Singer-songwriter Gabe Larson is the artistic gravity behind Waldemar, a heartland indie rock band (think The War on Drugs and The National with a dash of Willie Nelson), based in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Waldemar combines soaring vocals and poignant, confessional lyrics against a dense backdrop of sweeping guitar tapestries and synth textures to deliver a sonic freight train of an album. The new record *Ruthless* is a journeyman musician’s fixation, the renegade harmonies of a blue-collar poet.

Written and recorded over a span of five years, *Ruthless* is an act of remarkable patience and commitment. For two of those years, Larson spent every moment outside of his job sanding floors, painstakingly transforming a weathered, century-old horse barn on his property into a professional recording studio with his brother and bandmate Nick Larson. The studio is hidden in plain sight, nestled along an alley in Eau Claire’s North Side Hill, blocks away from the old Uniroyal tire factory. The setting is incredibly generative and inspiring. Across the street is an elementary school, complete with the sounds of laughing children at play, and in the industrial buildings nearby, hundreds of laborers maintain the neighborhood’s workaday heritage.

“As physically exhausting as it was to build the studio, making this record was even more grueling mentally and emotionally” Larson explains. “I found myself in a season of deep uncertainty. Everything was in question. I had deep fears that all I thought I knew about the world, family, politics, spirituality, ultimate reality, who I can trust etc. perhaps was wrong. Many questions still remain, but I’ve been slowly finding a strange peace in knowing that life is always lived amidst uncertainty and the only way forward is trust.”

“Recording the album was a long chase” recalls Larson, sighing as he reflected on the months of late nights turned to mornings arduously working alone in his studio. Many of the songs underwent extensive revisions. Songs like *Limbo*, *Ruthless*, *Patience*, *Ultimatum* and *Trust* went through various cycles of being fully recorded, scrapped, re-recorded, and deleted again until they finally found their form. “I never knew what exactly got lost along the way, but whatever it was, it was essential, and the fastest way to re-finding the song for me was to delete everything and start over.” Other songs like the highway-worthy *Longing,* or the slow burn standout *Summer Rain* came forward with surprising immediacy; the latter being written and fully recorded during a spell of 10 overcast August days.

Larson often worked long stretches by himself but these seasons of solitude were punctuated by sessions of productive collaboration with his bandmates Nick Larson and Colin Carey (drums), Josh Garcia (guitar), John Roemhild (bass) and Jordan Coffland (keys) along with additional help from other Eau Claire musicians. Most of these sessions were individualized, opting to bring his bandmates in one at a time to build out parts on the songs. The recording process was insular, gradual and granular, each layer laid like another brick in the wall, slowly climbing upwards to completion.

The naming of a band is serious business and Waldemar isn’t just a whimsical-sounding moniker. It is a tribute of sorts to Larson’s paternal grandfather, Waldemar, who was a Minnesota farmer during the Great Depression and who throughout his life, quietly suffered from his own depression. “Wally was always someone I wanted to be closer to, but I didn’t know how. He was my earliest understanding of what depression looked like in a person.”

Enduring the throes of another dark, near-endless Wisconsin winter, and in the bitter aftermath of his previous band falling apart in 2015, Larson wrote a song that encapsulated his own struggles with depression and became something of an artistic touchstone. That song, Waldemar, “was about me through the lens of Wally. I was trying to understand myself in the context of generational struggle and the sense of lostness I was in after my band broke up.”

That song turned out to be a light at the end of the tunnel and began his path out of the deep depression he’d found himself in. Encouraged to continue writing, Larson created a new band bearing the family name and song that pulled him out. “I owe a lot to that little song. It’s the oldest on the record, and yet it never ceases to feel fresh every time I sing it.” Waldemar isn’t then, just a name, or even a band, but an acceptance of heritage and an understanding of the maladies we inherit and share. Out of that acceptance, grew the confidence to move forward artistically, largely alone, but always with the support of friends and community.

Larson’s songs have always been created alongside a rather blue-collar life. Larson currently owns and operates a wood floor refinishing and installation business in Eau Claire with his brother and bandmate Nick Larson. In the early years of his flooring business, Larson also spent time on roofing crews, as a house painter and even as a school bus driver. “I wrote about half of the songs on the record while driving kids to and from school every day. The kids called me “Mr. G”. I’d hear melodies or lyric fragments in my head while I was driving and as soon as I parked the bus back at the station, I’d hum it all into a voice memo and then race home to record a better demo at my studio. A lot of the early writing on the record was made that way.”

There is an essential interplay between Larson’s hard manual labor and the music he makes. Both inform and enhance each other, intensifying the band’s plaintive lyrics and soaring sounds. “I did most of the work mixing this album while I was sanding floors,” Larson explains. “Just like when I was driving bus, I’d listen to my mixes while sanding and stop to make notes constantly. Then I’d go home to my studio and make a million little edits and tweaks. Refinishing floors has strangely become a vital part of my creative process.” That obsessive attention to detail imbues Larson’s work. Sand, polish, sand, polish, sand, polish, until the final product looks effortlessly perfect. This isn’t music being made in some sun-drenched beachside studio. This is the music of middle-class America in 2023. This is the music of a craftsman and a worker.

*Ruthless* is the relentless vision of a musician perfecting a sound, the cascades of guitars, synths and vocals washing over a listener like rivers polishing stone, like grit on grains of wood. But the album also represents a different generative experience: the recent birth of Larson’s daughter, Ruth. In this, the album is a poetic dovetailing of a craftsman musician honing his trade, and his young family begetting new life. In a Midwestern setting that gave rise to so many other American dreams, *Ruthless* is a testament to the power of struggle, that we are made by what we make.