

Here I Am, Haim

On the road in America with three Jewish sisters who rock

By [Sean Cooper](#) | November 2, 2017 12:00 AM

It's dark and nearing midnight in Denver. On the way into the city from the airport, the mountain air flows through the open windows of the taxi, fresh and crisp until we approach a long stretch of warehouses secured by barbed wire and topped with giant exhaust fans. My driver, a chubby man with glassy eyes, explains that the overwhelming weed smell now wafting through the car originates not from anything in his possession but rather in the industrialized growing operations that surround us and keep the city's resident and visiting tokers handsomely stoned. At the dimly lit pizza bar the 30-something waitress with the same glassy eyes says she hasn't heard of Haim, [the band](#) I'm in town to see, but that might have more to do with her, she concedes, as it was long ago when she stopped keeping up with the latest pop-music sensation.

I rent my desk space and electrical outlet for the price of a coffee cup and check in with the band's Public Relations Brohany, a Brooklyn-based professional who, for the better part of four months, has dangled and withdrawn an actual interview with the three Southern California sisters who make up Haim. This, despite my offers of maximum flexibility, to meet them before the current tour, during the tour, after the tour, on show days, pre-show days, post-show days, or on any fixed future date for :5, :15, or :30 minutes with one, two, or all three sisters at anytime convenient, all of which has been retorted with a "let me see what I can do" before the requisite "sorry that doesn't look like it will work," a patterned deflection I begrudgingly start to admire and which reflects the current success of Haim, for whom the music industry clock is loudly ticking.

In pop music years, the span between Haim's 2013 debut, *Days Are Gone*, and their 2017 follow up, *Something To Tell You*, was nearly a lifetime. At a certain point—namely, as musicians age out of their sprightly 20s and into their queasy 30s, when questions of existential purpose ferment in earnest, a band must consolidate its marketplace position. Either blow up big enough to fill stadiums of \$60 fist-pumpers who will later patronize your \$40 amphitheater shows for nights of nostalgic singalongs (see: Arcade Fire), or else dig your heels in for a long haul of less lucrative creative reinvention, maybe etching out a single or two. Back in 2013, no one was quite sure where to place Haim on this pop-indie matrix, the band themselves probably included, as evidenced by their nearly three years of constant touring, making as much money as they could off one full record before having to answer the question of who is Haim back in the studio.

Haim's preference to defer that answer for as long as possible certainly made sense, given that their debut and perpetual tour promo earned them a peculiarly broad kind of fame—a Best New Artist Grammy nominee, a rabid, teen-centric fanbase, a spot on Jay-Z's Roc Nation roster, name checks from Stevie Nicks, Hillary Clinton, and various indie rock royalty, gushing appreciations in [Pitchfork](#), [New Yorker](#), and music blogs of note, and remixes from top-shelf dance producers. It seemed, in fact, like they might do the impossible and be everything to everyone, rock star goddesses who play all their own instruments,

write their own songs, make you dance, make you cry. But with the sophomore record now here, every media appearance is a precious step towards realizing their previously mysterious and soon-to-be-actual fate. In the late afternoon, I linger as non-creepily as I can around the Ogden trying to catch soundcheck, until I'm shooed away by a bulky security goon with his eyes on alert during a nose pick. I eventually head back to my rented room to get my dancing shoes and stroll slowly over to the venue.

The dense proliferation of recreational dispensaries is a bizarre sight in Denver, with the window-tinted cannabis leaf storefronts abutting coffee shops and vegan luncheonettes it's like walking through a movie set for some straight-to-video film about an alternate progressive America, but the percolating good time vibes are belied by the atmospheric menace that keeps seeping through the surface. Nearly every service industry person I meet during the day and a strong number of those on the bus and sidewalks are in speech and body language demonstrably flying at altitudes somewhere between microdosed and high as a kite. More unsettling than the zombified citizenry is the security guy I see taking a smoke break outside a dispensary a few blocks from the venue, in black fatigues, black boots, and a handgun on his utility belt. A massive cloud of thick vapor forms around his Oakley sunglasses just as quickly as it disappears. He pockets his vape pen, swipes his electronic key, and goes inside with a light touch on his holster.

