

ZDAN 'SO WHAT!' ALBUM BIO

Life is cyclical. If you're lucky enough to eventually circle back to where you started, there comes a few crucial realizations: you've had the tools you need to survive all along, your stamina is far greater than you predicted, and that sensation stirring within you is the realization that you just reinvented yourself by refusing to stay put. People often misinterpret what it means to come full circle, as if it's a pawn moved back to the beginning of a board game. In reality, that starting line is the red ribbon on a victory lap and you're about to receive a trophy. On SO WHAT!, her fourth studio album, Nashville-based rocker Zdan breaks through with the music equivalent of a photo finish, an audible grin on her face and relief rolling off her shoulders.

Despite a nearly 23-year-long career in the music industry in which she composed striking original songs, a small part of Zdan always believed she was still chasing who and what she was really meant to sound like. Now, the longtime singer, songwriter, and producer sounds comfortably liberated while knee-deep in rock, muscular guitar solos, and the thick grooves of vintage roots music. "Get out of your head and back to reality," she sang a decade ago on her self-titled debut. Now, in the spirit of her new album's title, she's finally heeding that advice on SO WHAT! by forgoing rules and conventions.

This new era begins with the artist formerly known as Brandy Zdan ditching her first name and embracing ZDAN as her proper moniker. "It's me separating my identity as an artist and producer from who I am as a person. But mainly, it's about breaking down the barriers of gender and genre," she explains. "People expected me to be a feminine singer-songwriter – which I am, but often not in the ways they assume. I wanted to broaden that to reflect how I sound on this record, the fact it's a band project, and give myself the freedom to do whatever I want."

Some of Nashville's finest musicians joined Zdan in rehearsals for SO WHAT!, including Sturgill Simpson's go-to bassist Kevin Black, her husband Aaron Haynes on drums, and pedal steel player Joshua Grange who toured with Beck and Sheryl Crow, and with special guest appearances from local indie-rock legends Aaron Lee Tasjan and Molly Martin. For Zdan, instilling the energy in rock music means exploring the push and pull of musicians together in a practice space during its creation, not just handing sheet music to session musicians in the recording studio.

Through those nuanced collaborative sessions, Zdan emboldened the loudest version of herself: someone who doesn't ask for permission, wait on the sidelines, or forfeit the reins. "I'm staking my claim / I'm here to stay," Zdan sings with a smirk in album opener "Hell No!" Critics have long compared Zdan to Joan Jett, but on SO WHAT! she bolsters

that grit in her voice through live vocal takes while also embodying the liberated yet melodic hollers of The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde. Strengthening that edge are Zdan's searing guitar skills, in which gruff power chords and wild riffs rear their head, inviting you to join in the raucous on songs like "Pink Lipstick" or standout "Let It Out."

"I just turned 42 years old and I feel like I have the fearlessness of when I was a teenager first starting to write songs. I've wanted to get back there: before you're thinking about the music industry, or what your career should be, or what the outcome of your songs will be," says Zdan. "There really is a fear that you get pigeonholed. But with every year that passes by, your give-a-fucks go down, and down, and down. We should all strive to get back to that, because it's so freeing to be here."

SO WHAT! uncorks Zdan's righteous anger as gender disparities in the music industry continued to box her out, LGBTQ rights came under attack, and restrictions on reproductive rights jeopardized the lives of millions of women around the country. "Save Me (Rock n Roll)," a rowdy synth-led barn burner, flips off those eager to rescind the separation of church and state and body autonomy. On the smokey slow-burner "Damn Thing," featuring guest vocals from Carl Anderson, Zdan urges those trapped in a web of lies to be honest with themselves. Later, on "Living Is a Sin," she waxes poetic about a judgement-free life, singing, "If to live is to just get by, then living is a sin."

"As a Canadian-born artist, I didn't expect to be writing songs about a woman's right to choose in 2025, but I have an American daughter. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, it was no longer about me. It was about my daughter's future, being able to love who she wants, and her ability to choose what's right for her," Zdan says with an edge in her voice. "I'm angry, as we all should be, and getting to use music as an avenue to stand up for these things couldn't be more crucial. The best part is that my daughter loves singing along to it, too."

Turns out her fans want songs that tap into that feeling. Zdan raised \$34,000 through a Kickstarter fundraiser to record and release SO WHAT!, where she billed the album as a retort to male producers and executives that refused to take her work at face value. "That's more money than an indie label would spend marketing a record, and it's all possible because I was vulnerable, asked for help, and bet on myself," says Zdan. "That's what rock 'n' roll is really about: putting your fingers in the air and doing what they said you couldn't do."

The air of liberation coating SO WHAT! revels in that feeling of dyeing expectations – including her own. "What the hell do you do when you can't break through?" Zdan yells over a classic rock 'n' roll guitar riff in "Breakthrough." The answer, it seems, is to take

back control and have fun doing it. From her sultry snarl on the title track to the uptempo vocal harmonies in “T-shirt,” the confidence she exudes over these bold rock songs is contagious, like hearing Stevie Nicks or Chrissie Hynde let it rip live. If her last album, 2021’s *Falcon*, was about spreading her wings, then *So What!* is Zdan jumping off the highest cliff to take flight.

A huge shift in Zdan’s sound on *SO WHAT!* is the result of her reclaiming the producer’s chair and breaking up the boys club in the process. Over the past few years, Zdan has produced records for artists like Emily Scott Robinson and Wild Ponies, during which she further honed her ear. “Producing records has given me a better perspective of how much work there’s left to do – it’s all dudes, at least in Nashville,” she says. “So the 6% of us who are behind the board? We’re very intentional with our choices.” By leaning into live vocal tracks, Zdan draws out the raw emotion and humanity of her voice. “This is a living, breathing, moving album, and it needs to sound that way,” she says.

Zdan crafted *SO WHAT!* with the brash confidence of her youth that reclaimed space with each passing day. “Ageism is prevalent in this industry, and a big part of the album title *So What!* is a rebuttal of that and all the reasons I’ve heard ‘No’ again and again,” says Zdan. “Patti Smith performed here a few years ago, and as she was playing ‘People Have the Power’ with her son backing her on guitar, it struck me: I couldn’t tell if she was 71 or 19. Patti was completely ageless. That was a life-changing moment in the simplest way. As I wrote and recorded this album, I started to feel that agelessness within myself. So what if I’m in my 40s? So what if I’m in the minority behind the board? I’m a record producer and I’m here to break some glass.”