

Rolling Stone

By **JONATHAN BERNSTEIN** 

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Over the past half-decade, M.C. Taylor has released four new albums (and a slew of outtakes compilations and live records) under the moniker of his country-soul recording outfit, **Hiss Golden Messenger**. But more impressive than the sheer quantity of the North Carolina singer-songwriter's output is the degree of spiritual sensitivity, compositional craft, and high-stakes emotional urgency Taylor has been able to bring to each collection in such quick succession.

Rarely do songwriters who release original music so often manage to make each release feel as necessary as Taylor — And no Hiss Golden Messenger record has ever felt more necessary than his new LP, *Quietly Blowing It*. Taylor's mournful meditation on a year of loss, grief, and upheaval may be more sparse and sedated than the 2019 Brad Cook and Aaron Dessner-assisted *Terms of Surrender*, but this offering of solemn joy and hopeful sorrow is also the most timely record of his career.

Written and recorded largely during the earliest months of the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020, *Quietly Blowing It* maintains an ever-present sense of calamity, both personal and collective. Inner turmoil bleeds into a sense of shared tragedy and vice versa throughout its 11 songs: On the title track, the song's narrator, dealing with interpersonal unrest, glances at the television and notices that "there's a riot goin' on" outside the walls of his home as well as inside. On "Sanctuary," meanwhile, the comfort of loving embrace offers respite amidst devastation.

Taylor has always excelled at turning everyday moments into occasions for unfussy existential reflection. He does this with the most concise, cutting couplets of his career: On “Glory Strums (Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner),” jogging becomes an occasion for deep, dark self-reflection (“I know that there’s good in me/Why’s it such a hard time?”). On “It Will If We Let It,” Taylor reflects on the cruel selfishness that artists can so easily inflict on their loved ones: “Were you happy?/I ignored it/I was telling/other stories.”

As one might expect from a record made during a time of intense isolation, much of the music on *Quietly Blowing It* feels solitary, subdued, and contemplative, calling to mind, at times, the cloistered folk of earlier Hiss records like 2012’s *Poor Moon*. But Taylor has grown immensely as a melodicist and arranger (he self-produced this album) in the ensuing decade, and the LP, which features contributions from longtime companions like Josh Kaufman and Scott Hirsch, is full of the collaborative warmth of recent Hiss landmarks like *Heart Like a Levee*.

Faced with a period of prolonged seclusion, Taylor turned, as ever, to his record collection. On *Quietly Blowing It* he embraces his role as roots synthesizer, conjuring and quoting everyone from Sly Stone and Curtis Mayfield to Rod Stewart and John Prine. All those musical references can help make it seem like *Quietly Blowing It* is offering prophetic wisdom even when Taylor is merely just trying to write himself out of hard times. “You gotta let someone in,” as he puts it on the title track. “That’s all that’ll save you.”

Hiss Golden Messenger Beautifully Processes the Pandemic Blues on 'Quietly Blowing It'

Written and recorded largely during the earliest months of the pandemic, it's the North Carolina roots artist's best LP yet

