

Langhorne Slim Works Through America's Anxiety and Addiction Problem on Liberating New Album

'Strawberry Mansion' finds the songwriter ruminating on his own battles with panic attacks and pills

By **JOSEPH HUDAK** 



Sean Scolnick still remembers the doctor's reaction when he asked for a refill of tranquilizers. The Americana singer-songwriter who performs under the name **Langhorne Slim** was on a solo tour of Europe when his prescription pills to combat anxiety ran out. The doctor was dismayed by how quickly Slim burned through his prescription and how freely the drugs were administered in the U.S.

"I was in a country where I didn't speak the language and I found out they don't prescribe that. I went to a doctor and I said, 'OK, here's the deal. I'm on this medication and I'm all out of it.' Of course, I was out of it because I was taking it more than I was supposed to," Slim says. "[The doctor said], 'We only prescribe this to like the most extreme cases, but you guys in America, it's fucking crazy.'"

Slim got enough pills to see him through the tour, but the doctor strongly advised that he wean himself off when he returned home. "With Benzos, it's really bad to just stop that shit cold turkey," Slim says. "It can kill you."

A few months later, however, he was still on the pills, fraught with anxiety, and creatively walled-off. For an artist whose lyrics often welcomed listeners into his personal childhood memories — playing cards with his grandfather, riding the rollercoaster, and posing for a photo with Mr. Peanut on a New Jersey boardwalk in 2017’s salt-kissed **“Ocean City”** — Slim was unable to let anyone in. “I was numbed out for quite a while,” he says.

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Ironically, the same pandemic that drove so many inside and away from their loved ones afforded Langhorne Slim a chance to open up. Alone in his East Nashville home but supported from afar by a few key friends — including one who challenged him to write a song a day — he took a breath and looked inward.

“It was a forced simplifying and slowing down at a point that I needed that desperately. I don’t know that I would have done that left to my own devices,” he says. “It was an opportunity to start confronting some stuff that I think I’ve been running from in one way or five others for a long time.”

Slim got sober for the second time in his life (he had previously stopped drinking and using drugs seven years earlier) and meditated on the existence of his two heroes: his grandfathers Jack and Sidney. “I call them Jewish Buddhas of Philadelphia,” he says. He imagined everything they faced growing up in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philly and recalled wit and wisdom they had shared with him. Their presence is palpable throughout *Strawberry Mansion*, Langhorne Slim’s new album out Friday.



“I feel the spirits of those men and the energy of those men,” he says of their go-where-the-wind-takes-you worldview. “I never thought of it until years later, but maybe it was what I loved so much about the idea of rambling around with a band.” (Since launching

his career in the early aughts, Slim has restlessly toured the country, playing festivals from Austin City Limits and SXSW to Tennessee’s Bonnaroo and Pilgrimage.)

He mentions Jack and Sid by name in “The Mansion,” a whimsical tribute to their northwest Philadelphia stomping grounds, where John Coltrane once lived. “All one as the big band’s playing under a Philly sun,” he sings. In the album-closing skiffle “Red Bird,” he recounts one of Jack’s favorite parables. “Have ya ever heard the story ‘bout the man in a room full of horseshit?” go Slim’s lyrics. The way his grandfather told it, it was about two kids: one inexplicably miserable in a room filled with toys; another happily whistling away as he shoveled an insurmountable pile of horseshit.

“His parents are like, ‘Why are you so happy?’” Slim laughs. “And he’s like, ‘Underneath all this shit, there’s got to be a pony!’ I just think that’s fantastic.”

Slim has done his share of digging over the past few months. While there was no horse at the bottom, he did rediscover his gift for melody. *Strawberry Mansion* is a record based around earworms like “House of Fire,” “No Right Way,” and “Red Bird.” Even “Panic Attack,” a song that recounts a vivid bout with anxiety, is tailor-made for whistling.

“I don’t know if it sounds cheesy, but it was as if [songs] were floating in the air right in front of me,” he says, “and it was slow enough that I could pick up the guitar and play the melody and write.”



For the past six years, Langhorne Slim has hosted an all-star New Year’s Day concert in Nashville, inviting friends to join him onstage and celebrate the year to come. He intended to continue the tradition during the Covid era in an outdoor venue and play songs off *Strawberry Mansion*. But as the virus had its way with Tennessee, he smartly pulled the plug. He doesn’t know when he’ll be back onstage. “I don’t see a tour in my near future at all,” Slim says.

The difference now, however, is that he's OK with such uncertainty. Instead of self-medicating, Langhorne Slim continues to write songs, plucking those melodies out of the air.

"I wasn't putting the same pressure on myself that I have in the last so many years with all this stuff," he says. "It's just like, 'Fuck, I can breathe again.' And there's no deeper breath than music."