

Phosphorescent

A New Glimmer

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN | PHOTO BY DANIEL ARNOLD

MATTHEW HOUCK had spent several years working on new music, but he still was unsure if he had made a record. It had been a turbulent few years: Houck had undergone a series of earth-shaking changes that had spiritually, emotionally and geographically uprooted his personal life. All that time, he had been writing songs reflecting the life-changing turmoil of such change: songs about reflecting on past selves, songs about the bliss of second chances, songs about newfound isolation, songs, that contained, on a literal sense, the words *new birth* in their titles.

"It was very piecemeal," Houck, who records under the moniker Phosphorescent, says today, calling from his new home in Nashville. "Because of the drawn-out process of making this record, I lived with a lot of these songs in various stages for a long time, so I really didn't know what this record was."

That all changed when Houck sat down to write a new song called "C'est la Vie No. 2." The song, a pulsing meditation that finds Houck reflecting on his long-forsaken childish things, is a wistful statement of growing up that acknowledges just how greatly we are all burdened by our past even as it celebrates our ability to overcome and move forward from more destructive versions of ourselves.

In the song, Houck recites a long list of his old bad habits, simply to make it clear, or, rather, to help convince himself, that he's moved past them.

"I stood out in the night/ In an empty field and I called your name/ I don't stand out all night in empty fields and call your name, no more," he sings.

As soon as Houck wrote the song, he knew he had an album. "At that point, everything clicked," he says. "That's when I finally understood what this record was. That song was really the unifying keystone that brought everything together. It made it feel like a piece of work."

One month after writing the song, Houck realized his album was finally finished. The title he ended up settling on? *C'est La Vie*.

Bookended by two atmospheric instrumental pieces, Phosphorescent's new album alternates between bouncy piano pop, ethereal indie-folk, and downtrodden electronic balladry. Most of its nine songs, including the new-parent devotional "My Beautiful Boy" and the old-world blues

"These Rocks," are languorous, down-tempo offerings that do little to convince listeners Houck has arrived at any sort of conclusive hard-won contentment in his own life. But perhaps that's the point.

Houck likes the phrase *c'est la vie* (French for "such is life") because it can be applied in any number of situations. It can be a statement of defeat, of acceptance, of hard-fought contentment, or just maddening frustration. To him, it was the only way to tie together an album whose songs he describes thusly: "Some of them are a little grouchier, some of them are a little sweeter, some of them are a little sadder, some of them are kind of optimistic." Regardless of the specific situation the characters in Houck's latest album find themselves in, chances are the phrase will apply.

Or, as Houck himself puts it in the title song: "C'est la vie she said/ But I don't know what that means."

Since releasing his most recent album, the career-making *Muchacho*, in 2013, Matthew Houck has gotten married, had a kid, left his longtime home in New York, moved to Nashville, spent several years building a recording studio from scratch, and had a second kid. "It was a time of great change," he says, reflecting on the period that led him to writing and recording his new album. "It was very much a 'close an old chapter, start a new chapter,' kind of feeling."

Such upheaval can be heard plainly on the new Phosphorescent LP, which balances heavy backward-looking reflections with a joyful, newfound buoyancy that reflects the ongoing thrill of discovery of the utterly new life Houck has found himself in the span of just a few short years. Some songs, like "There From Here," which he began writing in New York but ended up being about something entirely different by the time it was finished in Nashville, evolved right alongside Houck himself. Draped in swirling circus organs, the song is about the naked thrill of not knowing what lies around the next corner. "If you'da told me Nashville," he sings, "I'da said, 'I can't even see you there from here.'"

"Life stuff happens," explains Houck, "and then it ends up making its way into the music."

Becoming a father has had a particularly dramatic impact on the way in which Houck views his life's work. "For years, my sole driving thing was working on this art and trying to better myself as an artist. Everything else came secondary," he says. "Kids are the first thing that could ever compete



with that notion, that sort of inward selfishness. Kids are powerful little things; they'll kind of shatter that inward-looking space."

Discussing the road that led him to *C'est La Vie*, Houck is genial and thoughtful. Still on the front end of the press cycle for his new record, he is deliberate with his thoughts, careful not to misspeak as he processes the emotional journey that led to his latest work. A few hours after we talk on the phone, Houck calls me up out of nowhere, eager to make a clarification: he had made a mistake when laying out the timeline of the record: the initial recording sessions for the record took place in 2016, not 2015.

"It's funny, interviews make you reckon with and evaluate things and honestly, without them, I just wouldn't do it," he says. "Once I know I've written a song, I really don't explore it backwards unless pressed. Doing that would freeze you up if you did it. It would take too much time to evaluate, so you kind

of just have to trust what you're doing."

Matthew Houck has been trusting his own artistic process, and little more, for roughly 15 years. His 2003 release *A Hundred Times Or More* was the first in a series of sparse, crudely-recorded acoustic confessionals that found the young, Huntsville, Alabama-born singer working through his young 20-something blues with his gently-lilting rootsy-folk narratives.