It's a sold-out show of 2,000 or so at the Ogden, and the flow through the metal detectors into the lobby is steady. The crowd is heavily white, early 20s, and more female than male, with males in the role of boyfriend, to girls who wear fresh white T-shirts tucked into high-waisted jeans, a style rocked often by the fashionable Haim. Besides concert posters for Nick Cave and the XX, a sign on the wall reads "tonight's performance will include the use of fog and strobe lights." The opener is a four-piece dance-punk outfit from Brooklyn with a lead singer in a David Byrne Stop Making Sense suit that has been tailored down to fit her narrow skeletal body. In between songs she flicks back her raspberry colored hair and says, "We hope that you've learned very quickly that we are all about raging your faces off. Just a precursor to the face meltage you're about to experience with the Haim ladies." Dutiful boyfriends abscond to the lobby bar, returning with complimentary neon green earplugs that poke out like gumball toys from the craniums of their decibel-sensitive partners.

The opener is off promptly at 8:30 p.m. and the narrow-waisted drummer in a black-and-white checkered T-shirt frantically disassembles his drum kit, like he's breaking down a party before the host's parents get home. The theater walls are painted ox-blood red, and when I get up to the balcony section I realize the ceiling is something like a shag-carpet spray-painted black. It's a mid-week show but the balcony bar is doing steady business in heavy pour cocktails and Budweiser on tap. Early Justin Timberlake plays loud and two young women in lots of makeup ask me to take their photo with the stagehands setting up for Haim. I wait for but do not find a minute that goes by for the duration of the set break when I can't see at least one group or pair in the crowd smiling up into an outstretched hand, taking selfies.

It's dark and the crowd roars. Bright white lights flash and the sisters appear in order of age, the youngest Haim, Alana, 25, stage left, Danielle, 28, in the center, Este, the eldest at 31 to the right. They're a strong presence, their voices booming in sweet harmony as they weave through "**Want You Back**," the guitar-sugar opener off their new album. Large chunks of the room sing the lyrics back to the sisters. Danielle handles most of the lyrical duties and Este, in a patent leather skirt and tall black boots, bobs her head to her own smooth baseline, her eyes wide open as her bright-red mouth seems to pantomime the beat, flaring into wild shapes.

The stage setting is sparse, with the three sisters up front, Alana with her various electronic toys and keyboards, Danielle with some pedals and her lead electric guitar, and Este stalking the edge. Way off in

the back is a touring drummer with big Weird Al hair and a nearly motionless keyboardist in a muscle T. Behind the whole outfit are three giant white screens, 25 to 30 feet tall, one framing each sister. The screens move through a palette of warm color gradients, like mood rings for a sedated pulse. When the lights max out in time with the climax of “**Don’t Save Me**,” a first-album song about wanting all your love or none of it at all, the huge screens take on the distinct image of bedroom vanity mirrors, as if the crowd was singing “don’t save me, save me” to their own reflection.

The sisters swig water bottles as the crowd engulfs them in hoots and cheers. Alana, who plays the role of the talkative, precocious youngest sister, works her way through the story of how they played this venue seven years prior when she was a senior about to graduate high school. “So I was, what, 17 years old and I told my school to fucking suck it. And we came here—there’s something about this venue, this place, it’s a magical place,” she says. “And tonight is going to be a magical night for all of us.”

They plow through “**Little of Your Love**,” a second-album song about wanting more of your love, and Danielle shreds long, twangy guitar lines for the song’s finale, evoking the more lucid guitar phrases from peak Allman Brothers. After the song, Este points out that some fans had thrown up what looks like dozens of joints onto the stage. Este’s humor is often dry and approachably obscene, like a long-sober uncle who considers George Carlin to be his spirit animal. “Looks like someone’s been reading my diary,” Este says just as a stage-hand comes out to pick up the joints. “Hey, Chip, are you stealing these from me? I’m watching you Chip,” who hands her one. Although Este is type-1 diabetic and doesn’t smoke weed, because of the munchies as she once told an interviewer, she play-acts a puff. “This will be great later in my hotel room, smoking a fucking doob.”

As they move through the set it’s clear that Haim is a formidably polished trio. In between songs a stagehand wheels out a large floor drum to Alana’s side. “This is my favorite part of the set,” she says, adding “Everything that makes me angry all comes out during this song. And I know we’re all angry. I know we have a little thing in us that makes us so angry and I know you can get it all out during this song. You just need to feel the vibrations.”

