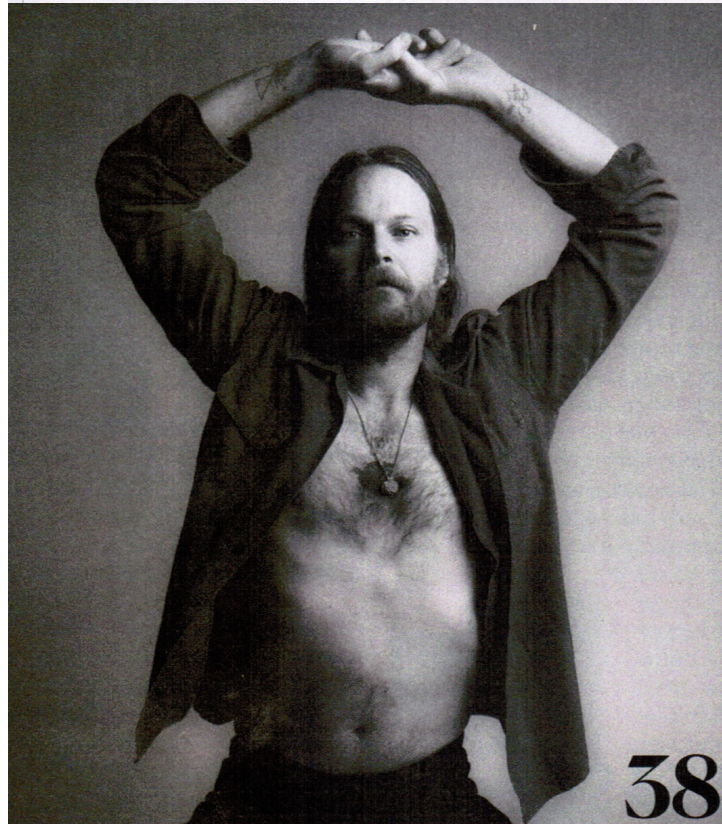


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OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2019



HISS GOLDEN MESSENGER

SURRENDER

TO

After over 500 shows, M.C. Taylor stretches the boundaries of what Hiss Golden Messenger can, and should, be while searching for his own universal truth. *By* **MIKE AYERS**

THE RAW

IT'S A SUMMER EVENING IN LATE JULY, AND M.C. Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger is sitting on my back porch in New Jersey, talking about how vulnerability is his golden ticket, the thing that's going to continue to be an immense source of inspiration for his music—just like it was for his new album, *Terms of Surrender*.

"I feel like people listen to Hiss Golden Messenger because they're hearing a certain type of vulnerability in the songs that they can connect with," he says as the sun starts to fade out for the evening, the June bugs surrounding his voice with their familiar summer song. "Offering that vulnerability is an important part of what I do. It's like the best part of what I do. It can be a pretty raw place to live. It's not like [making music is] working on an assembly line. It has to be as real as I can make it. It's every time."

Taylor has been exploring this notion of vulnerability at a remarkable pace since he started playing under the Hiss Golden Messenger name in 2006. Since the project's 2009 debut, *Country Hai East Cotton*, Taylor's recorded and released numerous Hiss albums, with his last six arriving on Merge. His Hiss Golden Messenger music oscillates between folk and country-flavored rock, but also has tinges of R&B and gospel woven throughout.

He's played over 500 hundreds shows during the past decade—on this night, he's just making a pit stop on his way up to the legendary Newport Folk Festival, where he'll sit in with Dawes and curate a show at a church. The previous night, he was on hand for Merge Records' 30th birthday bash in Durham, N.C., where he shared the stage with Mount Moriah's H.C. McEntire and The Mountain Goats. But the eight-hour drive he endured doesn't seem to have taken a toll; his eyes tend to light up as he speaks about songwriting and how he approaches his songs, how lucky he is to be able to play music for a living after years of struggling through odd jobs and other bands.

"I might have a few lines jotted down," he says of how a song begins. "I might have an idea of how I want to phrase something or a rhythm in mind that I want to try to sing against. It just kind of falls together. I've been lazy about it lately, but I'm allowing myself to not be made nervous by that. Because I write a lot. I've had a lot of records out. And I've been very tough on myself about staying busy, keeping my mind and body engaged and thinking about songwriting."

