No other solo American guitarist this century has impacted that fecund scene quite like William Tyler. After crucial stints in Silver Jews and Lambchop, this adopted son of Nashville emerged at the dawn of the last decade with a string of inquisitive albums that paired the measure of his country rearing and classical enthusiasm with his ardor for postmodern experimentation, field recordings and static drifts folded beneath exquisite melodies. Tyler dug Chet Atkins and Gavin Bryars, electroacoustic abstraction and endless boogie. His productive little enclave of instrumental music has increasingly followed such catholic tastes, not only ushering new sounds and textures into the form but also critical new voices and perspectives.

And on the brilliant, bracing, and inexorably beautiful Time Indefinite, Tyler’s first solo album in five years, he steps at last into the widening gyre he helped create. The guitar serves as a starting point for an album that will make you reconsider not only Tyler but also the possibilities and reach of an entire field. A vortex of noise and harmony, ghosts and dreams, anguish and hope, Time Indefinite is not a great guitar record. It is a stunning record—a masterpiece of our collectively anxious time, really—by a great guitarist.

In early 2020, as the world teetered at the edge of unrests still unimagined, Tyler left Los Angeles for Nashville, where he’d lived most of his life after his parents left Mississippi. Most of his gear (and, for what it’s worth, all of his records) stayed in California, awaiting what he presumed would be a rather rapid return. It, of course, wasn’t. So as Tyler dealt with the depression, nerves, and questions of those endlessly tense times, he began recording little ideas and themes with his phone and a cassette deck, resigning himself to the distortion inherent in those devices.

Tyler was in early talks to make a record with Four Tet’s Kieran Hebden, and some of these bits felt like test cases for what they might do together. As that collaboration crept in other directions (as heard on last year’s staggering “Darkness, Darkness” single, with more to come), Tyler magpied other sounds. He soon asked longtime friend and producer Jake Davis to help stitch them together and perhaps clean up those imperfections. (Eventually, back in Los Angeles, Alex Somers stepped in to provide the finishing touches.) Davis and Tyler opted to go the other way: embrace the hiss and wobble and, in the end, unintentionally make a record that reflected those times and these—uneasy, damaged, honest.

From the start, Tyler’s music has pulled from the past, drawing old notions and conventions into the revealing light of now. In November 2020, on a family trip to Jackson, Miss., to clean out his late grandfather’s downtown office, Tyler spotted an old tape machine, still sealed among the flotsam. He took it back to Nashville, back to Davis, and they began using it to create tape loops that conjured the vertiginous feeling of that unknown moment.

*Time Indefinite* begins with a sampled shard from that antique, as harsh as Merzbow processing the sound of a washing machine. It is a lurid, worrying signal flare: I am here, and things are hard, but I am trying. The piece unfurls like a haunted house still inhabited by real, living people, trying to make do when the world around them seems to be saying don’t. Not 10 minutes later, at the start of “Concern,” Tyler slips into a melody as gorgeous as anything he’s ever found, strings and steel rising like the sun beneath his simple folk waltz. It is a hand on a shoulder, a radiant bit of music that answers: I am here, and things are hard, but we are trying.

This seesaw of struggle and survival defines these 10 songs and 54 minutes, a map of anguish and belief and the trails that link them. “Electric Lake” is an ecstatic drone that summons La Monte Young to this century, but there is pain beneath its glow. “Howling” is an absolute wonder, its gentle guitar lope and choir of echoing horns and keys recalling the glory days of Windham Hill. But the background actually does howl, latent worry simply waiting to roar back to life. It doesn’t during the supple “Anima Hotel,” but you know it won’t be long now, because it never is—on this album as in real life. “This is a mental illness record,” Tyler will tell you without shame, as open in life and speech as he is on tape. “It’s music about losing your mind but not wanting to, about trying to come back.” He doesn’t, however, need to tell you that; you can feel it, probably even recognize it from your own experience.

Too, Tyler’s albums have been nests of non-musical references and influences, as he has pivoted between spirituality and philosophy and summoned the landscapes and legends of the greater American imagination. *Time Indefinite* is no different, especially in the way it conjures the deeply personal films of Ross McElwee. In the mid-’80s, he began to make a movie about Sherman’s march through the South, but it spiraled into a tangled history about family, loss, and what we do when our best instincts surrender to the worst things we can imagine. (The record is a nod to this idea, of time’s relentless push and our place in, beneath, and beside it.) It is no great revelation that the lives we lead shape the work we make, whether or not we intend that to be the case. In these songs, you can hear Tyler, like McElwee, wrestle with incoming demons out loud—addiction, middle age, loneliness, neurosis. All of our struggles are different, but we are united at least in having them. *Time* Indefinite is the soundtrack that Tyler’s create.

As the ninth track, “Held,” begins, you will likely hear it as the end, the benediction at the close of all these goddamned chaotic blues. It certainly feels that way, an abiding and immersive drift through sleeplessness and into another day that ends with an acoustic waltz, pure William Tyler beauty. But it is never that simple, is it? *Time Indefinite* instead concludes with “Ojai,” a curious electronic comedown that never actually comes down or goes up. It, instead, hangs in the middle distance, its sampled cuts playful synths, sighing guitars, and vanishing drones forming a question mark that never stops growing. Is it happy? Is it sad? It is neither. Instead, it is a final signal flare: I am here, and things are hard and wonderful, and I am still here.