

Gabriels
Angels & Queens
By: Brad Weté

We have coincidence to thank for connecting Compton-bred gospel singer Jacob Lusk, UK-born producer and keyboardist Ryan Hope, and LA-native producer-composer and violinist Ari Balouzian. Well, that and of course, God.

Roughly seven years ago, film director Ryan Hope had just signed a deal with Roman Coppola's Directors Bureau and moved from the north England city of Sunderland to Los Angeles, where he stumbled across producer-composer Balouzian's scoring work. Intrigued, Hope reached out and the pair began working together out of Balouzian's apartment studio.

Their work brought them to Jacob Lusk and his church choir, but when additional parts were required, the choir returned minus their lead. Never the type to settle, Hope and Balouzian popped down to a church service in a Leimert Park middle school and set up a remote studio where Lusk effortlessly laid key vocals and harmonies for them.

"We just kind of clicked in a really weird way," Lusk recalls while laughing. "A brotherhood was formed." All who listen to Gabriels' (their group name comes from St. Gabriels Avenue, the street Hope grew up on) two-part debut album *Angels & Queens* (with the first installment arriving September 30 via Atlas Artists/Parlophone Records), can hear their synergy. They'll also fall for Lusk's rich, far-reaching vocal range.

His powerful voice took a bit of work to master. "I didn't know what to do with it," Lusk admits. "When you have all of the tools in the toolbox, you end up trying to use them all at once, and that sounds terrible. It's like a car going 200 miles per hour in a 20 miles per hour zone and the car is a big rig."

But with diligent practice and a church upbringing, Lusk clearly learned to use his gifts. Before long, he was building his music industry resume as a background singer for icons like Gladys Knight, Diana Ross, Beck, and Nate Dogg.

As a trio, their breakthrough moment came via Milan fashion house Prada's 2018 three-part vignette series *The Delivery Man*, directed by Hope himself. Their sultry cut "Loyalty" played as Academy Award-winning actor JK Simmons delivered Cahier handbags. The placement showcased their ability to create music as pleasing to the ears as couture pieces are to the touch and resulted in a bevy of record labels inquiring if Gabriels had any more music to offer. At the time, they did not.

Energized by the interest, the R&B-soul-rock hybrid collective crafted a slew of rough cuts, signed a major label deal, and unveiled a pair of critically acclaimed EPs in 2021 (*Bloodline* and *Love and Hate in a Different Time*). Producing standout tracks "Blame" and the latter's title track, the group quickly found fans in the likes of Elton John (who called "Love and Hate" "*probably one of*

the most seminal records I've heard in the last 10 years”), David Byrne, Celeste, among others. Following a striking debut at Glastonbury, earning KCRW's *Breakthrough Artist of 2021* award, and hitting the late-night circuit on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *Later...With Jools Holland*, Gabriels returned to LA in 2022 to develop the thoughtful records on *Angels & Queens*.

Future-funk lead single “Angels & Queens” was born during the era. With a memorable, lighthearted opening set of lyrics, the Trojan Horse of a track swirls into a poignant cut where Lusk realizes just how deeply one can be affected by the person holding their heart—all while his voice soars to euphoria. “It’s a sound that we’ve been reaching for for a long time,” Hope says.

Elsewhere, “If You Only Knew” finds Lusk playing the role of his late godsister who lost her battle with addiction. “I was with Ari and Ryan when we got the call,” Jacob remembers. “I decided to write about it at that moment. We wrote a story about what a person would say from the other side.”

There’s a sullen start where she speaks to the family she left behind, then it swells (thanks to strings, an organ, and choir) into an inspiring hymn about how losing someone doesn’t have to equate to loneliness. “It’s so personal, but that becomes universal,” Balouzian says of their lyrics.

Hope echoes the sentiment, which is reflected throughout the LP. “If you can put the listener in the room and say what someone eats, what color their car is, or what material their couch is, the listener builds a picture in their mind. That’s what all of the songs have, those unique textures. If you put someone in the room with you, you have a better chance of them feeling whatever human emotion you’re trying to convey with the song.”

Sonically, the album booms with joy and dips into heavy waters and moody vibes, as exemplified on “The Blind” and “Taboo.” Production titan Sounwave (known for his hits with fellow Compton-native Kendrick Lamar) was a key figure in molding the project. “Sounwave was from a different world,” Balouzian adds. “It was a really free, respectful process. He put drums on a bunch of our demos, then we’d shape them together. It was amazing.”

Ahead of *Angels & Queens*’ release, the crew isn’t getting ahead of themselves with goals of critical acclaim, trophies, and Hollywood glitz. For Hope, the greatest part of this album was the journey. “I got everything I needed from it; enjoying the process. I’m not looking for it to do any specific number or win a bunch of things.” The same goes for Balouzian. “The success of this was actually getting to make something we’re so proud of,” he says.

Lusk’s answer is, unsurprisingly, a bit more colorful: Considering his time in the industry had always been assisting others in executing their vision—writing hooks for rappers, serving the Lord at church, singing background—he’s overjoyed to simply be his full self for once. “Meeting these two men allowed me to write what my heart felt, to find what feels natural.”

“I’m not gonna lie,” Lusk continues, setting the table for a candid follow-up. “I want to win every award, every Grammy! I want to perform with everybody and anybody.” Then he punctuates the thought, as he often does: “Praise God!”