

Two things: don't call Ivor Novello-winning singer-songwriter Laura Mvula's unapologetic, 80s pop-referencing new album Pink Noise a comeback record. “I've always been here,” she smiles, “I just took some time to do what I needed to do.” Secondly, this isn't Laura Mvula 2.0. It's not as simple as that. “Let's go with Laura Mvula 4.5,” she laughs. “Honestly, doing this record nearly killed me. Not literally, obviously, but in some sense.” While it's musical inspirations lean heavily into the vibrant pop Mvula loved growing up – Michael and Janet Jackson, Prince, Earth, Wind & Fire, Chic, the list goes on – it's an album borne out of both intense struggles and the positive realisations that come when you emerge reborn the other side. Lyrically it touches on ideas around break-ups – both personal and professional – but also a hard won appreciation for “being present and being in the moment.”

It's all there on the album's delicious lead single, Church Girl, an 80s-era Whitney Houston-esque slice of effortlessly euphoric pop that turns the spotlight inwards while careening towards the dancefloor. “I was the original pop head in my family, I'm obsessed with pop,” she says, acknowledging the shift from the more experimental, baroque soul of her first two albums, 2013's Sing to the Moon and 2016's The Dreaming Room, both of which were Mercury nominated. “For some reason when I made Sing to The Moon that sound became permanently attached to me in people's heads. Like having the same hairstyle for the rest of your life, which for me is unthinkable. So this album was such a release.”

While her first two albums were successful, both critically and commercially, Mvula found herself at a crossroads at the start of 2017. Having parted ways with her old label, she even contemplated a new career altogether. “I probably did look at teaching jobs on a rainy afternoon but the truth of it was that there was initially a period of freedom,” she says. “I could enjoy the fact that I had some kind of platform but I didn't have to answer to anyone. I could, for the first time, ask the question, what do I want to do?” In May of that year The Dreaming Room won the coveted album of the year award at the prestigious Ivor Novello awards, an accolade that gave Birmingham-born Mvula – a classically trained musician, let's not forget – hope for her future in music. Suddenly she had time to look back on how she was perceived, and to look at the bigger picture. “Growing up my parents always said to me and my siblings that as young black people we were going to have to work a hundred times harder just to get in the room, and that for me meant literally attempting to create a new genre of music,” she says. “So if I was going to do this thing I was going to have to invent something to go 'hey, I'm here'. I was learning that I was perceived as this artist who was very 'special' and it was 'pop but it's not pop, it's jazz but it's not jazz, it's classical but it's not classical, it's black but it's not black'. I realised that a lot of this game was about justifying being in the room in the first place. Because I was doing something that couldn't be neatly boxed. With this new album there is something hugely relieving about leaning heavily into a style of music – that 80s cosmic landscape – that has always been in my spirit.”

At the start of 2018 Mvula was asked to support the legendary David Byrne on his critically-lauded American Utopia in the UK. It was, she says, a game changer. “Not just being invited, which in itself was such a high honour, but because it meant that I had to think about creativity again.” It also meant using that boundless creativity in new ways. “I was so bored of people being like 'sit at the piano and sing' – I'm not a cabaret performer. It's not my thing. So then I started to think about how I could make a big sound with just me and maybe one other person. Then we developed this idea of making everything electronic and not committing to any form with all the previous material. I'd torn it all apart and put it together again in a way that made sense to me at the time. No one else.” It was a revelation, and slowly a more uninhibited Mvula started to emerge. It was after the London show that Mvula had a meeting with her new label Atlantic Records, only she didn't have any new music to play them, just an idea of where she wanted to head next. “I started seeing creative paths like Jacob Collier or even Janelle Monae. These are artists whose music I admire and they have managed to thrive doing what they love the way they want to do it.” Despite everything that had happened, her engrained confidence in her own abilities started to shine through. “The things we believe in our core, the stories we tell ourselves over and over, I know one of mine has always been 'I will make magical music'. There's nothing anyone can do, including myself, to tear down this very pure and authentic vow that I made to my creative self from ages ago.”

The first song to slowly emerge was Pink Noise's grand-standing album opener, Safe Passage. “It was a weekend and my mum was knocking on the door reminding me to eat,” she says of its intense creation. “I didn't wash. It was such a beautiful time.” It was a breakthrough moment, all started initially in Mvula's makeshift “box room” studio in her house. The throbbing, slightly sinister-sounding Conditional, a searingly honest (“another blow to the ego, a victim of conditional love”) synth workout emerged at the same time. “After Safe Passage I didn't want people to get confused and think 'ah, she's doing her nice music',” she laughs. “I wanted to nip that in the bud quite quickly. I did the beat at home and I thought it was funny because it sounded like a beat for someone else.” She eventually took that demo and other gestating future classics into a studio with New Zealand producer Dann Hume, who gave her the space to work out what it could be. “With Dann, anything I throw into the air he's able to catch it with me rather than be someone that goes 'eh, not sure what that's going to be'.” It's a working relationship that's paid dividends, be it on the elasticated funk of armour-plated pop goliath Remedy (“my favourite song on the album”), or the stadium-sized ballads Golden Ashes and Magical. “It's like wanting so much to be seen and heard and validated through the tools I know best how to use which is melody, harmony and groove,” she says of the fact her ballads rarely fade into the background. “I need your attention.”

For the album's title Mvula knew she needed something that would sum up the vibrancy of the music, and also work with the slightly sci-fi angle of February's spectacular Under a Pink Moon livestream in which she re-worked some of her older hits in a more synth-lead context (there was also an EP, 1/f). Pink noise is a scientific term – sort of the opposite of white noise - that Mvula stumbled across while having a “nerdy lockdown afternoon” and watching a tutorial online. “It was half an hour long and literally 30 seconds in I knew I wasn't going to make it through it all,” she laughs. “Then the guy leading it says 'this is where we have pink noise' and I was like 'that's it!' and stopped the video.” The more she researched the more she started employing pink noise's blend of more intense low-frequency tones and softer high-frequency tones on the album itself. Part of what these frequencies can help with is recalling lost memories, which feels apt when presented with the spectacular Pink Noise and its ability to recall the brilliance of 1980s pop while keeping it fresh.

For its creator it's also the album that reminded her of her value: “Growing up, I was always made to feel that I was someone special.” Pink Noise is further evidence of that.