

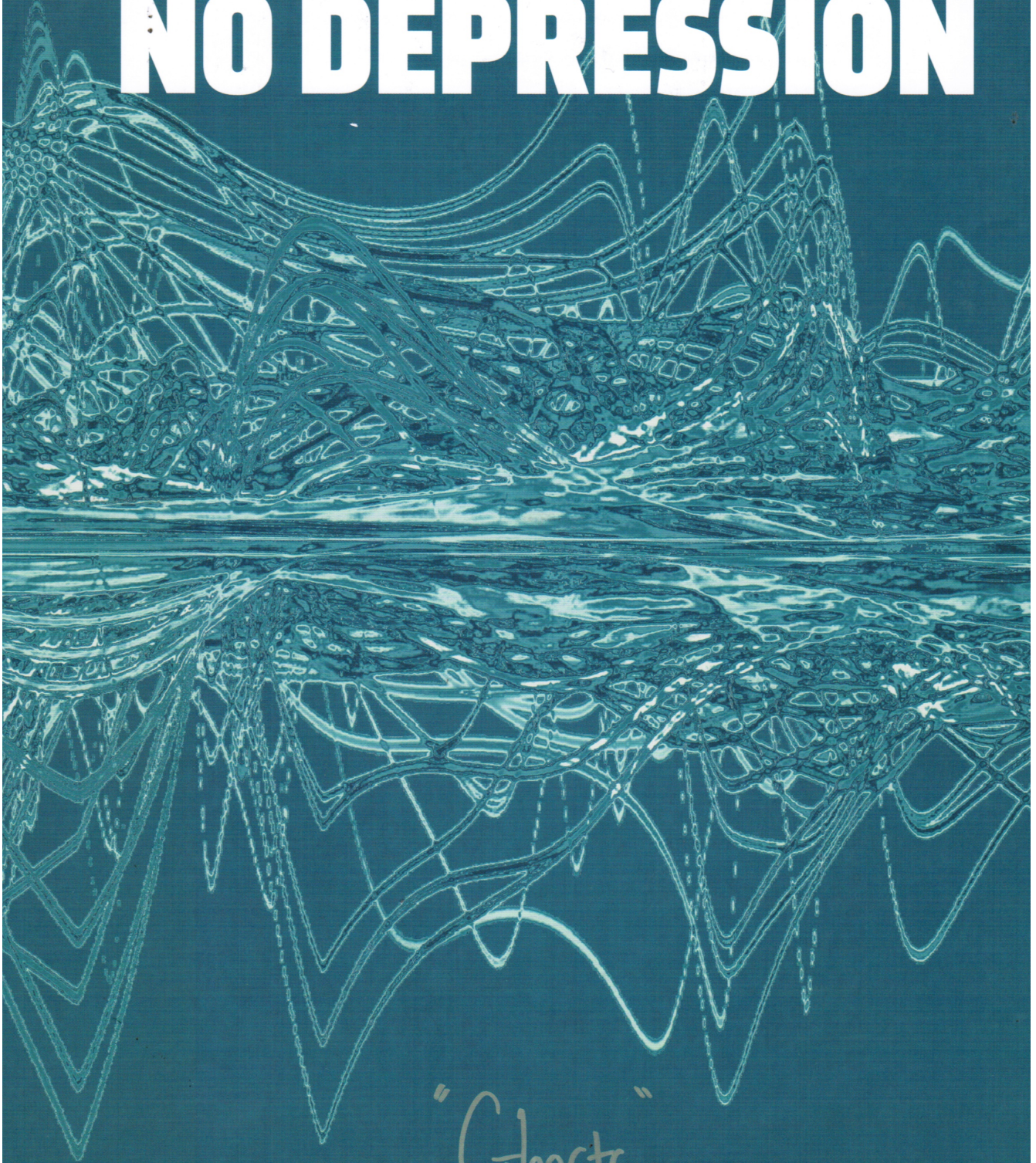
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# NO DEPRESSION

"Ghosts"





