

Howlin Rain

Mansion Songs

"I walked out of the back end of my major label run and the first 9 years in Howlin Rain with no band, no label, no foreseeable immediate move forward and a figurative suitcase full of songs, my talent, invigorated by having nothing else to lose, exhausted by the bullshit and grind of the music business, this musical life, and all it's absolute bullshit and fucked tests, cynical but not bitter. I still wanted to make more records. I wanted to track the journey from nothingness back to creation in musical form in a set of three albums and rock bottom was the perfect place to start from. There's nothing to fake down here! It's a dark and beautiful and pure cave to create something truthful from. The first album in the trilogy is Mansion Songs."

- Ethan Miller on the making of *Mansion Songs*

Redemption comes in a multitude of forms. For Ethan Miller, it has arrived amid catharsis and transformation. The Howlin Rain we thought we knew has evolved, on Miller's newest, *Mansion Songs*, into something strange and true and beautiful, a sound made of cigarette ash and swollen moons, salt air and the eggshell light that comes just before the dawn.

"When I began this record, I most certainly hadn't given up, but I was in a dark and trying place," explains Miller, "I wanted the album to reflect a dignified despair. Often times that's what art is; elegant sorrow, pushing through despair with some kind of dignity, in search of a reasonable justification of life."

The result is an album that pines and yearns, lusts and wails. "Meet Me in the Wheat," "Big Red Moon" and "Wild Bush" push the album into high gear, up-tempo jammers that form the yang to the mellow yin of the album's deep feel ballads. Tracks like "Restless" and "Lucy Fairchild" ache like raw wounds or sway like lost, half-sunken ships. "New Age" is bright and clear-eyed and full of wary joy. "Coliseum" prowls, red-veined and hungry - claws out and teeth sharp.

But wait – before we go on, let's get it all out of the way – the back story, the multi-threaded narrative that leads to the hear and now.

Miller is one of those triple threat talents, an endlessly charismatic front man, prolific songwriter and powerhouse lead guitarist. His vocals, writing, and playing are executed with an impassioned fury which verges on religious ecstasy. His music has left a trail of fans in his wake - among them looming names like The Black Crowes, Queens of the Stone Age and iconic music producer Rick Rubin.

Miller first emerged amid the bright psych roar of NorCal's beloved Comets on Fire, a band that blew fast and wild and left us awed in its wake. As Comets' lead singer and guitarist, Miller defined himself among a new wave of pioneers who were grasping at the ragged roots of hard rock and tearing them out to hold up to a new sun.

It was in 2004, while still in the throes of Comets, that Miller began to first experiment with the sounds and players that would eventually evolve into Howlin Rain. "A very earthy rootsy thing for fun," Miller remembers of the band's nascent years, "there was a part of the nihilism and chaos and bombast of the music of Comets on Fire that wasn't totally fulfilling the full spectrum of my desire to make and create different kinds of music. I was looking for something more melody and harmony based."

That desire resulted in a first, self-titled album for Howlin Rain, released almost simultaneously with Miller's third record with Comets on Fire. "The sound and concept of the first album was sort of taking Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* and flooding it with layers of heavy fuzz guitars," he explains of Howlin Rain's debut, "It was made fast and it's loose, sloppy but fully confident, with a shambolic, lost, AM rock glory."

It was during the recording of the band's second album, *Magnificent Fiend*, that producer Rick Rubin first stepped into the picture. "Rick called me one day out of the blue, invited me down to his house in Malibu and there asked me if I'd consider signing to his label American Recordings."

And so it began. There were shows with Queens of the Stone Age, The Black Crowes, Mudhoney and Roky Erikson. There was the long road to the band's third album, *The Russian Wilds*. And although Miller is now no longer working with Rubin, he doesn't repent time spent. "Rick impressed upon me the idea and the execution of being a prolific songwriter and that was hugely beneficial to the technique and outcome of *Mansion Songs*."

Miller began *Mansion Songs* by seeking the unfamiliar, facing down ghosts and demons with a new sound, strange and foggy music, music full of lament and deep and primal desire. Recorded in San Francisco, in musical cohort Eric Bauer's studio (known as "Bauer Mansion," where Ty Segall, Thee Oh Sees and Mikal Cronin have also recorded), this new Howlin Rain record somehow feels both familiar and bracingly fresh.

Miller is exploring in unknown lands here, but at the same time, returning back to himself, back to his heart...and to his home. "I wanted to make an album that was very San Francisco (where I often work and play) and very Oakland (where I live and love). A removed, slightly mossy, mutant thing brewed up in a basement studio where Chinatown, North Beach and the Financial District meet at a street corner in SF far from the concerns of album sales and marketing. I wanted to make a record that junkies in the Tenderloin could feel at home wandering through, a place where broken hearts could wander around...and smolder out."

And that is exactly what Miller's done. *Mansion Songs* is a living, breathing, and thrillingly imperfect thing. It sweats, it bleeds, its skin is rough and calloused. Bringing in a revolving cast of collaborators, musicians he had known and worked with, as well some he had never met, Miller and producer Bauer left it loose and raw, keeping many of the shambling, ragged-at-the-edges, first or second takes. "I wanted something that showed raw nerves in the end, something that painted the elegance of hard-won fatigue and showed off-color bruises."

Mansion Songs is Miller and Howlin Rain pushing away the stone and stepping out into the sunlight. It marks next chapters and fresh starts and new roads (and a new label, LA-based Easy Sound Recording Company). In the end *Mansion Songs* is one of those rare albums made by running with eyes closed and smile wild – straight into uncharted territory.

"Sometimes we regain control over ourselves and our lives by allowing our psyche to give in and accept chaos and let it blow us to the place it must for us to begin to have clear emotional sight again," says Miller of making the record, "These songs are the sound of despair in various forms, the giving up hope, the darkness, the shock and sadness of isolation, the romance of despair, the ecstatic light and dark energy of despair, irony and humor in the face of despair and ultimately - redemption and rejuvenation on the other end."