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**NATHANIEL RATELIFF & THE NIGHT SWEATS**

**BIO**

*Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night* *Sweats* practically explodes with deep, primal and ecstatic soulfulness. This stunning work isn’t just soul stirring, it’s also soul *baring*, and the combination is absolutely devastating to behold. You don’t just listen to this record—you experience it. So it’s entirely fitting that the self-titled album will bear the iconic logo of Stax Records, because at certain moments Rateliff seems to be channeling soul greats like Otis Redding and Sam & Dave. But as this gifted multi-instrumentalist honors the legacy of the legendary Memphis label, he’s also setting out into audacious new territory.

Those who were beguiled by *In Memory of Loss*, Rateliff’s folky, bittersweet 2010 Rounder album, will be in for an initial shock when they spin *Nathaniel Rateliff & The Night Sweats*. But when you delve beneath the rawboned surface of the new album’s wall-rattling presentation, with its deep-gut grooves, snaky guitars, churning Hammond and irresistible horns, you’ll find that same sensitive, introspective dude, who bravely tells it like it is, breaking through his reticence to expose often harsh truths about the life he’s lived, the people he’s hurt and the despair he’s struggled with. The difference between the two albums is that the Nights Sweats’ funkiness insulates the starkly confessional nature of Rateliff’s songs while at the same time underscoring their emotional extremes.

The place where Rateliff is coming from is intensely real and intimate. Doing what he does is an act of bravery. “These songs are about the struggles I’ve had in my life—drinking too much, that kind of crap,” he says with characteristic candor, punctuating the admission with a rueful laugh. “And then the relationships we all have. I’m not a great communicator in my personal life, so it’s funny to be writing songs that say the things that I’m never very good at saying. It’s taken me a long time to figure that out. I’m trying to be a better communicator, but it’s horribly awkward—it’s awful—to tell somebody something you know is gonna hurt their feelings. I’ve always been one to go, oh, I’ll just eat this one; it’ll be okay.”

As the band blazes away on the soul-rock rave-up “I Need Never Get Old,” the visceral “Howling at Nothing” and the supercharged “Trying So Hard Not to Know” (key line: “Who gives a damn and very few can”), which open the album with a sustained outpouring of torrid intensity, Rateliff is opening himself up emotionally as well as physically, the raw grit in his voice conveying anguish and hope in equal measure. The buoyant immediacy of the music makes the hard truths embedded in the songs easier to swallow than it would be in Rateliff’s other primary mode—a solitary guy with a guitar, the brim of his baseball cap pulled down, putting his heart and guts on the line without the protection of his simpatico cohorts. Make no mistake, these songs would stop you in their tracks presented in that naked way as well, but the additional layers of soulfulness provided by the Night Sweats—its core comprising guitarist Joseph Pope III, drummer Patrick Meese and keyboardist Mark Shusterman—bring a convergence of intensities, musical and psychological, to the performances.

“S.O.B.” sits at the dead center of the album, between the brutally honest confessionals “I’ve Been Failing” and “Wasted Time.” Thematically, the song is the album’s linchpin—partly a rebuke, partly a cry of defiance, “S.O.B” is the “fuck it all” anthem of a blue-collar kid from the Heartland whose conditioned idea of therapy is a shot and a beer chaser, and then another round, on the way to sweet oblivion. In live performance, Rateliff and the Sweats have been known to mash together “S.O.B.” and The Band’s “The Shape I’m In” as the double-barreled climax of their sets (you can find it on YouTube), the frontman high-stepping and boogalooing across the stage with controlled abandon, bearing a striking resemblance in his physicality to the young Van Morrison. These moments of revelry are also revelatory, singling out two of Rateliff’s biggest influences. Indeed, he hears distinct evocations of The Band on his new album, and he was listening to “TB Sheets” and the rest of Morrison’s *The Bang Masters* as he was writing it.

From there Rateliff contemplates some of the sustaining aspects of existence, from redemption by way of the forgiving love of another in “Thank You,” “Look It Here” and “I’d Be Waiting” to sexual heat in the N’awlins-style strutter “Shake.” The album ends on a hopeful note with the relatively laidback “Mellow Out,” which could certainly be heard as Rateliff admonishing himself to do just that. “Originally, I had it ending with a song called ‘How to Make Friends,’” he says. “The chorus is ‘When everybody knows you, nobody’s gonna want you.’” Another laugh follows, this one self-mocking. “But I replaced it with ‘Mellow Out,’ which is more of a release rather than a total bummer.”

When it came time to pick a producer, Rateliff went with Richard Swift, a polymath who has made records under his own name, helmed projects for Damien Jurado, the Mynabirds and others, and has played with The Black Keys and the Shins. Swift’s specialty is summoning (and capturing) inspired performances in the moment, and the synergy in the studio, first with Rateliff and then with his band, was instant and palpable. Rateliff and the Sweats already had the arrangements of the new songs down cold, having shaped them on the road. Swift, knowing a good thing when he heard it, set the mics, honed the sound, giving it plenty of space so that the studio itself served as an integral sonic component. Then he pressed “record” and coaxed it into happening organically. “Richard has such great ears, and he really knows how to play to the room,” Rateliff notes. “We have similar theories of recording: basically, you just need to play it right.”

Rateliff, who’s 36, traveled a long road to get to this point. He left school after his dad passed away at the end of 7th grade, left his home in the small town of Herman, Missouri, where his future would’ve likely involved endless shifts in a nearby plastic factory; and worked as a janitor for a high school. Not long afterward, he followed some local missionaries to Denver, thereby escaping what he describes as “the Midwestern lifestyle of working and growing up too fast.” He soon outgrew his childhood understanding of religion, realizing that “there are so many books out there besides that one,” as his worldview expanded exponentially. Rateliff spent the next 10 years on the loading dock of a trucking company before becoming a gardener and getting married along the way. But as the years passed, he became increasingly focused on writing songs and performing them at any watering hole that would have him, in time becoming part of the city’s burgeoning folk scene. “I got kind of a late start making music,” he says, “but eventually I went out on the road,” first with Born in the Flood, which he’d formed with Pope, and then The Wheel, the forerunner of the Night Sweats. By then, he’d overcome his longstanding discomfort at playing his songs in public.

“Writing at home is one of my favorite things to do,” says this constitutionally solitary man. “But for years touring was really hard for me—being alone, being married and having my relationship run through the mire, because a lot of my songs are about that. Sometimes it sucks to sing those songs and have to relive those situations. It leaves you pretty exposed, and your partner too; it can be unfair. But now I love being on stage and cracking jokes, trying not to take myself too seriously, even if the material is about failed relationships and alcoholism, that kind of stuff”—there’s that rueful laugh again.

“I try to be lighthearted,” Rateliff continues, “because, although the songs are heavy, I want it to be a release for people. I’m trying to do something that’s emotionally charged and heartfelt, and I want the experience to be joyous, for people to feel excited and dance around instead of being super-bummed by reality—I mean, things *are* hard. But I can remember dancing around to some song that was breakin’ my heart, dancin’ with tears in my eyes. I love that feeling, and I wanna share it with people, and hopefully they’ll feel it too.”

*—Bud Scoppa*