Much like the city itself, the music inspired by New York is always changing, always evolving. Meet MICHELLE: Sofia D’Angelo, Julian Kaufman, Charlie Kilgore, Layla Ku, Emma Lee and Jamee Lockard. Six 21-year-olds raised across Manhattan and Brooklyn; six like-minded individuals who came together in an unlikely way.

The kernel of inspiration for what would eventually become MICHELLE started in the spring of 2018 when Julian and Charlie were both in their second semester at separate colleges, both wading through bad breakups and looking for something to pull them out of the mire. “We wanted to be doing something instead of proactively destroying ourselves,” explains Julian. “So we started FaceTiming all the time.” Both trained multi-instrumentalists with self-taught production chops, the pair had been orbiting one another since their mid-teens at house parties and onstage at all-age event spaces like 7eventytwo. So they came up with this: write and record a one-off, quasi-concept record about growing up in New York… and do it in two weeks.

Pulling in vocalists they’d befriended in high school (Layla), college (Jamee), and through the local music scene (Sofia + Emma), alongside additional New York musicians and singers, the pace was swift, the method unconventional. Using Julian’s keyboard-strewn bedroom as a studio – monitors under his lofted bed and a makeshift vocal booth sandwiched between shelves and some hanging clothes – the vocalists would come in pairs and write alongside Julian and Charlie, laying down two tracks a day.

Fueled by passion and frozen pizza, the project was not without its nerves and tensions; after all, a creative collaboration in a small space with people you don’t know *that* well is a terrifying prospect for anyone. “A great record is like a tempestuous relationship – if there’s not some struggle to make it as great as it needs to be, you’re not going to hear any emotion in the music,” notes Charlie. “When me and Julian are battling it out in the control room that’s when I know it’s working.”

Released in September 2018, *HEATWAVE* is a streets-and-skylines homage to their hometown. The lyrics capture the city’s idiosyncrasies (“2.25,” “MANGO”), its magnetic pull and its polarizing qualities too (“STUCK ON U,” “THE BOTTOM”), all set to R&B-inflected pop, sleek synths, plush harmonies, and buoyant grooves. The collective’s omnivorous, disparate influences – Noname, Led Zeppelin, Sly and the Family Stone, Orion Sun, My Chemical Romance, SZA, to name a few – distilled to create a cohesive whole. But it wasn’t till a few months later that the group finally came together for the first time to rehearse – just once – on the day of their debut show (at Bard College where Layla and Emma were studying). “I feel like everyone was extra themselves that day,” recalls Layla. “So I really got a sense of who they were and how they moved through the world.” That evening the venue was packed and the audience knew the words to every song.

In some ways, it was only when the sextet started performing live that MICHELLE began to coalesce as a true creative collective rather than a standalone musical project. “There’s definitely a lot more comfort now,” says Layla. “This time around someone might come to Julian’s house and be like, ‘Yo, I’m so depressed today, this thing happened to me…’ and that would spark the writing.”

As their relationships strengthened so too did their songwriting abilities, turning inwards and to each other for lyrical grist. The push and pull of romantic relationships feature in songs like “Sunrise,” with its smart syncopation and indelible hook, or the smooth, 90s R&B swagger of “Unbound.” Elsewhere “FYO” sees Jamee and Emma taking the creative lead, exploring their biracial identity, setting their shared observations to a skippy beat and loungey, funked up sonics. It was the first time the two half-Korean songwriters had ever tackled such subject matter, but for a group predominated by queer, biracial women the space to discuss such topics is key.

“It’s very comfortable to be around such a diverse group of people – there’s real discussion and reflections about racial identity,” says Sofia, herself of Cuban-Italian descent. “It’s about being as honest as possible. Now we have this outlet to share our stories.”

“It wasn’t intentional at all,” adds Emma of the group’s composition. “But it’s going to matter for the people we play for, and in the work that we make, and the spaces we occupy.”

Listening to a recent podcast with Stevie Nicks and The 1975’s Matt Healy, Sofia was struck by a comment from Fleetwood Mac’s first lady: “What keeps a band together is when every member is still impressed by the other members in the group.”

It’s a notion that certainly rings true for MICHELLE. When the band recall their initial encounters, it’s clear they’re impressed, and in some cases in awe, of each other’s skills. The effect is almost of an unspoken individual challenge to push themselves forward creatively. Although MICHELLE is their top priority and focus, each member is involved in other endeavors, whether that’s solo projects or other bands (some with each other), finishing college degrees, or continuing to pursue commitments to dance and visual art. These days they respect and rely on each other’s input and advice and it all ultimately feeds back into MICHELLE.

“We’ve continued to learn about each other’s identities, pasts, and interests, and when we’re together I feel supported,” says Jamee.