Jett Fueled
Rock icon Joan Jett's eleventh solo album rides on her thriving cross-generational influence

By Matt Diehl

"It came in fits and starts," Joan Jett says of her eleventh solo album. "I'd think, 'I can't do this anymore'—but the more I just let go, things started pouring out." There's certainly a sense of catharsis to Unvarnished, Jett's first album in seven years, and her first set of original songs in more than a decade. Though it retains the classic guitar crunch that's made Jett an iconic presence since "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" spent seven weeks atop the Billboard Hot 100 in 1982, it's also the most autobiographical and political record of her career. "I had more life change than just sex, drugs and rock'n'roll to comment on," Jett says. In a sense, she's seen her world turned upside down. Unvarnished comes in the wake of her parents' deaths, as well as the devastation of Hurricane Sandy that Jett witnessed in Long Beach, N.Y., the beachside Long Island community that she calls home. "Any Weather"—the first single and a collaboration with Dave Grohl—marries a milking rodeo to romantic resilience with an environmental cautionary tale. Elsewhere, "Soulmates to Strangers" explores abruptly failed relationships in a poignant rocker co-written with Laura Jane Grace, the transgender frontwoman of Against Me! "When I came out publicly as trans, Joan got in touch," says Grace, who then asked Jett to perform the replacements' "Androgynous" with Against Me on tour. Despite her absence from recording, Jett remains both influential and relevant. "Joan is a heritage artist, but she's also very 'now,'" says Carianne Brinkman, VP of Blackheart Recordings, the indie label Jett formed in 1990 with longtime creative partner Kenny Laguna. "You see it at her shows—there'll be 16-year-olds, or younger, in the audience." Jett's personal stories continue to reverberate throughout popular culture. Miley Cyrus (who dueted with Jett on a medley of her hits in a performance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show") and Avril Lavigne (who's covered Jett's "Bad Reputation") have both sung her praises. Grohl and Foo Fighters have brought her onstage everywhere from New York's Madison Square Garden to "Later Show with David Letterman," and included her as support for the Foo's 2012 South American jaunt. "We went into Alicia Keys at [New York rehearsal studio] S.I.R., and she went crazy," Laguna recalls. "She's from a whole different genre, and she said she drew courage from Joan." The release strategy for Unvarnished pivots on Jett's balance between her established fan base and millennials. "You need exposure, but you can't blow the mystique," Laguna says. TV appearances provide a crucial reminder that Jett is back: "Any Weather" made its broadcast debut on "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" on Aug. 8, and Laguna says significant morning-show appearances are being negotiated—a first for Jett, as are social media initiatives. (Jett is now on Twitter, where she's likely to answer questions from fans in coming weeks.) And while much of Jett's discography has been held back from streaming services, don't be surprised when Unvarnished is on Spotify. "It has replication to stream catalog because it consistently sells," Brinkman says, noting that "I Love Rock 'N' Roll" sold nearly 70,000 copies upon its official release on iTunes. "But Unvarnished is a totally different ballgame. As for radio, we're going for it, both traditional and otherwise—Sirius and Pandora are brilliant—but it's not the meat-and-potatoes of the campaign." Having an artist-driven, family-business label—Brinkman is Laguna's daughter—allows a different kind of fluidity in marketing choices for what has become a truly indie release: While Blackheart has partnered with majors like Columbia and Mercury in the past, Unvarnished will roll out through a distribution partnership with Degromex. Brinkman expects a series of new, highly selectively branded/sparsely collaborations—previous partners include Lucky Brand clothing, makeup line Hypertica Glamour, toy giant Mattel and Barbie, and Gibson Guitars, whose Joan Jett model Laguna claims is its best-selling signature model outside of the Les Paul. For Jett herself, Unvarnished continues to blaze trails as she has since the dawn of her career. "I've always been true to myself," she says. "Everyone always wanted me to put down my guitar. Even when I first met Kenny, he expected the band would record all the music and I'd just record vocals. I told him, 'Forget it.' Expecting that girls can't cut it is the default setting, and I've always fought that. I had to be me."