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## Live review: Julien Baker is young and miserable yet transfixing in Eagle Rock



The singer Julien Baker. (6131 Records)



By **August Brown** · Contact Reporter

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**A**mid all the sound and fury and botched James Bond themes at the Oscars last weekend, there was small concert in Eagle Rock that made a far bigger impression with much, much less.

Julien Baker is a young (born 1995) singer and guitarist from Tennessee, whose music recalls both the high points of '90s indie rock and a deeper strain of classic-country songwriting. Her debut album, "Sprained Ankle," released last year, earned praise for her preternatural poise and intelligence as a songwriter, tackling dark themes without guile or poses.

But her Center For the Arts Eagle Rock set on Friday (and forgive the tardiness of this writeup, we had a busy weekend here) was completely transfixing. It proved that even in today's ramped-up pop climate, it

is possible to hold a room's breath still with just a voice and guitar.

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Baker earns lots of comparisons to early Cat Power, a fellow young Southern woman who plumbed depression and regret over an intricately picked electric guitar. "Sprained Ankle" often harkens back to late '90s Midwest college rock like Low and American Football. But in person Baker is better than even her quite-decent debut implied.

With no backing arrangements other than an occasional loop of ambient noise, Baker's voice was at the forefront on Friday, and it's a wonderful instrument. Rangy but not showy, pained but not exaggerated, she moved from falsetto peaks to plainspoken mumbles and perfectly sad turns of melody.

When she dug in deep, like at the ends of "Brittle Boned" and "Go Home," she can really howl. But she's at her best during the long passages when nothing stands between you and her late-teenaged tales of getting hammered, wandering in a fog of antidepressants and calling friends desperate and sick from the side of a highway. And if you listened closely, there was a touch of Willie Nelson in her songwriting, and a yearning for a uplift that every Southerner raised in earshot of a church choir never quite escapes.

She's also funnier than that all makes her out to be: tuning her guitar between songs, she drolly referred to one tune as her "Metallica song," and kept mock-apologizing for how much of a bummer her music can be.

But that came from a place of confidence — she knew she had the room in her hands. And not since Conor Oberst has someone so young found such a smart and universal take on the classic themes of being young, drunk and miserable.

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