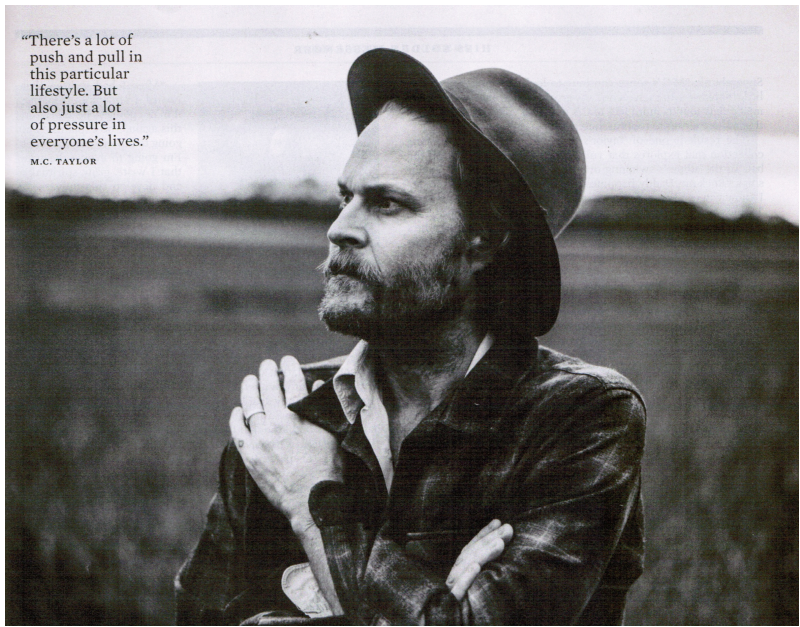
All of this sounds super positive. Hiss Golden Messenger—which has grown to include a collective of players in the live realm, some more steady than others, like Phil Cook—and Taylor have a blueprint, something that's sustainable for years to come, including the strong work ethic that any musician trying to survive needs, along with a desire to create that's seemingly insatiable. But dig deeper and there's more that Taylor is wrestling with these days—more push and pull intertwined into his psyche than you'd be able to spot with a cursory glance. There's a struggle that's universal, something everyone experiences at times, like pangs of guilt and darker thoughts about how a 44 year old can be a good husband, father and *person*.

"I was dealing with stuff that has been present in my life for a long time," he says of the music on *Terms of Surrender*. "Stuff, like depression, that's come to a head over the past year and a half. And I was just trying to find some kind of therapy to deal with that and not just sit on it. Depression is kind of a sense-deadening condition. And so it can make it hard to find inspiration. It's that kind of stuff, set against the backdrop of our world, which, you know—everybody feels that. There's no map for this, really. And I'm the kind of person that likes to glance at a map now and again."

TAYLOR WAS BORN AND RAISED IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND CITES an early love affair with Public Enemy's landmark 1988 album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, as something that taught him everything music could be—but more important, what it didn't *have* to be.

"That is a complicated record," he says. "It's very layered and noisy. I was a little white boy in Southern California, trying to understand even the smallest part of the philosophy and theology that exists on it, which is deeply African-American. That's the type of record that taught me that it can be very productive to feel uncomfortable with art or not be able to put a finger on what it is that does this thing to you."

As high school was winding down and his college career was just starting at the University of California-Santa Barbara, Taylor started getting serious about playing the guitar. After he graduated with a degree in English, he moved to San Francisco, where he lived for almost 10 years, spending time as a substitute teacher, shuffling between temp jobs and working at a spot called the Bay Area Video Coalition, an organization that helps journalists and storytellers make ends meet. He also was in the indie-rock/alt-



"There's a lot of push and pull in this particular lifestyle. But also just a lot of pressure in everyone's lives."
M.C. TAYLOR

country hybrid band The Court & Spark. That group released four albums and were making things happen: They were featured on NPR, and hipster blogs gushed over their second album, *Bless You*.

The group officially disbanded in 2007 and Taylor moved to the Chapel Hill, N.C. area, where he took a job that seemingly altered his musical and professional life for good. He became a folklorist for the state of North Carolina, traveling to remote areas of the region, recording various personal and family histories, and documenting music that had been passed down for generations.

"It was amazing," Taylor recalls. "I would go out to these very rural communities, and I mostly recorded music because the people that hired me knew that I played music. I put together a mobile recording rig and I would record people playing and interview them. My task was to go document the 'best' or what was representative of a certain county. Someone might pass me a phone number and say, 'You should call this person; they're a great fiddler.' And so I'd call them, set up a time to come to their house and say, 'Who else do you like to play with?' It just snowballed."

In 2009, Taylor had an artistic breakthrough with the Hiss Golden Messenger album *Bad Debt*—the super lo-fi-sounding record he made in his home kitchen at all hours of the night, as to not wake his first newborn.

