

Early into *Santa Cruz*, the poignant third album in David Bazan's ongoing musical memoir of his sometimes-uncanny life, he discovers the Beatles. He is the new kid from Arizona in a new school in the famous California coastal town where his dad has accepted another post at a Bible college. He and his first friend there, Matt, are sitting on the carpet in Matt's little bedroom, flipping through the records bequeathed by his father, when Bazan spots a familiar cover—The White Album, known only from a church documentary that warned children of the Satanic secrets of "Revolution 9." Play it backwards, the propaganda said, and it would offer a command: "Turn me on, dead man."

So, of course, the kids played it forward and were fascinated by the sound, by the imagination, by the act of consecrated creativity far outside of Christian rock. Bazan was 13. "Treading water on the open ocean/Then you threw me out a life ring," he sings, the smile obvious just through the sound as the beat picks up like a racing pulse, more than three decades later. "All I needed was a little help from a friend." That is the moment where, in many ways, the remarkable songs of Pedro the Lion begin to take shape.

In 2019, after a 15-year break filled with solo records and side-projects, Bazan returned to the moniker under which he had become one of indie rock's most identifiable voices and incisive songwriters, Pedro the Lion. He sort of stumbled into 2019's *Phoenix*, a charged chronicle of his childhood there, while spending the night with his grandparents during a tour stop. But he soon understood that unpacking his peripatetic youth, where his music minister father shifted around the country like a Marine moving bases, was helpful, healing, and maybe even interesting. The gripping *Havasu* followed in 2022. Bazan was onto something, untangling all the ways his past had both shaped and misshaped his present inside some of his best songs ever.

That past truly begins to become the present on *Santa Cruz*, the most fraught and frank album yet in a planned five-album arc; this one covers a little less than a decade, from just after he turned 13 until he turns toward adulthood around 21. These songs ripple with the anxiety and energy of teenage awakening—of hearing rock 'n' roll, of understanding that independent music exists, of making out with an older schoolmate in deepest secret, of falling in love, of finally starting to understand that in order to be yourself you're going to need to be something other than your parents' vision of you. It is the rawest, most affecting and affirming album Pedro the Lion has ever made.

*Santa Cruz* begins with a prayer that feels like a dirge, a synth-led funeral march to another town where Bazan knows no one. "If I lay it down/And I keep my eyes on you," he moans, steeling himself through self-sacrifice. "It'll all work out." But when he arrives in Santa Cruz to begin eighth grade, the self-flagellation comes quickly, Bazan lecturing himself for the lameness of the neon-green backpack he picked out in Phoenix and the Christian rock that is his lifeblood. For decades now, Bazan has been known for his music's deliberate pace, often linked to slowcore. Here, however, he renders detailed images in rapid-fire waves, his voice stapled atop the quick rhythm like never before in order to capture his nerves as he learns there might be life outside of his family's Christian fiefdom—apocrypha, whispers of sex, mere games of ping-pong.

But every time stability seems to appear during these 11 songs, the family is off to another job. By ninth grade, amid the metronomic mile markers of "Tall Pines," they are headed for little

Paradise, where there are dreams of drum sets and clandestine shirtless make-out sessions when his parents are away. With the stirring “Don’t Cry Now,” as close to a dance track as Pedro the Lion has ever made, they’re bound for Seattle, where Bazan found his own fledgling music scene, deepening friendships, and the dawn rays of what would become his future.

When his family splits for California yet again, he stays behind, living with a friend just so he can graduate from the place where he’s become so invested in drums, guitars, and songs that he’s barely maintained his grades. The day after he graduates, he stuffs everything he owns into plastic garbage bags and heads south with his mom, returning to the family flock, now in Modesto. “You sweetly slept in the passenger seat/I gripped the wheel, messed up inside,” he sings of his mother during “Parting,” his voice a true-to-life admixture of love and longing, of devotion and doubt.

The six-month stay in Modesto, though, would prove to be among the most transformative moments of his life, the slow-motion catapult that sent him into right now. After he quits selling vacuum cleaners to sad women, he nabs a gig at a guitar store. That’s where he hears a crisp piece of lo-fi wizardry from a local Modesto band, a moment that feels almost like a Beatles-sized revelation, a permission slip that says he can, in fact, make music on a scale as small as he wants. He writes the first Pedro the Lion songs there, and, in the cathartic and gorgeous climax of “Modesto,” vows to return to Seattle, to be in a band, to fall in love, to be himself. Its successor, “Spend Time,” feels like some skeletal and celebratory arena-rock anthem, with incandescent harmonies and sharp harmonics and slicing riffs. Back in Seattle, “back in his room, drumming with Paul,” he is on the precipice of the rest of his life, the life that you now know as a listener.

When Bazan began considering the times and the songs that would soon become *Santa Cruz*, he thought about fictionalizing it all. He could break with the narratives of *Phoenix* and *Havasu* to give himself and everyone else in the story some critical distance. These events are not old news, after all, and he worried about untangling the active threads of the rather recent past from right now. And would it seem like he was scolding his parents, two people trying to raise kids the best they knew how? The result does not feel like blame. It feels like redemption, like finding the way forward for yourself, however it happens. “Your grief is not a burden,” Bazan beautifully sings in one of the final verses. “It’s energy.” And it’s currently powering one of the most real, riveting, and powerful song cycles in memory, happening right now.