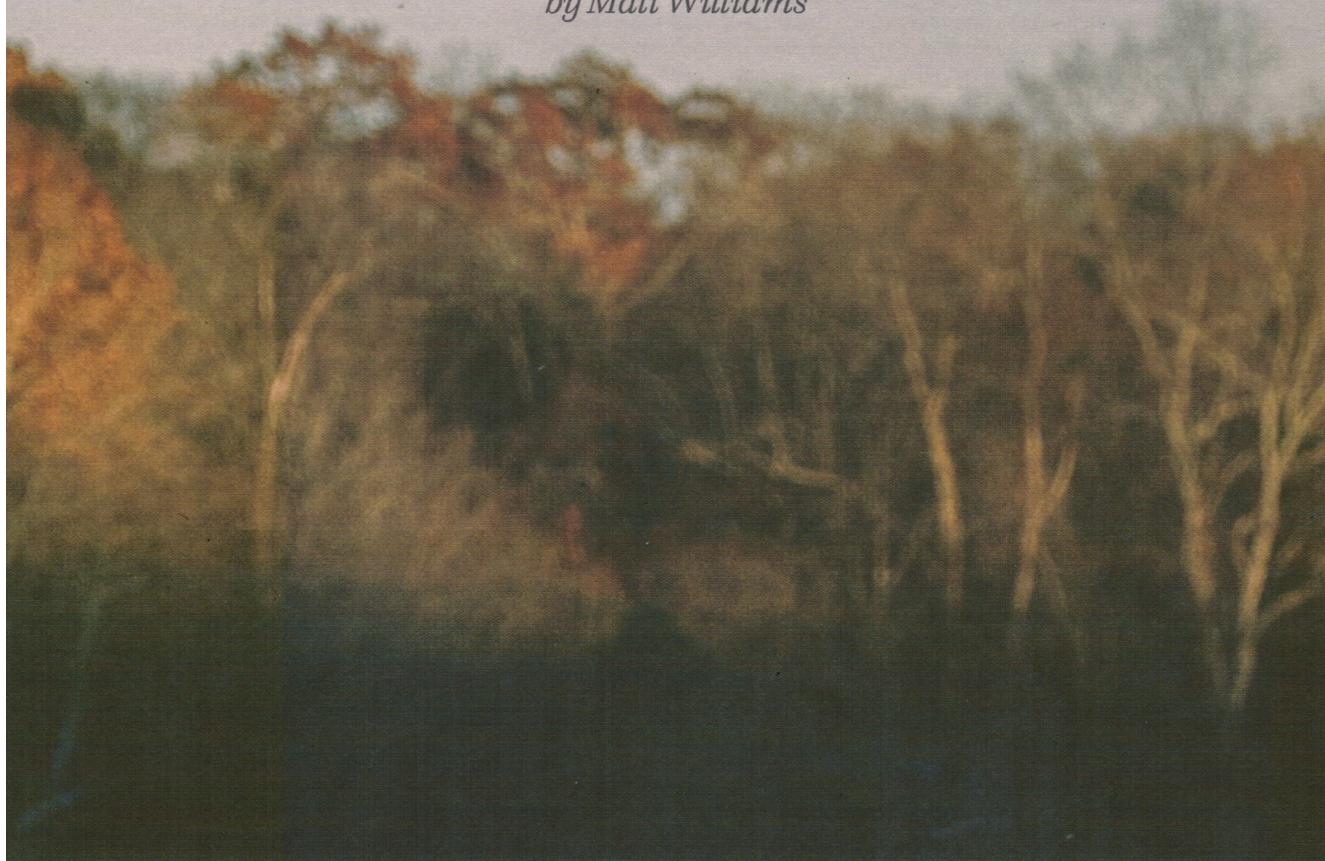




# QUESTIONS OF THE HEART

**Hiss Golden Messenger finds the timeless  
in what we experience together**

*by Matt Williams*





**“When people talk about their experiences with God, when I read accounts of people encountering the Holy Spirit, the closest experience I have to that is what it feels like to make music with people. And I have to wonder if we’re not actually all talking about the same thing.”**

