Sub Urban’s take on pop can sound dark, at first. The 21-year-old singer, songwriter, and producer born Daniel Maisonneuve has spent the last few years writing captivating, complex, otherworldly music as a means of processing the turmoil of a tumultuous coming of age. Even on his most beloved songs, he sings about heavy themes—addiction, anxiety, and the lonely weight of existence. As he finishes the follow-up to his 2020 debut, Thrill Seeker, it’s as if his eyes have adjusted to the dark. “My new sound is manic, sinister, and cynical,” he admits. “But it feels more whimsical too. My sound is no longer just dreary. And it feels more cohesive than it’s ever been”.

Part of his development can only be credited to the passage of time. Thrill Seeker was made up of songs from Sub Urban’s earliest days, and fueled by his love for warped sounds from the edges of pop and the catharsis offered by emo formulas. The twisted love song “Cirque,” for example, was written when Maisonneuve was just 15. New songs like “PATCHWERK” show his growth as both producer and songwriter, using radiant synth programming and kaleidoscopic vocals as the score for a perpetual struggle of jealousy and addiction in an overwhelmingly material world. It’s still murky by the standards of mainstream pop, but Sub Urban now leans into a playful swagger, experimenting with his eccentricities.

Maisonneuve wasn’t always so assured. Growing up in New Jersey, he grappled with mental health issues that affected the way he related to others. “I was one of the odd ones alone at the lunch table during my public schooling,” he says. But music was always there to help him process the isolation and existential dread. He remembers hearing the psychedelic sounds of ’60s pop and ’70s prog-rock and jazz fusion around his house as a child. He took piano lessons from the age of 6 to the age of 15, giving him a working knowledge of baroque concertos and other classical music. Though he didn’t connect with all these sounds then, he realizes now they gave him a love for transportive music—songs that allow you to feel like you’re somewhere else. When he dropped out of high school in 10th grade, to produce and write music of his own, it was a way of chasing that feeling.

“Making music was the best way to vent and push away my insecurities,” he says. “That drove me to create a new world for myself”.

Sub Urban made this approach explicit on his first hit, 2019’s “Cradles.” In the opening line, he sings of a desire to “live inside my own world of make-believe” while unsettling synth arpeggios ring into the distance. But as the world became stranger, the message resonated. Buoyed by many a viral moment on TikTok and a stunning music video featuring the artist laying in a pool of blood, the song hit #1 at U.S. alternative radio and has since earned over 316 million views on YouTube alone.

Though Thrill Seeker was mostly made up of songs written before “Cradles,” it too carried on Sub Urban’s imaginative worldbuilding. The cinematic videos for “Cirque” and “Freak”—rich with symbolism and detail—demonstrate the bold directions Maisonneuve is exploring. Throughout the time he’s been working on his next album, he’s never stopped dreaming of wrinkles to add to Sub Urban, whether that’s leaning into his love of baroque, experimenting with wild new vocal tones, or crafting impossibly ambitious video ideas. Even if it still seems dark at times, this new era is fueled by the joy of creation—the exciting energy of ushering in a whole new world.