"My wife and I were living with our three-month-old son in Pittsboro, N.C., way out in a forest farm," Taylor says. "I didn't know anybody. I was drifting, but not unhappily. If someone at that time would have asked me what my relationship to making music

was, I would have said, 'I mean, I have my guitars.' I love music but I had no ambitions of being a public musician right then.

"For me, the vulnerability that I like was in finding the way in which I could sing out to the world," he adds. "Whether that was the way that I used my voice or the words that I used... there's something about *Bad Debt* and what my life was like when I wrote those songs. That taught me certain things about songwriting that, once they were revealed, I've always been able to go back and find."

The stark difference between *Bad Debt* and *Terms of Surrender* is apparent with the production, the continuation of a progression you can hear if you listen to all the Hiss Golden Messenger albums in order. *Terms* offers perhaps his most expansive, cohesive country sound yet—but there's also experimental elements woven throughout, like the odd-sounding rhythm section on "Old Enough to Wonder Why (East Side - West Side)," the bluesy guitar riff throughout "Whip," and the solemn piano surrounding the chirping sounds on the title track, where Taylor sings, "I'm gonna take it on the chin and save it/ It's one thing to bend it my love, another to break it." The bulk of the album was tracked at Long Pond Studios in Upstate New York, the space run by The National's Aaron Dessner. Taylor spent just five days recording there and did a few more days at Sound City in Los Angeles, before working on some vocal takes in Nashville to finish things up.

"*Terms of Surrender* expands the idea of what a Hiss song can be, in an organic way, such that nothing feels forced," says Mac McCaughan, co-owner of Merge Records and guitarist/vocalist in

Graham Tolbert

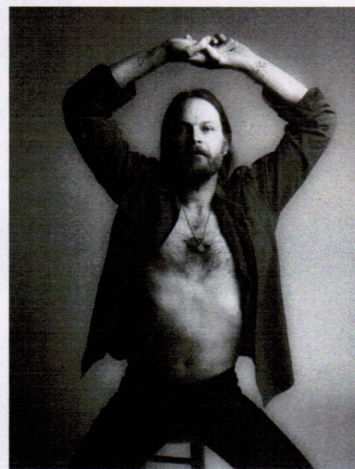
HISS GOLDEN MESSENGER

Superchunk. "M.C.'s songs continue to look out into the world a little bit more with each record; the growth I hear the most is in the music that sounds more like M.C.'s personal voice than the songs that adhere closer to roots archetypes."

The result is one of Taylor's best efforts to date, a 10-song collection that explores that vulnerability he craves right off the bat. In the album's swinging opener, "I Need a Teacher," Taylor sings, "Rock me, Daddy, happiness ain't free/ I see where you're at/ I know you can see me/ Beauty in the broken American moment." Taylor's voice is rough around the edges, sounding at times a bit like a cross between Neil Young and Gram Parsons, though he's clearly carving his own path these days. Remarkably, despite how much of himself he says he puts into that vulnerable material, he's pretty confident and unwavering at this point. One of the album's highlights is "My Wing," a rootsy tune with a driving rhythm, in which he seems to be giving specific directions on how to feel—most likely to himself. It's full of mantras to live by: "No retreat. No surrender. Make it tender. Make it lasting."

"I've been extremely fortunate these past 10 years to not actually be in a scenario making a record where I felt completely lost, where I was listening to something and was just like, 'This sucks. I cannot figure out what I'm doing here,'" he says.

AFTER THE SUN HAS COMPLETELY SET AND NIGHT HAS FALLEN, TAYLOR continues his journey to Newport. He plans to stop somewhere along the road for some rest, but he'll wait to figure out exactly where. He's approached life like that for years, but says around the time he recorded 2014's *Lateness of Dancers*, he had a decision to make.



"After I had written that record, I remember thinking, 'I'm not going to be able to do this again,'" he explains. "I'm going to have to quit my job if I'm going to evolve the way that I write, grow spiritually and develop this universe I was creating. It was pretty unpredictable for several years. It still feels like that some days."

Weeks later, after two mesmerizing nights at Red Rocks opening for Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats, Taylor says that he's accepted that there might always be some stumbling blocks no matter what stage you're in. But being conscious of them—and channeling those vulnerable moments into song—well, that's paramount. And finding your own terms of surrender, what you're willing to give up for some greater good, is tough, but certainly doable.

"I was thinking a lot about what I'm prepared to sacrifice to have the life that I thought I wanted or I think that I want," he says. "What *Terms of Surrender* means to me is that there's a lot of push and pull in this particular lifestyle. But also just a lot of pressure in everyone's lives. We all have dreams or fantasies about what we want our lives to look and feel like. But getting there is tricky. It's never the journey that you think it's going to be." **T**