M.C. Taylor

**T**HE CURTAIN CLOSES ON HIS Golden Messenger’s earthy, unadorned 2010 record *Bad Debt* with “Drum,” a song that, in the years since, has become eternally stitched to the essence of the band. Like the rest of the album, it was recorded in the creekside house in Pittsboro, North Carolina, where songwriter M.C. Taylor and his family lived at the time, at the kitchen table as his newborn son Elijah slept nearby. Through the tape hiss, Taylor sings softly over a shuffling, steady strum. He addresses a father, a brother; takes heed of the plowman, the farmer, the hunter. “Take the good news, carry it away,” he sings, just barely above a whisper. “Take the good news, spirit it away.”

For 2014’s *Lateness of Dancers*, “Drum” was re-recorded, fleshed out by sweet and soulful fiddle, plucky banjo, softly swelling organ. It became a live tradition for Taylor to wade into the middle of a crowd, creating a circle around him, and lead a small but mighty chorus of voices in the refrain, magnifying its potency and spiriting away that good news. More importantly, the song took root during these acts of communion, in fleeting moments wherever it overflowed from its original, solitary confines. What

began as a lone, hushed voice into a tape recorder had blossomed into a collective exclamation of joy.

“When people talk about their experiences with God, when I read accounts of people encountering the Holy Spirit, the closest experience I have to that is what it feels like to make music with people,” Taylor says over the phone from his home in Durham. “And I have to wonder if we’re not actually all talking about the same thing.”

He continues, “This sense of exhilaration, the thrill, the idea that you are in the thrall of something that is not totally controllable ... I have to think that if I’ve experienced God, that’s as close as I’ve been to that energy. It’s the same feeling that you get when you are really experiencing love, right?”

The pursuit of that feeling has made Taylor one of the more prolific songwriters working today. The latest Hiss Golden Messenger record, *Quietly Blowing It*, which came out in June via Merge Records, adds to a catalog that clocks in at around 10 studio albums (depending on who’s counting), a handful of EPs, and numerous live releases. Like the records that came before it, *Quietly Blowing It* finds Taylor asking profound spiritual questions —

about love, alienation, resilience, the ghosts that haunt America, and how to move through this world.

In an essay titled “Mourning in America” released when *Quietly Blowing It* was announced in March, he writes that he started the album while holed up in a small basement room a year prior, “looking for peace” at a globally tumultuous time. Later, when pandemic conditions allowed, the album was recorded properly, with the whole band. “The vast majority of *Quietly Blowing It* is the sound of us together in a room making that music,” Taylor says. “And it’s somehow a metaphor for something that we’ve been dealing with this year.”

### **Better Together**

Just what exactly the good news sung about on “Drum” might be is up to each individual life it touches, but the song demonstrably and undeniably seems concerned with the transformative power of togetherness. That sentiment — that we need each other — often seems to drive matters of human spirit in the Hiss Golden Messenger universe (which ostensibly began after Taylor finished a graduate program in folklore at the University of North Carolina). It’s beating



back darkness in the chain-breaking resistance of *Hallelujah Anyhow's* "When the Wall Comes Down" from 2017, and it's there when Taylor seeks guidance on *Terms of Surrender's* "I Need a Teacher" from 2019: "Lord, make me thankful / though it ain't easy / give it away freely / it'll come back to you eventually."

In the face of the past year and a half, *Quietly Blowing It* counters like a salve, emphasizing that strength of spirit comes from togetherness and confronting the ghosts seemingly disparate groups have in common — fights for safety, recognition, self-determination, and freedoms of choice and identity. As Taylor sings on "Way Back in the Way Back," the opening track on *Quietly Blowing It*, "Up with the mountains / down with the system that keeps us in chains." Taylor alludes to these systems that enable racism, police violence, unequal education subtly in song and more directly via his own actions. (For example, he directed all proceeds from his 2018 single "Passing Clouds" to the nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety and \$1 from each ticket sold for his 2019 *Terms of Surrender* tour to the Durham Public Schools Foundation.)

