

Ratboys
“Singin’ to an Empty Chair” (2026)

Ratboys opens its new album, *Singin’ to an Empty Chair*, with an invitation. “What’s it gonna take to open up this time?” vocalist **Julia Steiner** sings, launching an 11-song conversation that stands as Ratboys’ most introspective and emotionally driven work yet. Before long, the song swells into the sort of musical sunshower that’s become Ratboys’ specialty, underscoring the high stakes across the band’s sixth album and how gracefully the four-piece navigates them. When Steiner asks the question on “Open Up,” it’s clear she really means it.

Despite its title, *Singin’ to an Empty Chair* is not defined by what’s missing. Rather, Steiner says, it’s the beginning of an important dialogue. “A big, overarching theme of this record is my attempt to document my experience being estranged from a close loved one,” she says. “The goal is to update this person on what’s been going on in my life and to try to bridge that impasse and reach out a hand into the void.”

Singin’ to an Empty Chair, the band’s first album for **New West Records**, fills that space with nearly an hour of new music showcasing Ratboys at the peak of their powers — twangy, effervescent, and as confident as they’ve ever been.

Emotionally piercing songs like “Just Want You to Know the Truth,” the billowing tale that delivers the album its title lyric, mingle next to bubbly power-pop, delicate Americana, and an exhilarating six-minute detour called “Light Night Mountains All That.” Steiner labels it the band’s “wormhole jam” thanks to guitarist **Dave Sagan**’s extraterrestrial guitar bloop and its unorthodox time structure. “It soon turned into, like, okay, we gotta granularly break it down and bring out the whiteboard,” Sagan says about the detail that went into the four members’ collaborative process.

It’s no small feat, but luckily, Steiner and Sagan have long been great partners in exploration. The two formed Ratboys in 2010 before rounding out the lineup with bassist **Sean Neumann** and drummer **Marcus Nuccio**. “It’s just fun to play music in a room with your friends,” Nuccio says, highlighting the genuine chemistry that’s fueled the band through its worldwide tours. That chemistry took center stage on Ratboys’ previous LP, *The Window*, which found them operating at their highest level yet, becoming one of 2023’s most-praised albums.

To begin crafting its follow-up, the four members decamped to a 75-acre plot of land in **Wisconsin’s Driftless Area** to write and demo the new songs – or, as Steiner says, “to make a bunch of ridiculous noise.” Months later, the group reconvened back at the same cabin to begin tracking with co-producer **Chris Walla**, the band’s trusted collaborator who also produced *The Window*. After a one-week cabin session, Ratboys and Walla took the songs to Steve Albini’s famed **Electrical Audio** studios in Chicago, and later to **Rosebud Studio** in Evanston, Illinois, to finish recording. As such, some songs on *Singin’ to an Empty Chair* are journeys within themselves, patchworked together from multiple recording sessions across the Midwest. “We wanted to approach this record like it was a quilt,” Neumann says. “We recorded the songs in all these different places, so we approached it in a way where different songs had different scenes. Certain parts of songs were recorded in different spaces, and we switch back and forth between them throughout the record to help tell the story of each song.”

In different squares of the quilt, some songs on *Singin' to an Empty Chair* call upon humor and whimsy to relax the tension. Some called for intentional, detailed edits between studio takes, while others aimed to capture the band in its natural four-piece element. Ratboys tracked the irresistible post-country tune “Penny in the Lake” live in a room together, while Steiner later overdubbed incisive vocals with a smile: “Today’s gonna change my life / What’s for breakfast, Jesus Christ?” Humor finds its way into the conversation on the caffeinated anxiety anthem “Anywhere,” for which Steiner found inspiration in Sagan’s family dog. “Whenever Dave’s mom leaves the room, oh man, his whole world just falls apart,” she says. “You can see it in his face. I think a lot of us can relate to that sort of anxious attachment style.”

Steiner’s lyrics have always probed her mind’s inner workings, and complex family dynamics were present in early Ratboys songs like “Charles Bernstein” and “Control.” But *Singin' to an Empty Chair* marks the first Ratboys album written since she began therapy, and she credits the clarity she’s found for the album’s unflinching examinations of self. “The title is in reference to a therapy exercise that I did, called The Empty Chair Technique. It’s basically an attempt to have a difficult conversation, or an impossible conversation, with someone who’s not physically present, by speaking out loud to an empty chair and imagining that the person is really there,” she says.

“Just Want You to Know the Truth” continues the dialogue initiated by “Open Up” by unspooling a highly personal tale about unearthing buried secrets and the ensuing fallout. “It’s not that I don’t miss you or the way it used to be,” Steiner sings. “It’s that I can’t live my life without sayin’ anything.” An extended coda, marked by one of Sagan’s most electrifying guitar leads to date, leaves plenty of room for the theoretical reply.

The gentle and lilting “The World, So Madly” presents a similar opportunity to connect. Steiner wrote it about “feeling sort of helpless that the world is spinning and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.” But in making peace with her lack of control, she found power. The same could be said for “Burn It Down,” a stadium-ready powder keg that furiously ignites with a declarative refrain, magnified by Neumann’s soaring harmonies.

Fittingly, while the album begins with a hand extending into the abyss, it concludes with a scene of serenity, as Steiner finds comfort in the loved ones still at her side. “At Peace in the Hundred Acre Wood” finds Steiner once again wringing tranquility out of chaos over the swaying lull of a Hammond B3 organ played by **The Decemberists’ Jenny Conlee**. One moment sees her “crying in the rain,” but eventually, she concedes that she must “laugh through the pain.” On the most emotionally interrogative Ratboys album yet, the resolution hits like a semicolon — definitive about the challenges present, but hopeful for the future. “It’s not all doom and gloom,” Steiner says. “There are plenty of good days, days filled with friendship and love, and then there are days when I dwell on things and desperately want to bridge the gap. It’s my whole life, you know? So, for me, this record is a document of all of those days stitched together, like a quilt in a time capsule, just waiting to get dug up when the time is right.”

/// Words by Patrick Hosken

Shortened bio (271 words):

Despite its title, **Ratboys'** new album ***Singin' to an Empty Chair*** is not defined by what's missing. Rather, it's the beginning of an important dialogue with a close loved one vocalist **Julia Steiner** finds herself estranged from. The music on the band's sixth studio album – its first for **New West Records** – fills the space that person left behind with 11 songs showcasing Ratboys at the peak of their powers — twangy, effervescent, as confident as they've ever been, and perhaps more emotionally interrogative than ever before. The four-piece Chicago band followed up 2023's highly acclaimed *The Window* by reconvening with co-producer **Chris Walla** to begin tracking at a **rural Wisconsin cabin** before taking the songs to Steve Albini's famed **Electrical Audio** studios in Chicago and later to **Rosebud Studio** in Evanston, Illinois. The results veer from bubbly power-pop on "Anywhere" to irresistible post-country on "Penny in the Lake," along with heart-piercing ballads like "Just Want You to Know the Truth" and an exhilarating detour into the extraterrestrial on "Light Night Mountains All That," which Steiner dubs the band's mammoth "wormhole jam." *Singin' to an Empty Chair* also marks the first Ratboys album written since Steiner began therapy, which the singer/lyricist credits for the clarity found across the album's unflinching examinations of relationship and self. Fittingly, as the album begins by extending a hand into the void, it concludes with a scene of serenity – all while weaving candid honesty, humor, chaos, and whimsy along the way. "It's not all doom and gloom," Steiner says. "The experience of making this record definitely gives me hope for whatever happens next."

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