

INDY week

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A man with a full grey beard and a white fedora-style hat is crouching on a large, reddish-brown rock. He is wearing a camouflage-patterned jacket over a dark shirt, blue jeans, and brown leather shoes. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft-focus natural setting with green foliage and a warm, golden light. The entire scene is framed by a white border.

Hiss Golden Messenger Gets Personal

by Madeline Crone, p. 16

**HISS GOLDEN MESSENGER:
QUIETLY BLOWING IT**
[Merge Records; June 25]

Getting Personal

M.C. Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger

PHOTO BY BRETT VILLENA

might have spent the last five years doing something else?”

Leaning back in a wrought-iron chair, he extends his arm, revealing a canvas of eclectic ink indicative of a true road warrior. At a closer glance, though, some of the tattoos read more like badges of honor, spelling out names—“Abby,” “Elijah,” and “lone,” the names of his wife, son, and daughter. His rocker stylings are also threatened by the fluorescent bike helmet at his feet on the patio, graffitied with weather-worn chalk etchings, and as he reflects on the context of the album creation, Taylor further softens.

When the pandemic swept the nation in mid-March, last year, Taylor was already home. He had sidelined himself, months earlier, while touring his Grammy-nominated album *Terms of Surrender* in the UK. Burned out on road life, he canceled the remaining Australian tour dates and headed back to North Carolina to “find peace.”

“I’ve created a lot this year,” he says. By “a lot,” he glosses over a bounty of unannounced recording projects and songwriting unfathomable to even a considerably productive person. “But I’ve been dealing with more anxiety, depression, listlessness, [and] feeling more adrift than at any time in my life. And I don’t think I’m alone in that.”

Though he’s accrued plenty of evidence of the hours spent in his home studio—an 8’ x10’ cinder block basement enclosure—Taylor still wonders where the time went.

“Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the moments of work and creation are so joyful, and the moments of anxiety and depression feel sticky, like moving in slow motion,” he says. “And so the joyful moments feel like they’re just flying by—there’s no thinking involved.”

Quietly Blowing It came into fruition piece-by-piece. Between March and June, Taylor wrote nearly two dozen tracks from his home. He was joined by an impressive roster of collaborators, including Griffin and Taylor Goldsmith of Dawes, Zach Williams of The Lone Bellow, Nashville guitar great Buddy Miller, and producer/musician Josh Kaufman of Bonny Light Horseman. Taylor sat in the production seat when they recorded the album at Overdub Lane in Durham over a week in July 2020.

“I wasn’t chronicling anything that was going on outside our collective windows,” Taylor says of the 11 songs on the album. “But it’s all in there, somehow.”

As to what was going on outside that one rather small studio window, he cites

On his tenth album, Hiss Golden Messenger is still searching—but this time, he’s not looking to explain anything to anyone but himself

BY MADELINE CRONE music@indyweek.com

“**M**aking this record didn’t heal me or cure me,” Hiss Golden Messenger’s M. C. Taylor says. He’s talking about *Quietly Blowing It*, his new album due June 25 via Merge Records. The release, his tenth, is another entry in an unrelenting pursuit of answers to existential questions.

Sitting on his back patio in Durham, Taylor looks out at the lush treeline. Miscellaneous toys are strewn about the backyard, dusted by late spring’s yellow haze.

“This isn’t the beginning or the end of an experience,” Taylor continues. “This record—like all of my records—is a charting of experiences that are both intensely personal, but in some ways, universal. Like who doesn’t occasionally consider whether they

the broad strokes in an essay, “Mourning in America,” that he wrote about the album: “Class and money and work. Alienation, disorientation, miscommunication, and self-hatred. Climate change.”

Also, the positive inverse of all that, too: “Locating hope and inspiration in small moments and movements. Living productively. Making family. Finding and offering sanctuary. Time as a healing agent.”

It’s hard to deny that the album is steeped in political overtones, but this blended perspective may be the source of its resonance—a unifying alchemy that can be found only when the personal is applied to the whole. Weary listeners might hear echoes of debilitating uncertainty in “If It Comes in the Morning” while the harmonica-driven “Hardlytown” pulls a page from Bob Dylan’s book. Through his paternal lens, Taylor considers how much we owe one another, hoping the lessons he shares with his children of being a good neighbor are not lost on the self-serving nature of modernity.

In the title track, Taylor traces missteps over Miller’s undeniable guitar riffs. Lyrically, he concludes: *It was good while it lasted / But that ain’t the answer/ You gotta let someone in / That’s all that’ll save you.*

As he listened, he sought a gut feeling, one that answered his seemingly simple criterion: “Does it feel good?”

In the silence this year, he reflected on the purpose of his artistry. In continuing to create, he wondered, whose opinions should he allow to dictate the art? The result of that introspection, Taylor says, is “music that feels much deeper and more out than I’ve ever gone before. It makes me want to keep exploring.”

His first single from the record, “Sanctuary,” has floated atop the Americana charts since its release in January. From a business perspective, Taylor says he understands the purpose that Americana serves as a label. But he finds humor in the categorization. As a listener, his days are filled with music. None of it, he says, is singer-songwriter music.

Since his 2008 debut, *Country Hai East Cotton*, the influence of records that others might not consider Americana has continu-

ously crept in—amalgamating in something reflective of the Orange County, California, native’s journey to this point.

“Even this far into my music career, I still fall prey to wanting to make music or records that sound like records I love, instead of following my gut on what people are going to believe, coming from me,” says Taylor.

“Maybe I listen to *Exile on Main Street* and think, I want to make a song like that. And I do. But there’s something off; it just doesn’t feel believable. So I have to acknowledge that. Otherwise, I have this nagging sense of regret, pretending to be something that I’m not.”

Taylor points to Curtis Mayfield’s steadfast influence as one that still feels genuine. It’s where he learned the double-tracked falsetto he employs in his artistry.

“When I do it, I don’t think it’s a lie,” says Taylor. “His records are ones I’ve come back to my entire life and examine how he was doing what he did. His music can be easy, groovin’, challenging all while saying things that really cut you.”

Mayfield’s musicianship manifests itself in the R&B tones of “It Will If We Let It”—a soulful apology to his wife, Abby. “Hardlytown” hosts a lyrical nod to the icon’s 1965 album *People Get Ready*. Looking back from another era of unrest, Taylor reinterprets Mayfield’s hope in the line *People, get ready / There’s a big ship coming*.

To keep authenticity in check, Taylor routinely returned to his tunes while he was recording. As he listened, he sought a gut feeling, one that answered his seemingly simple criterion: “Does it feel good?”

“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,” he says. “It feels like the most personal album that I’ve made because I’m not trying to explain anything to anyone except myself.”

He’s not pointing fingers here. Who is *Quietly Blowing It*, you might ask? Well. That’s up to the listener. ●