



Nathaniel Rateliff
And It's Still Alright

When Nathaniel Rateliff went to a writing retreat outside of Tucson, Arizona, for 11 days in the spring of 2017, he didn't know he was starting his third full-length solo album. He thought he was actually sequestering himself to finish writing the last few songs for Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats' follow-up album to their self-titled 2015 debut. In Tucson, Rateliff did manage to write the last few songs for what became the Richard Swift-produced *Tearing at the Seams*. But another song managed to creep in that was unlike any of the one's he'd composed for the Night Sweats' second effort, signaling that he had other things he wanted to say.

Quieter, more reflective than the songs he'd written for the Night Sweats album, the piece that became "What a Drag" was a sad confirmation that his marriage had run aground. He had touched on the topic in some of the songs on *Tearing at the Seams*, but with much more diehard-romantic ambivalence, still hanging onto a shred of hope that things might work out. When the first words of "What A Drag" appeared out of the dry Arizona air, it was a stark realization that things had become irrevocably broken, and he would have to finally face the end of his 11-year relationship. The repeating chorus of the song -- the lead-off track for *And It's Still Alright*, his new solo album -- vividly conveys weighty resignation and chilling finality: "I left feeling alone."

But what began as a solo album about the painful slow dance of the unraveling of a relationship turned into something altogether different when Richard Swift, Rateliff's longtime friend and producer of the Night Sweats' two albums, fell ill from the complications of alcohol addiction.

The two were close, both having been raised in strict religious households and experiencing similarly wrenching crises over their faltering faith. They bonded deeply when they worked on the Night Sweats' 2015 debut album which was certified gold in 2017.

"Richard always would say I was like his twin. His lost brother," says Rateliff quietly.

The two frequently discussed working on a solo album for Rateliff — his first since 2013's *Falling Faster Than You Can Run*, where the singer/songwriter's more personal writing could find a home.

"Richard was really excited about working on it," says Rateliff. "He'd send me ideas for it while I was working on the *Night Sweats* album. He told me, 'Man, I can't wait to start working on the solo stuff.' We had this vision of making it like a Nilsson album. We were both big fans of *Nilsson Sings Newman* and *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*. We thought you can't ever have too much Nilsson."

What Rateliff didn't figure was that he'd be doing his solo album without his friend. In June, 2018 Swift was hospitalized for hepatitis. And soon after, on July 3rd, 2018, he passed away.

Over the next few months, Rateliff tried to make sense of it all, feverishly writing songs fueled by strong coffee and an exercise bike. "I used to do physical labor for work, and that was really beneficial to my writing," says Rateliff.

The movement certainly jogged something out of his restless subconscious, helping him address some big life questions -- the ones that have stumped philosophers, statesmen and profound thinkers since time began, exploring the unsteady terrain of love and death. But in the end, what he really was doing was creating an homage to his friend.

With Swift's voice in his head, Rateliff set out to begin the album they had talked about at National Freedom Studio in Cottage Grove, OR. Nathaniel enlisted *Night Sweats* drummer Patrick Meese and James Barone, friend of the band and monitor engineer, to help him.

"It's great when you get to work with other people that can see your vision and then see beyond it. Patrick [Meese] and Richard [Swift] had always had my back, and it was great to work with James Barone, who is a longtime friend of mine. We went back to Richard's studio to start the record. It was very strange and very cathartic. It was a very weird experience to be in a room that we'd laughed so much in. I felt that Richard was everywhere," says Rateliff.

Not surprisingly, after Swift's death the scope of the album changed. No longer was it a bitter valentine about his failed marriage. Instead, it became an inquiry into getting older and losing those close to you, but still choosing to carry on, albeit with fractured hope.

"The unfortunate reality of getting older is you have to bury all the people you care about," explains Rateliff. It's a phrase he utters in the brooding title track, making one believe that he's experienced far too much loss in his life. "I guess in some ways it makes me realize that none of us is invincible. You can drink yourself to death or you can die in a car accident. I don't think anyone knows how or when they're going to go."

But Swift's sad passing turned out to be a cautionary tale for his friend.

