

Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats

South of Here

“He is one of these guys that will just carry the torch,” the legendary Robert Plant stated in a recent interview when asked “who is your favorite young artist?” Calling Nathaniel Rateliff ‘a leader of the next generation of greats,’ he continued, “Beautiful songwriting, beautiful singing, great delivery and he is a magnificent guy to go with it.” Plant is not alone. Rateliff’s collaborations with Paul Simon at Newport, Willie Nelson at the Hollywood Bowl and performing on-stage alongside Bob Weir and the late, great John Prine are just a few examples that underscore Plant’s sentiment.

Fast forward to 2024.

South of Here, Rateliff and The Night Sweats’ fourth full-length album produced by Brad Cook (Waxahatchee, Bon Iver, Kevin Morby) and recorded at Sonic Ranch outside El Paso, TX reckons with a lifetime of pain and trauma and transforms it into a stirring, soul-baring rumination on love, loss, hope and resolve. Following *And It’s Still Alright*, Rateliff’s beloved 2020 solo LP, and *The Future*, The Night Sweats’ acclaimed 2021 release, the new album (with help and insistence from Cook), seamlessly blends both sides of his immense talent: emotionally potent, vivid storytelling and the rugged, R&B revivalism that has powered the band to world-wide acclaim over the past decade.



album artwork

Rateliff’s songs have always come from a place of deep honesty, however through this recording process he found he was incorporating more of his own personal story than ever before. “Brad was a great producer to write alongside,” Rateliff noted. “This album is a look into my own struggle with anxiety, insecurity and also stories of my life. He encouraged me to take

responsibility for my own narrative in the songs and to write about what’s happening in my life. These recordings were done together in a room with my closest friends. I hope these songs and stories give people an opportunity to better understand their own struggles, whatever they may be.”

South of Here’s 11 original tracks were all written by Rateliff and performed by The Night Sweats:

Nathaniel Rateliff (vocals, guitar), Luke Mossman (guitar), Joseph Pope III (bass), Mark Shusterman, (Hammond B3, piano), Patrick Meese (drums, piano), Daniel Hardaway (trumpet), Jeff Dazey (tenor sax), and Andreas Wild (baritone sax). The band, in peak form, fill these songs with intuitive beauty while Cook's production captures their soulful fire with immediacy and purpose.

However, before the band's leader could focus on making a new album, he had to steady himself. Rateliff recalls struggling with an unusual level of anxiety for months. "I was not in a great headspace," he says. "I was neurotic about imperfection. Any detail that was off was a real distraction for me. All of that was keeping my mind in this constant state of negativity." In January 2023, he headed to North Carolina to work with Cook in his studio. Through the ten days they spent together, Rateliff and Cook broke through, finding a rhythm and leaving with a handful of songs written.

Pushing through the fraught energy, on songs like "David and Goliath," "Heartless," "Get Used to the Night," and "South of Here," Rateliff reaches across damaged connections with unflinching honesty; others like "Remember I Was a Dancer," "The Center of Me," "Everybody Wants Something," and "Time Makes Fools of Us All," offer cinematic portrayals of self-doubt and innocence lost. Bound by the struggle for identity and the search for belonging, *South of Here* reverberates with the understanding that we're all in this beautiful mess together.

The driving "Heartless" refers back to the time years ago when he and Night Sweats bassist Joseph Pope III left their Missouri hometown and settled out west. "My childhood left me so broken that I didn't know/We were coming out even," Rateliff sings, recalling the hardships that pushed him forward.

"For whatever reason, that autobiographical stuff was coming up," Rateliff says. "There are things in 'Heartless' that relate to Joseph because we were going through the same things at that point in our lives, even if I wasn't intentionally writing about them."

The title track "South of Here," ponders the possibility of survival and reinvention. It was one of the last songs Rateliff penned for the album and summed up much of what he'd been feeling. "So much has changed in my life and for us as a band, and I'm grateful for it," he says. "At the start of my career, it felt like the bottom was going to drop out and now, for the moment anyway, it seems to be sustainable. But when things become too much for me, I think about disappearing and just never getting onstage again."

Rateliff tunnels deeper into his own harmful patterns on the stripped-down "Center of Me." "Why do I wait until this shit gets harder," he sings, describing the isolation he feels when personal relationships break down. "Primarily it's about my inability to communicate," Rateliff says. "I tend to avoid conflict at all costs, which just causes a lot more conflict. The line that goes, 'Alone in my head,' I feel like that a lot of the time. It can spiral and create feelings of doubt and insecurity."

Elsewhere on the album, Rateliff battles feelings of despondency in the deceptively cheery "Everybody Wants Something," while on the Randy Newman-esque country soul tune "I Would Like to Heal," he recounts the often overwhelming steps to recovery. "In my letting go, I find some space to grow," he sings, clear-eyed and hopeful. In "Get Used to the Night," Rateliff pays homage to his friend and collaborator Richard Swift, whose untimely death from complications of alcoholism was a painful wake-up call. "You run ahead and I'll catch up to you/Still so much left for me to do," he sings with tender resignation.

South of Here closes with "Time Makes Fools of Us All," which further references the long journey he and Pope have been on together. "When disease came to steal you, I shaved my head and mourned," he sings, recalling Pope's battle with cancer. The message is: all good things come to an end and that ultimately, no one gets to stay on top forever. But there's joy and meaning that realization.

It's all led to this point. On the grand and commanding *South of Here*, Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats harnessed the struggle and followed their NorthStar to create the most essential recording of their career. "I always try to put some bit of hope in there," Rateliff says. "The world feels pretty bleak right now, but nobody needs me to say that. We have to continue to figure out a reason to make things better, regardless of how bleak things may be. Admitting those difficulties builds strength."

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