At the time, Houck had recently moved to Athens, Georgia after spending several years traveling around the country.

Houck's first album that earned him a modicum of attention was 2007's *Pride*, the initial project for his current label Dead Oceans. Houck eventually moved to New York and followed up that record with a left-field choice: 2009's *To Willie*, a record entirely comprising understated Willie Nelson covers.

"If there was a mission statement in Phosphorescent," he told this magazine in 2010, "it would be to follow whatever these songs are becoming on any given day."

But it wasn't until 2013's *Muchacho* that

Matthew Houck's life would get turned upside down. That album, driven by the heart-breaking seven-minute quiver of "Song For Zula," would become Phosphorescent's indie breakthrough that took the singer, and his longtime backing band, from playing small bars to headlining several-thousand person clubs. "Song For Zula" continues to find new lives to this day, appearing in a flurry of television shows and big-budget movies.

"It's still totally surreal," Houck says of the newfound attention, post-*Muchacho*.

A live album and deluxe edition of *Muchacho* followed in the ensuing years, but for the most part, Houck receded into his music-making, trying to figure out what it meant to write songs with the knowledge that the rest of the world suddenly cared about what he had to say.

"This was absolutely the first time that there was this knowledge at all times that what I was doing was going to be heard, that people maybe even had expectations," he says of *C'est La Vie*. "Whereas for many, many years I made a lot of records that were mostly for me, where I had this vague notion that obviously some people will listen to them, but it was never certain. This was the first time I was aware of that sense while

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making the record. I tried to ignore it, but it was definitely there.”

Making *C'est La Vie* was anything but a conventional process for Houck, who embarked on a laborious, several-year long project of converting a Nashville warehouse into a studio by hand. In the summer of 2016, before he had built his studio, he booked studio time with his band to introduce them to a half-dozen or so new songs he was excited to show them. The band recorded themselves running through the new songs for the first time, and the results so energized Houck that he spent the next number of months using those rehearsal tapes as source material for his new record. “You can only not know a song once. It can only be new to you once,” he says. “Those sessions were a rough thing, they weren’t usable, but there was so much amazing stuff in there that captured that kind of spontaneity.”

Houck essentially sampled the sessions, splicing together guitar solos, organ parts, speeding up and slowing down tape, as he re-recorded more parts to fit seamlessly with the raw initial sessions. “It was like editing a movie, which on a technical level was just really, really hard,” he explains. “A lot of chopping pieces back and forth.”

During that period, Houck continued to build his studio and tinker further on his new in-progress album as he settled into his new hometown. It’s an image, I tell him, that very much suggests the classic trope of an isolated artist driving themselves nearly mad with their own artistic perfectionism.

“That’s very accurate,” Houck says with a laugh. “It’s just how it happened. I kind of became a hermit. Nashville still feels like a town that I don’t really know and that I don’t feel a part of. I would literally go from the house to the studio every day for two years. It’s just what I was doing, and it took up all my time.”

Houck says for all that’s changed in his own life and career since he began writing songs as a teenager, his process has remained relatively the same. “The main thrust and space that I go to mentally is still the same place that I was always going to,” he says.

One element of his songwriting that has remained entirely static is Houck’s lifelong penchant for writing six-plus minute songs.

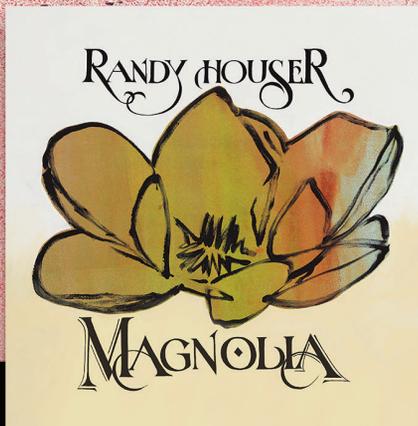
“It always feels like a normal-length song to me when I’m writing them, but then when I record it, it’s always like, ‘Damn, it’s a seven-minute song!’” he says. “What am I going to do with this?” Of the nine songs on his

new record, just three are less than five minutes, with a third of the record — including the haunting album centerpiece “Christmas Down Under” — exceeding six minutes. The album’s unwieldy song lengths was likely one of the issues at play when Houck’s label, Dead Oceans, insisted on choosing the bouncy, unusually upbeat song “New Birth In New England” as the album’s lead single, a decision the singer wasn’t entirely pleased with.

“I understood all the reasons about why they wanted to put that song out,” he says. “I’m okay with it, of course, but I didn’t really agree with it.”

Apart from the minor disagreement about the album’s lead single, Houck was, more than anything, grateful that in the midst of such radical change in his own personal life, he felt entirely free to create something altogether new in the wake of *Muchacho*. “Outside of the pressures that I put on myself, one thing that I have done right, amongst things I think I’ve done terribly wrong, is establish this sense of whatever I’m going to do and whatever I’m doing in the present moment,” he says with relief, before saying goodbye. “Hopefully, that can withstand any kind of direction I would ever choose to go in.” ★

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