



## **Mourning in America**

**By M.C. Taylor - Hiss Golden Messenger**

Even before 2020 rolled up on us like an existential mugger, I was already in the process of breaking down. In the dressing room of the Brudenell Social Club in Leeds midway through a short solo tour of the UK in December of 2019, I cancelled an impending tour to Australia, leaving the promoter rightfully disappointed. As it turns out, canceling a tour is expensive, but at the moment it felt like the best \$10,000 I'd ever spent. I was fried. Burnt out. Exhausted. Dislocated. Unclear of my purpose. I played for the good people of Leeds—the night of Boris Johnson's election, no less—before starting the trek up to Glasgow for a show at the Centre for Contemporary Arts the next day, and then traveling hundreds of miles back down to Bristol. It wouldn't take a forensic psychologist to interpret my journal entries from this trip: "In the bakery in Hackney outside of London Fields. Am I doing what I want? Is anyone? Walking the tunnel here, it feels like a dystopian vision come to life. Posters for the Endtime Rebellion. People sleeping rough. Beautiful faces floating above it all. And me, drifting. I'm ready to be home. I can make it, I think." I needed the time and space to mourn something, though I wasn't sure what.

By the time of my last music-related travel—a week of writing with my friend Gregory Alan Isakov in Boulder, CO—in early March of 2020, it was clear that things were about to change, though we had no idea how drastically. Gregory's side job is running an organic farm outside town, and, to me, he seems like someone that blends his work and spirit—that is, the parts of labor that are not transactional but transformative and existentially nourishing—quite elegantly. We talked and wrote a lot about work during that week. I've had a lot of jobs in my life that I was unsuited for: Over-the-phone women's swimsuit salesman. Short-order chicken cook. P.E. teacher. Receptionist at an MRI office where the technicians would sigh and shake their heads sadly when an unsuspecting terminal case walked out the door. By my late 30s, though, I had the good fortune of finding my way into a profession—writing songs and singing them—that brought me intense joy but required an unusual amount of intention and clarity to make sure that it continued to feel creatively generative, and not a put-on, not purely transactional. To be clear, I've never been under any illusions about what a privileged position I occupy; I'm not digging ditches by any stretch of the imagination. But I've spent enough of my life doing jobs that I didn't love and to which I had no connection to know what it feels like to be selling yourself short.

When I sat down in my studio—in actuality an 8' x 10' room in the basement of my house packed with books and records and instruments—in March to begin writing the songs that would become *Quietly Blowing It*, I was looking for peace. I made a vow to myself that I would not let opinions and feelings that weren't my own have any bearing on what I was creating. I kept doubts about rhythms and lyrics and arrangements—many of which I have absorbed over the years from sources with wholly different agendas than my own—at bay

as much as I was able. What I was writing needed to feel genuine to me. It needed to feel right to sing, and it needed to help me remember my purpose.

Through the spring and early summer, I composed songs about life as I felt it through the small window looking out over my backyard in Durham, North Carolina. As the specters of the coronavirus epidemic, mass civil rights protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by cops in Minneapolis, fires raging out of control on the West Coast, and the fractured presidential election roiled America, I wrote about things that felt important to bear witness to for myself: Class and money and work. Alienation, disorientation, miscommunication, and self-hatred. Climate change. And I wrote about the inverse of these things, too: Locating hope and inspiration in small moments and movements. Living productively. Making family. Finding and offering sanctuary. Time as a healing agent. I wrote to make sense and to begin the process of grieving and rebuilding in my own life. I'm not sure what the difference is between celebrating and mourning. I feel like I was doing both at the same time.

In my opinion, one of our great American records—one that bears perfect witness to the unrest that comes with unrelenting change—is Sly Stone's *There's a Riot Goin' On*, but I would never call what appears on that album protest music. It's too internal, too personal, disarmingly inward looking. Nevertheless, it seems to soundtrack a transformative American moment in a way that feels electric and instructive. I hear a concentrated and condensed version of myself filtering through the smoke of America on *Quietly Blowing It* that feels kindred; I hear myself talking to myself. It feels like the most personal album that I've made because I'm not trying to explain anything to anyone except myself. Who is it that's quietly blowing it? Me, of course. And making this music became a document and a reckoning, an act of contrition and a cry for change. This is me mourning, and celebrating, and dancing, and crying, and praying, and hoping. And it's all the same song.

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