The track, “**My Song 5**,” is a pop-rock/hip-hop hybrid with a big bass-line about no longer needing the love of a cheating partner. Alana thumps out massive blasts on the drum while Danielle runs a guttural guitar line that crunches the air and leaves much of the floor head-nodding in blissful unison. Danielle is narrow-waisted with thin arms and a long neck, but the red electric guitar looks small and docile in her hands. She commands her instrument with the slightest flick of a wrist and gliding fingertips.

After a Shania Twain cover singalong and a clap-along to “**The Wire**,” their first album’s lead single but perhaps the lyrically weakest, a bubble-gum pop lament about no longer being in love, Alana chats up the crowd about how her family loves to dance, and since everyone has been dancing “we’re all officially family,” which elicits wild cheers from 2,000 next of kin. “This is our weird fucked up family reunion and we’re having a really fucking good time,” she says. Este, who on account of her diabetes sat for a few songs on a stool, says “You guys dance to this next song, and I promise I’ll dance with you. Can you do that for me? I swear on the Torah I’ll dance for the next one. Is that a deal Denver?”

A young guy in a trucker hat chuckles nervously to his girlfriend, “that’s great, swear on the Torah,” as if he’d never heard the Old Testament deployed sardonically.

“All right let’s do this!” yells Alana. The sisters lay down the bouncing synth-driven opener to their first album, “**Falling**,” a slightly vague celebration of living for yourself in the moment, but it’s more of a sing-

along than a dance-along. Undeterred, Este does a jig of her own and Alana storms off the stage with security guards struggling to keep up. As she moves through the crowd she jump-dances to try to get others energized, before running up to the balcony. She flies through the aisle and dances a few bars with a group of girls, as most in the immediate vicinity have abandoned the groove in favor of capturing the surprise appearance with their phones. She grabs everyone's hand as she runs back out of the balcony, yelling "I just love you guys!"

Back on the stage, they bow to close the set and walk off to thunderous applause. Amidst chants for an encore, they come back out in dim lights to play "Right Now," a slow burn post-break-upper about no longer needing the love of a cheating partner. The crowd echoes the lyrics, "saying that you need me/need me," as the sisters leave their instruments and head to a drum set in the back. They each grab sticks and alternate solos for a drum session, abandoning the song until they lock in with the crowd that chants a "hey/hey/hey" in a spontaneous call-and-response until all three sisters drop into an accelerating pattern that crescendos into one great slam on the drums.

The crowd pours slowly into the street. A young woman in fishnet stockings with a balloon tattooed on her chest walks out with an arm over her friends' shoulder, repeating "right now, right now."

It's nearing 11 p.m. I wander down the block and inexplicably find a music store still open. It's a massive box of a space with tall windows and glossy eyed clerks shelving records and CDs while a metal-cover of Kanye plays loud on the store's stereo. In the back is a VHS section beside a vintage porn magazine section and up and down the aisles there are white men in their 40s, 50s, 60s browsing albums, some of them with small stacks in hand. It's a dusty place crowded with every product every associated with music and counterculture on sale in some form on spinner racks, wall shelves, or behind the counter. Bongs and grinders sit next to Rolling Stone tongue keychains next to black lights next to a Madlib Quasimotto poster next to a Britney T-shirt next to a high-end brush to clean debris off of vinyl needles. A white guy in his 50s comes to the counter to spill out his life to the polite clerk. Divorced and now in Denver, he once sold music recording equipment. "Back then I used to record the local bands on my tape recorder. That was when there was a real sense of craftsmanship in music. Today it's all about technicians," a distinction he doesn't fully articulate to the clerk but which might reflect a more subtle unease about the internet-accelerated decline of a sustainable music culture left with no structural support for artists who in recognizing their own present peril can only look nostalgically back to a time when musicians were compensated for their time and creativity.

The Haim tour touches down in Chicago for a Friday night show at the Riviera Theatre. Around the corner, at a Buddhist temple, an older, barefoot woman in loose-fitting clothing smacks a long-necked mallet against the pale yellow skin of a feather-decorated floor drum. She does well to avoid the distraction of the bustling street, with pre-gamed concertgoers moving steadily towards the venue, where a bright white marque has in big bold letters: HAIM—SOLD OUT.

