

***JPEG RAW***

Anyone who has listened to a **Gary Clark Jr**. album or watched the four-time Grammy Award winner perform live knows that he’s a gifted multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and performer. And never more so than on his last album, 2019’s illuminating ***This Land***. But while ***This Land***signaled a breakthrough in displaying his musical versatility beyond the blues, his latest album, ***JPEG RAW****,* represents a quantum leap.

“Blues will always be my foundation,” says **Clark**. “But that’s just scratching the surface. I’m also a beat maker and an impressionist who likes to do different voices. I’ve always loved theater and being able to tell a story. At home when I play the trumpet, I think Lee Morgan, or John Coltrane when I play the sax. I’ve even got bagpipes just in case I need them. So while this is my most honest and vulnerable album about relating to the human condition, it’s also the most freeing.”

At once powerful, insightful and thought-provoking, ***JPEG RAW*** picks up where ***This Land*** left off. But unlike its predecessor, **Clark’s** fourth studio album was born out of an unprecedented two years during which the country was rocked by a global pandemic, coast-to-coast civil rights protests following the murder of George Floyd and a political insurrection staged inside the nation’s capitol. As a Black man and father concerned about the future for his three young children in a still challenging climate, Clark found himself back in the studio recording a personal call-to-action that’s compelling both musically and lyrically.

“When the album sequencing was finished, the band and I realized that we’d made an album into a movie,” he recalls. “That’s what I was going for sonically because that’s how the whole writing process played out. First, it’s about angst and confusion, the unknown. Next, it’s about looking at ourselves internally. And then it’s about what comes after: the hope and triumph.”

And as you listen to ***JPEG RAW*** unfold, those three distinct transitions in tone, mood and intention urgently resonate. The curtain rises on the 12-song set with the loud, chaotic **“Maktub.”** Named after the Arabic word meaning fate or destiny, the track outlines the first phase of the album’s mission statement as **Clark’s** aggressive guitar paints the picture: *“So we gotta move in the same direction / We gotta move / Time for a new revolution / We gotta move.”*

The album’s title track examines the role cell-phone society plays in this chaos at the expense of real-life, one-on-one interaction. At one point in the song, he decries the fact that “my boy just can’t walk around in the store with the hoodie hoodie / They gon be watching you like lookie lookie.”

“I don’t love having a mobile device,” explains **Clark** of the song’s origin and the album’s overarching theme. “I miss being able to have more genuine interaction, looking someone in the eyes and learning something, getting a perspective. ***JPEG RAW*** is about showing the real and not the edit. We live in a world of edits, filters and redos. We only get one shot.”

Before moving into the introspective segment of the album, **Clark** joins forces with electronic R&B/alt-pop artist **Naala** on the statement-making track, **“This Is Who We Are.”** Its marching cadence is in lockstep with the anthem’s chorus which starts: *“This is who we are, go on and hate me / I’ve shown you all my scars … “*

Among the songs embodying the aforementioned segment are **“Alone Together”** and **“What About the Children.”** The former features noted session trumpeter **Keyon Harrold**, whose horn perfectly complements the track’s slow jazz groove as **Clark**, in an aching falsetto, sings, *“You don’t think my love is for real / I’m still here, so /Why do we feel so alone together.”*

A demo that **Stevie Wonder** sent to **Clark** in 2020 led to the pair dueting on **“What About the Children.”** The funky-vibed mid-tempo track finds both gentlemen admonishing the world’s “heartless people” for whom children’s shattered lives in the wake of homelessness, hunger and other struggles don’t matter. Of working with **Wonder**, **Clark** says simply, “I was a changed human.”

***JPEG RAW*** closes its hope-exuding third segment with the nine-minute **“Habits.”** It’s about taking a hard yet empowering look at yourself before bad habits become problematic. As **Clark** shares on the chord-shifting track that showcases his mesmerizing guitar technique, life is about being strong enough to navigate the good and the bad.

“This was the hardest song for me to write lyrically because this is my truth, starting as a kid in the clubs growing up fast. So I’m trying to be better in all aspects of my life. I’m tearing up now because it’s probably the realest thing I’ve ever done. People, especially young kids, are being motivated by others’ false presentation of self. I want my kids to feel what it's like to be a real part of this earth.”

Working once again with longtime collaborator and co-producer **Jacob Sciba**, **Clark** traverses a landscape of musical influences encompassing R&B/soul, hip-hop, blues, jazz, country and African chants. The latter, says **Clark**, stemmed from conversations in the studio about the history of music and African music in particular.

“A lot of the scales from African music went into folk music, blues and country,” says **Clark**, whose influences and collaborations range from B.B. King, the Jackson 5 and Muddy Waters to Alicia Keys, Dave Grohl and Childish Gambino. “And we were playing African music in the studio. So that’s where the inspiration came from to go global as we talked about what was next after ***This Land***.”

Clark also tapped singer-songwriter **Valerie June** and funk master **George Clinton** as additional guests on ***JPEG RAW***. And the celestial harmonies backing several of the album selections belong to **Clark’s** sisters **Shanan, Shawn and Savannah.** Tying the whole project together are photographs that **Clark** took of himself and a fallen tree outside his studio that double as cover art for the vinyl package.

“I was able to be that weird kid that I knew I was in sixth grade,” says **Clark** with a laugh about his audio/visual mindset. “[But] we were working through the pandemic and a big freeze happened. The tree fell, but by spring leaves were still growing. To me it symbolizes resilience.”

Growing up in his hometown of Austin, Texas, **Clark** initially played and sang with his sisters at family events, performing songs suggested by their dad. Fast forward, and he’s a teen guitar prodigy getting co-signs from **Eric Clapton** among others. Making his major label debut with the 2011 Warner Records EP ***The Bright Lights***, **Clark** has since released three studio albums: 2012’s ***Black and Blu*,** 2015’s ***The Story of Sonny Boy Sli*m** and 2019’s ***This Land***. His four Grammy wins include **Best Traditional R&B Performance** for ***Blak and Blu’s* “Please Come Home”**) and **Best Rock Performance, Best Rock Song** and Best Music Video for title track **“This Land.”**

As he prepares now for the release of ***JPEG RAW,*** what does **Clark** want listeners to take away from his forthcoming album? “Breathe,” he urges. “Then go outside and listen to the birds as you look up at the sky. Appreciate the things you do have. Hopefully, the album resonates with positivity and hope. It’s really not about me, so take me out of the equation. This is yours now.”

[**ALBUM COVER**](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DVFsBpAc8KTxx1kcIVow-oMkDW0kOvr6/view?usp=sharing)

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**Contact:**

**Rick Gershon at Warner Records**

**Rick.Gershon@warnerrecords.com**

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