved–solo–to Michigan. “I just googled ‘boarding school music’ and that was the first one that came up. And then through financial aid and my teacher there, Courtney, she was just so helpful and passionate for me to go, I got there.” Despite sounding slightly impulsive, Sofía had always intended to leave Panama to pursue music. At 13, she told her Mom she’d “be out of the house by 16”. And, with self-confessed “tunnel vision”, she made it to the US shortly after.

After moving, Sofía’s curiosity truly came alive. In Michigan she was met with a range of people and cultures. “One of my closest friends was from Thailand, and she would show me what she grew up listening to. It was just so different. Somehow we’re all in the same place but come from so many different backgrounds,” she explains. “That, for me, was the first eye-opening experience.” The course was intense but rewarding, and here Sofía developed the intricate nuances of her songwriting. “We’d sit for hours and hours, just crafting songs,” she recalls. “We could spend two weeks on one song, going lyric by lyric, figuring out how to make it work.” Though she spoke *some* English upon landing in Michigan, Sofía found herself immersed in the language, with her songs now bridging together Spanish and English.

At 18, Sofía moved again–this time to study in Liverpool, UK. A stark contrast, Northern England’s dark days and gloomy weather was a fitting accompaniment to her headspace. She spent most of her first year in England feeling miserably out of place. “I didn’t have connections and I couldn’t even speak to people because I was so shy,” Sofía says. “That whole year I was just alone in my room.” So she wrote. It was here that *Ventura* was nurtured, drawn-out, music for solace.

Upon returning to Liverpool the following year, Sofía connected with fellow musicians who encouraged her to keep writing and hooked her up with sessions in London. She also started posting her songs online, eventually catching the attention of a music manager who reached out to her toward the end of the semester. Within weeks, her Christmas trip home to Panama was derailed by a visit to Los Angeles to meet with record labels, which promptly led to her signing with Warner Records. Though she returned to Liverpool for the spring semester, Sofía soon had to fly back to Panama when the pandemic hit, taking off in such a rush that her guitars and computer were left behind.

Now more than ever, Sofía is aware of the eyes on her as she gears towards the release of her second EP. It’s an additional pressure (“for the first time it wasn’t only for me”), and a project Sofía is determined to do justice. Between releases, Sofía found herself lost in the pandemic, questioning her relationship with music. Uncertain, she feared she’d never write again: “I definitely did not write during the entire pandemic. I could not write to the point where I felt like I was never going to write again, like I felt like I was stuck forever, but I guess a year went by and I was able to go back in. And around that time is when I started writing the second EP.” Entwined with this sense of questioning, grief, boundaries, and redefining her perception of others, the upcoming project holds together beautifully, connected by vivid production, lyrics that confront loss and portend hope, and distinct vocal delivery. It’s an outpouring of emotion that explores the sadness, doubt and resolution Sofía has felt over the past few years.

Reflecting on both EPs, Sofía finds herself increasingly connected to her cultural background. “I was fed the culture and the arts in Latin America and I think we have so much beauty in our books and so much literature,” she explains. “I don’t want to make the Americanized version of it because then what’s the point. I will make my version of it, which is with little things that maybe Americans would never pick up on, but people from my culture will be like, ‘oh my God I can't believe she’s using this thing on the track for this particular sound.’” Though she once dreamed of leaving Panama, now it’s the place she longs to go home to.

Her journey since leaving has fluctuated, and in navigating this has grown as both a person and as a songwriter. It clicked in a more serious sense a couple of years back: “I was on the train to London and it was the first time management had paid for my train ticket. I couldn’t afford it anymore and they got the ticket and for me, that was like… Wow. I felt I had one chance. I couldn’t mess it up. I put so much pressure on myself but I think it was needed for the moment. Sometimes I feel like when you hit those moments it’s like I cannot believe I'm here, and at the same time you feel so sad because that person who was fighting for that… You don’t have to use her anymore.”