If the theater in Denver was well-proportioned and thoughtfully laid out the Riviera is its chaotic architectural sub-consciousness, replete with a dank, dark basement bathroom, myriad bars with lines that jam every hallway, a floor level and stairs that open out to multiple mezzanines with terrible sight lines and creepy corners and a steep upper balcony that climbs up to a vaulted ceiling trapping a humid, listless air that takes the form of a wet, suffocating blanket bringing a sweat to every brow as the Brooklyn four-piece opener struggles to rile up the crowd. A pair of 12-year-olds walk ahead of their parents

quickly, trying to find a better spot to see, and moms line up downstairs against the wall scrolling Facebook, one in a 2016 Green Day tour T-shirt. There are groups of dudes here to party, hats backward, double-fisting. A dad in white New Balance sneakers and a T-shirt tucked into cargo shorts does laps on the back bridge of the balcony, his faint shadow cast onto the purple walls and gold crown molding by the naked hanging light bulbs.

Before the sisters, there was Mordechai Haim, their father, who grew up on Jerusalem Boulevard in Jaffa. Something of a soccer standout, he played midfield as a teen for Maccabi Jaffa, turning out a decent pro career in the 1970s. Taking up drums, the instrumental equivalent to soccer, where one must utilize highly controlled, rapid steps and quick changes in direction to create the illusion of effortlessness and ease, Mordechai, or Morti, also did a stint as a drummer in a touring choir group. A semi-pro soccer club in Los Angeles brought him out west, and he'd eventually settle there, working odd jobs as a plumber and on construction sites until he met his future wife, Donna, a native of Philadelphia who played Joni Mitchell covers in coffee shops around the city until the golden allure of California proved strong enough to prompt a move. She was teaching art to elementary students and giving guitar lessons when friends set her up with Morti at a party in the early 80s. Initially uninterested in this Israeli, Donna found herself gravitating towards Morti when he demonstrated his percussive prowess by drumming out a beat on kitchen plates and glasses with his fingers. They married two years later and joined up with another couple to form a rock band that played matinee shows at Club Med destinations.

A row with the other couple over a setlist led to their break up and Morti's epiphany. At home he told his wife that they were starting Rockinhaim, a band with the girls, Alana included, who was 4 at the time. While Morti and Donna built up a real estate company together, he taught his daughters drums in the living room and brought in voice, piano, and guitar teachers to supplement their practice of Journey and Eagles covers after dinner. Danielle was a standout talent, quickly learning her instruments and developing a smooth, wide-ranging vocal dexterity. The family played for free or peanuts, at Jewish delis and Bar/Bat Mitzvahs in the San Fernando Valley. They caught the attention of Columbia, who poached Danielle and Este to form a pop teen quintet called Valli Girl, which sang songs about doing your hair and shopping.

Este and Danielle left the band and returned to the family business, soon kicking out their parents and changing their name to Haim. They kept on the deli/charity gig circuit with Este eventually going to study Bulgarian choral singing in the Ethnomusicology department at UCLA. The sisters all worked odd jobs in restaurants and retail while Danielle's raw talent landed her spots in touring bands with Jenny Lewis, Cee-Lo, and Julian Casablancas. Her success spurred the girls to take their band more seriously. After a show, Este arranged through a student group at UCLA they had \$1,000 in their pocket to put towards travel to play opener sets for Casablancas. He urged them to take time off from live shows in favor of honing their sound, a move that soon paid dividends.

In February of 2012, Haim self-funded the recording and release of the EP *Forever*, which they made available for free on their website.

In 2013 while still living with their parents, Haim put out *Days Are Gone*, then left to tour relentlessly. They tried to write on the road, didn't like anything they produced, came back, moved out but could only write songs in their parents' living room, on the drum sets they grew up playing, until the end of 2016 into 2017 when they were ready to record *Something to Tell You*, with some tracks laid down at the home studio of their producer and Danielle's boyfriend, Ariel Rechtshaid, a genre-bending savant with credits on hits for Usher and *Vampire Weekend*.

