When it comes to studying the canon of rock and roll studio wizardry, John Pelant is a Ph.D. student. The myriad sonic details that separate merely good records from masterpieces — a specific Casio keyboard tone, a certain pitch on a drum-machine beat, the right amount of reverb — are the very particulars that Pelant revels in. He’s scrutinized some of the greats: Brian Wilson, Paul McCartney, Todd Rundgren... And he’s done his homework: when he talks about Lindsey Buckingham, he’d rather discuss that magical, lost *Buckingham/Nicks*LP rather than dwell on obvious touchstones like *Rumours*or *Tusk.*And while he’s more than happy to talk about Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde,*he’ll end up parsing the best take of “Leopard-Skin Pillbox Hat” from that recent voluminous box set.

Of course, all of this will be obvious once you hear the new Night Moves album, *Pennied Days.*Because the 26-year-old Pelant isn’t just a student of studio-bound auteurs — he’s well on his way to becoming one himself.

Formed in 2009 in the Twin Cities, Night Moves is composed at its core of Pelant and his 28-year-old partner in crime, Micky Alfano. Friends since high school, their bond was solidified when Alfano lent Pelant his copy of George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass,*a luminous classic of turn-the-page melancholy that echoes through *Pennied Days.*(Record geeks will recognize those glistening George Harrison guitar slides on stunning *Pennied Days*’s highlights such as “Hiding In The Melody” and “Leave Your Light On.”) Over time, Pelant and Alfano have broadened their scope to allow for a wide array of maverick influences, ranging from traditionalist heroes like Leon Russell and The Band to r’n’b originators Curtis Mayfield and Sly Stone to pre-punk experimentalists Suicide. (They also love Joe Walsh, like all right-thinking Americans.)

For *Pennied Days,*Pelant channeled both his disillusionment and his quiet resolve into a set of beautiful, melodic songs whose sunny surface obscures an inner darkness. *Pennied Days*might ultimately be as breezy and pleasurable as the records Pelant grew up loving, but little about how the album was made was easy.

“A lot of the songs are about trying to find yourself and what your future will look like and who you are – life overall,” Pelant says now — a seemingly simple statement about the most complicated of personal journeys. After wowing critics with Night Moves’ 2012 debut, *Colored Emotions —*and touring with the likes of Father John Misty, Lord Huron, Django Django, and Polica — Pelant eagerly set about recording demos for the follow-up. Originally, he planned on making another record quickly — Pelant is compulsively creative, writing loads of hooky pop songs in short bursts. (The band has few hobbies outside of music, beyond “drinking, wasting time talking about life, girls, and partying.”)

If anything, Pelant is almost *too*creative. As sessions for *Pennied Days*stretched far longer than Pelant anticipated — Night Moves wound up working on it for about three years — the music veered in every conceivable direction.

“Some stuff was really synth-y, doomsday, Flaming Lips-sounding — electronic and dark,” Pelant says, while other songs resembled the folky, laidback material of *Colored Emotions.*Amid all of the choices, an unexpected song rose to the top of the heap — the album-opening “Carl Sagan,” a bouncy pop-rocker with an irresistible falsetto vocal by Pelant (like “Frankie Valli from hell,” he says) that dates from the *Colored Emotions*era. Pelant returned to the track “for shits and giggles,” and the producer of *Pennied Days,*John Agnello, immediately recognized it for the gem that it is.

While Agnello’s experienced hand helped in guiding the record, Pelant’s goal was retaining the feel of his meticulously constructed demos. Another *Pennied Days*standout, “Denise, Don’t Want To See You Cry,” is based on the keyboard sounds that Pelant coaxed out of his “shitty ’90s Casio” on the demo.

Wary of making anything sound too slick, Pelant’s main concern was communicating the emotional truth of his original recordings. Listening to *Pennied Days —*the title alludes to the slow accumulation of small flourishes that ultimately added up to the record’s rich and bountiful whole — it’s obvious that Pelant succeeded. Just queue up “Kind Luck,” a jangly tearjerker about the end of a romantic relationship that doubles as a metaphor for moving on in any context.

“I was spending my days going into my basement, being in the dark while it was sunny outside,” is how Pelant sums up the making of *Pennied Days.*But after so much time in the darkness, Night Moves is ready to return to the light.