Throughout *Quietly Blowing It*, Taylor sings of these crises of the body

devotional attention paid to secular phenomena, as he finds a mystic, unifying energy in people, rivers, celestial bodies, or acts of service.

"His music articulates an untethered spiritual meaning, one which can make sense to those of us who have no coherent system of belief," writes *MOJO* editor John Mulvey in the liner notes for the 2018 box set *Devotion: Songs about Rivers and Spirits and Children*, which comprised remastered reissues of the first three Hiss records and a compilation of rarities. "On these albums, you can hear a mission, a compassionate vision, being improvised and fleshed out exponentially, as Taylor's sense of community and his place in it grows with every release. Also, they really fucking swing."

The swinging part — the earthy grooves, the attention to rhythm — is important. For the same box set, *The New Yorker* writer Amanda Petrusich nails

and the spirit and how they impact each other.

"I can't think of another time in my life that I've had better examples, over and over again, of the power of or just the human necessity of being together," Taylor says. "And the way that we accomplish things together. I know myself to be a pretty introverted person. And even at the beginning, when we were all needing to stay away from each other, I was kind of like, 'I can do this. I can do this for as long as I need to.' It's really clear to me now that we all need people, even the most introverted or solitary among us. So part of *Quietly Blowing It* is actually a celebration of gathering. It was really important to me that if we were going to make a record, no matter how difficult it might be, that we all be doing it in the same room together. And that's what the record sounds like, to me — a group of people in a room, together, making sound."

Union, communion, and working together are the forces that drive both personal and social change, and on *Quietly Blowing It*, Taylor offers reminders — that money isn't by itself a savior on the slinking, funky "Mighty Dollar"; that our issues won't be overcome if we can't talk about them on

down what keeps the feel of Hiss Golden Messenger grounded among sometimes heady lyrical motifs: "One of the things I like the most about Taylor, both personally and musically, is that he doesn't have a great deal of patience for bullshit; he instinctively resists limp platitudes and dopey philosophizing."

Rather, through grounding musicality and earnest questions about society, Hiss Golden Messenger offers a sense of balance even while musing on the complexities of human existence.

"I've always been drawn to those sort of knotty, tangled notions of what it means to be a human — what our obligations are towards one another," Taylor says. "And how we try and take shortcuts, and how some people do more of the work than others. And the ways that people living on the margins are exploited or mistreated. This stuff is Bible stuff. There's so much poetry in it,

the soft "It Will If We Let It"; and that in times of pain and despair, we need other people to survive, as on the melancholy title track.

"There were very specific things that all of us bore witness to in the past year," Taylor says. "And I was curious about whether I could separate the root themes that we witnessed from the actual specific event in order to make songs. Instead of feeling specific to 2020, instead of feeling like a record of protests of, for example, police murdering an unarmed Black man, I wanted to see if I could draw out some of those themes that felt like just a reiteration of themes that we've been witnessing — certainly I have — for my entire life. It's these constantly recurring themes of injustice, the search for peace and joy, and this sense of imbalance or unfairness in the world and how we attempt to reorder things, at least in our heads."

## Untangling Knots

This adherence to theme instead of particular events accounts for the timelessness of Taylor's songwriting. It's also imbued with a spiritual quality, sometimes with outright biblical references, but more often through the

and there's so much emotion in it. If I were to say that, thematically, I like to deal with the types of questions we might find in the Bible, that feels like a pretty dusty thing to say. But in practice, it's actually pretty emotional and pretty bloody in a lot of ways."

Such is the Hiss Golden Messenger modus operandi: asking questions, listening, and trying to make peace with the ghosts that haunt him, and us, collectively. And implicit in the act of flinging such questions into the universe is the hope there might be a response. Or at least that there could be someone else out there, who might not have an answer either, but is asking too.

"I'm not asking complicated mathematical questions. I'm just asking questions of the heart," says Taylor. "They might be complicated in a different way, but they are questions everybody can understand." ■