"I wrote 'And It's Still Alright' about Richard, but it just as easily could have been about me," says Rateliff softly. "'Rush On' is also for Richard. We struggled with a lot of the same issues. I guess I understood in some ways why he let himself go, so I tried to write from that perspective, to confront the emptiness that you can't seem to get away from and the danger of letting it overtake you.

There is very little here of the bigger-than-life-party starter with the rakishly titled hat and the knowing smile that you see onstage when he is fronting Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats. On *And It's Still Alright*, he's a wounded prophet, a weary seeker with a poetic genius and flickering faith who has seen and felt far too much pain and loss in his life: His father died when he was 13, his mother left for Texas with her new husband four years later.

"My mom was just in her mid-30s. She didn't know what the f*ck was going on either. I told her, 'I don't blame you. It's not what cards you're dealt, it's how you play them.' I think it was [science-fiction writer] Ursula Le Guin in *The Earthsea Trilogy* who says, 'Never trust someone without a limp.' Character isn't defined by our strengths but by what we overcome," says Rateliff.

He was determined to make some sense of his early travails on *And It's Still Alright*, hoping against hope that it's all part of a bigger plan. You can feel him faltering but never losing his hope across these 10 songs, always believing that there is a way out of the murky dark, a yearning for transcendence and rebirth that gives this record a spiritual incandescence. The rock and soul sound of a horn section is traded out for the emotive strings heard throughout this record. The nine-piece string section played arrangements created by Tom Hagerman from the band DeVotchKa.

"I think I always want to see hope in the darkness, and I like to try to share that," Rateliff says simply. "I feel a lot of my solo stuff is more introspective and honest in a different way than the Night Sweats songs are. I always try to write from a perspective of trying to approach everything very honestly, even if it leaves me vulnerable. But overall, it's almost like I'm a different character when I'm writing for myself. I like to remind people of what I'm capable of doing outside of the Night Sweats. Even if it's playing guitar a certain way or using a different voice than I have been using."

It's that kind of thinking that underpins the entire album, from the unease of "What a Drag" which features Night Sweats guitarist Luke Mossman; through the haunting grace, acceptance and wisdom of "And It's Still Alright," which brings to mind an *Astral Weeks*-era Van Morrison; to the Nilsson-esque gloss and cleverness of "All or Nothing." Daniel Creamer, of the Texas Gentlemen, lends his keyboard playing to "And It's Still Alright". Rateliff is stunning on the sassy taunt of "Expecting to Lose," which just might be a note-to-self or, instead, a cautionary tale. "Tonight #2" straddles hope and resignation without ever making a choice; it's a barbed lullaby with a fallen-angel chorus, the kind you'd expect to hear at the end of the world. "Mavis" is a sweet bouquet for the one that got away, gentle and romantic, bringing to mind the Beatles' "Golden Slumbers" or even the Band's "I Shall Be Released." It completely changes the course of the album, taking it into deeper lyrical and emotional waters, as if Rateliff has shifted some internal gear and is working his way through the last of Kathrine Kubler

Ross's *Five Stages of Grief* for both his marriage and Swift. "What A Drag" and "All or Nothing" feature Elijah Thomson, from the band Everest, on bass.

"You Need Me" was written while Rateliff was still married, and is searing in its prescience of events to come. "I didn't really see it when I wrote it, but I do now. I think a lot of songs work that way for me. I find out what I'm really thinking when I put it down in a song. It's surprising and a little unnerving for me to see it now."

"Time Stands" is a hymn, a showstopper, a gift from beyond, a song that asks more questions than it answers, yet it's anthemic in its scope and delivery. It almost wrote itself, according to Rateliff. "We did this song in two takes. I was in tears when we finished it the second time." "Kissing Our Friends" is a final painful goodbye to his wife, and a sure indication that he has moved on, regretfully. "Rush On" is an elegant farewell to his friend, a prayer for Swift's for safe passage to where he's headed out in the ethers. "It's raw and honest, and I have a really hard time singing it," Rateliff says, "but this song is pushing Richard even harder into whatever it is that's out there for him. Just be at peace, my friend."

Summing up, Rateliff says, "I think this album is a reminder that we all go through hardship, but regardless of the hardship everything ends up where it's supposed to. Regardless of where I'm at after Richard's death and my divorce, and getting older, I still continue to live and I still continue to find joy. I think that's the theme of the record."