Haim's own careful repetition of the Haim mytho-story, from no internal strife between the sisters to a idyllic family image, with Este once demonstrating how their parents met by playing chopsticks on the table for an interviewer to an unwavering and constant appreciation for their parents being cool and supportive when they were younger and even cooler now, with Morti and Donna joining them on tour during real estate lulls, where Morti kicks around a soccer ball with other bands and Donna making sure everyone has had enough to eat backstage, creates an impenetrably wholesome and polite comportment that admits only B-12 shots in the butt for the sisters when their energy droops and denials that they would ever want to break up the band to pursue solo careers.

The sisters come on stage and the temperature in the Riviera climbs another 5 degrees from the hot air of so many people shouting. Despite the heat Alana and Danielle both wear patent leather pants, Este is in a patent leather skirt, all rock billowy vintage tops that bring to mind sepia-tinted concert photos and archive footage on VH1. They open again with "Want You Back." The Chicago fans are rowdier than Denver, boisterous and loose, hurling fragments of the lyrics back towards the stage, dancing in waves. The baseline and guitars feel bigger here, like they might explode the theater. The sisters have played massive festivals in the past, and it feels like they've set their sights on just that kind of crowd, giving Chicago a deal to feel such a brawny sound in this intimate setting.

Maybe it's the heat but I lose the momentum of the dance party on the second immersion in this set, most of the same songs being played again, and try to find satisfaction in the lyrical presentation. As they coast through the new album's "Nothing's Wrong" I ache for some kind of metaphor or any external anchor outside the confines of the romantic state. Here it's about a relationship that's soured but even in this construction, which for other lyricists often becomes fertile ground for abstract imagery, the entirety of the song sticks to the literal plane, "counting the hours / with nothing to say"; "be honest/it's obvious/be honest," which I realize, as they break for the set and come back out for an encore, the vanity mirrors pulsing in time with Danielle's crescendo guitar lines on "Right Now" before they break for the sisterly drum circle, is the case for all of their songs tonight. A full set of songs that seal themselves in an idealized form, like a plainspoken New Age preacher, eschewing the metaphoric and offering connections only by way of the fantasy of a sincere presentation confined to pure aesthetics of love, untainted by the influence of any outside world.

It's the second day for tens of thousands at the weekend Midtown Music festival in a hilly park in downtown Atlanta. Haim is scheduled in the penultimate set on the Salesforce stage, right before Mumford and Sons play the dual headline with Future on the other side of the festival grounds. I had big hopes that the PR guy would find a way to squeeze me in for a few minutes of walking around the festival with either of the sisters but that possibility was squashed with another apologetic email referencing a busy schedule. I share a Lyft with two college girls who came in from Tennessee. They hadn't heard of Haim but they know how to get close to the stage for Future.

Inside the gates, teenage girls walk around with glitter accenting their cheekbones alongside shirtless boys with glitter accenting their triceps. On the Salesforce stage, Collective Soul grinds out their dressing room anthems for thousands trying to remember when Collective Soul entered and then exited the collective conscious-unconscious. The VIP section sits on a grassy knoll behind a heavily secured perimeter, with overheated guests sprawled out on matching lawn furniture underneath large patio umbrellas. Down on the grass, two men put down their beer to grab either side of an inflatable hammock, running back and forth through the crowd a half-dozen times before they get enough air to tie it up for their two girlfriends,

who then sit and cross their legs. The guys high five while the band rips into “Shine,” which prompts a woman next to me to say, “Oh yeah, this one sounds familiar.”

Seeing as 3,000 or 4,000 have already claimed the immediate vicinity real estate at Salesforce I head out for a stroll through this eclectically billed concert experience. With aging rockers, B-list rap stars, and a slew of folk/poopy bands there’s a strange charge moving through the air, reflective of the hybrid product offering that seems to be more about the general category of Music and Performance.

Down from the \$11 lemonade cocktail stand the candy bar Twix has set up a Twix Record Store, with employees in tight white T-shirts eagerly encouraging all to take social-media selfies beside John Lennon, Clash, and Lionel Richie posters. On the floor and shelves are stacks of the best records from the past 50 years, from *Thriller* to *Paint It, Black*. I ask a Twixer if the records are for sale. “Oh, no, sorry, they’re all decorative.”

At the counter where the register would be if this were an actual record store—an unlikely prospect here, or anywhere—is a huge bowl of snack size Twix bars. Anyone who posts a photo with the Twix hashtag will be entered into a contest for another music festival in Mexico, an offer that a high energy Twixer keeps repeating to the dozens who wander in. From a young man, he takes back the VR goggles that show highlights from the destination festival from last year. “Wasn’t that fun, wasn’t that neat! Just add the hashtag to the photos you’re going to upload anyway—yes, ma’am, just hold that up to your face and, you got it, just look all around, that could be you in 2018!”

At the Bank of America Experience, cardholders enter into a climate controlled tent that opens out into a tall-grassed square secured by a literal white picket fence. An older couple sprawls out on beach blankets in the shade of the tent, his hand holding an unbuckled fanny pack, while a few feet over people wait for the luxe porta-johns. A young girl at a table underneath a black tent hands out postcards. I ask about the title on her tent: Worship Music? “That’s just the slogan for the Tabernacle,” she says cheerfully. “A concert venue in downtown Atlanta.” I tell her I thought she represented a Christian-rock label. “Yeah, I know, a lot of people say that. We didn’t really think the slogan through when we made the tent,” she says, laughing.

Behind the food trucks, weary-looking concert goers pull out the flattened cardboard boxes for bulk mayonnaise and tomato paste to create temporary seating areas between the buzzing generators and the double layer perimeter fencing. A bulky man removes his sweaty shirt and kneels on a ripped piece of cardboard to eat samosas from Bollywood Zing.

I head back in the direction of Salesforce, pausing at an enclosed tent where a young woman is fighting with a drunk guy in a Grateful Dead tie-dye who wants to know why he can’t just get a few minutes for free. It takes me a moment to figure out what the tent is offering. Inside there are perhaps a hundred locker cubicles, each containing phone cords. “\$10,” she says. “One charge for as long as you want.” Scattered on the muddy plastic floor are teenagers in various stages of visible distress. Some lean awkwardly, sweat in the pit of their T-shirts as they arch over their phones pulled taught to the locker’s edge.

The crowd of 3,000 or maybe 4,000 dance on cue as the Haim sisters take the stage. Este is in a red print dress, Danielle in a T-shirt with the face of Phil Collins, Alana in a blue gym shirt tucked into big, red vinyl pants. They open up with the stand-by “Want You Back,” which loses some of its boom here against so much open space. Danielle has her pointed finger in the air and a scolding face for those in the front not

singing along, which perhaps because of her faded jeans or her earnest lack of irony brings to mind certain 90s era SNL characters, those over-eager school teachers who couldn't quite corral the class. She puts her focus back onto the guitar and Este plucks out the meaty bass line, giving the crowd something to move to.

The propulsive "Don't Save Me" gets the crowd seriously moving and Este's "I fucking love you, Atlanta" turns them into a mass of shouting glee. The sisters wind down the track and Alana showers the crowd in affection. "I'm taking aback by all the babes in the crowd right now," she says.

"Atlanta you look good right now," Este adds. "I don't even know what to say."

"So attractive," Alana says, each line earning cheers.

"What if I say I'm fucking single, and I have a night off in Atlanta," Este declares. "So if I don't fucking make out with someone tonight, I'm gonna be full on depressed-y. Este-y depressed-y."

"Well, I think you've got some takers," Alana points out into the middle of the crowd, where a group in matching aviators are all bouncing.

They get into "Little of Your Love," and while the large vanity mirror screens are here the stagehands don't turn on the lights. The lack of theatrics and the continual banter between songs contributes to the sensation of being at an intimate if not extremely crowded slumber party with the sisters, where we all dance along in socked feet to these very songs, just all of us and them, surrounded by bowls of popcorn in the glow of our third John Cusack movie.

Before "My Song 5," Alana explains the singular narrator that is the three sisters—their shared experience of what would normally be an individual's memory. "Hi, guys—so this is my personal favorite part of the set. Because we wrote this song after we got fucked over by a fucking motherfucker. So during this next song, I want you to scream at that fucking person. Because we're going to get it all out now."

Soon the sisters are gliding the crowd towards the finale, where the touring keyboardist and drummer keep the groove going while they assume their position for the three-way drum session, a real heady jam of three beats melding into one.

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