

MATTHEW CHECK - *THE NOVEMBER ALBUM* (Released 11/5/21)

"I can write about anything if I have an assignment," says Matthew Check, a longtime singer/songwriter whose career encompasses everything from Emmy-nominated bluegrass to critically-acclaimed American roots music. "I write Jewish music. I write kids' music. But when I'm writing for myself, I usually write about love, traveling, relationships not working out, and life throwing me curveballs."

Those themes take center stage on *The November Album*, whose songs were created during a period that found Check turning to alcohol to numb the pain of a broken heart. Recorded in 2013 as both the follow-up and sonic foil to *The Amazing Worth*, the EP receives its long-overdue release in 2021. Like a recently-discovered Polaroid from an older era, it shines a light on a bygone period of Check's career, serving as a time capsule for an artist who has continued to evolve, expand, and electrify as his career progresses.

This isn't the first time Matthew Check has offered a peek into his personal archives. *The November Album's* counterpart, *The Amazing Worth*, was recorded in 2008, back when Check was in the throes of a romantic relationship that vacillated between arguments and adoration. Like *The Amazing Worth*, *The November Album* also deals with romance and rejection. Unlike its predecessor, though, the EP embraces a stripped-down sound rooted in acoustic guitar, upright bass, and dusky melodies. A bluegrass banjo player for more than 20 years, Check creates his own version of Americana on these songs, both saluting his influences and forging his own path.

The November Album was created during Check's first decade in New York City, as well as the final throes of his drinking habit. A native of Newtown, Pennsylvania, he had moved to New York to pursue opportunities as a musician and Jewish educator. He landed a job at the Park Avenue Synagogue in 2010, overseeing various programs for families with young children. Those programs often involved music, which Check wrote and performed in collaboration with Joanie Leeds. Meanwhile, his drinking habit had gotten out of control.

"It was at the heart of my alcoholism," he admits. "I was a blackout drunk most nights of the week, and lived a double life of having a respectable job during the day while being a neighborhood barfly at night. I always had Josie in the rearview mirror, thinking about the relationships that didn't work out." Did he drink because he was heartbroken? Or was it the other way around? The two were inextricably linked. While struggling with his vicedemons, Check remained as prolific as ever, writing songs whose autobiographical lyrics never shied away from hard truths.

"You'll still be sure to find me on any given night, drinkin' on the east end of town," he sings in "Lovely To Have Met You." Songs like "Josie Revisited" were retrospective examinations of the broken relationship that had inspired his previous EP, *The Amazing Worth*, while tracks like "Sometimes a Woman" were inspired by more recent rejections, with Check singing his melodies in a voice both tender and tired. Even the EP's most deceptively happy song, "Couple of Reasons," was grounded in lyrics that contrasted its upbeat vocal harmonies and jaunty tambourine.

"In the summer of 2013, after a breakup and a long bender, I for some reason felt that it was time to record these songs that were simply lying dormant on my computer in demo form," Check remembers. Working with Greg Barbone, who'd previously played piano on *The Amazing Worth*, he recorded *The November Album* at a home studio in Forest Hills, Queens. Drummer Nick D'agastino joined them, as did upright bassist (and frequent Carolina Chocolate Drops performer) Jason Sypher. Americana singer Alec

Gross contributed harmonica to three tracks, while Matthew's brother, Jon Check, played the EP's sole guitar solo on "Couple of Reasons." Backup vocals were provided by Grammy-winning artist Joanie Leeds.

Shelved for eight years, *The November Album* sees the light of day in 2021, nearly a decade after it was created. Matthew Check is now sober, having released a string of diverse records — including 2014's bluegrass/Jewish hybrid *The Bluegrass Kabbalat Shabbat Experience*, 2019's *Sterling* (recorded as part of the folk duo Joanie & Matt), 2020's collaborative *The Condesa Queen*, and 2021's *The Amazing Worth* — after kicking his vices to the curb. Prolific and adventurous, Check is still moving forward. At the same time, *The November Album* reminds us that glances of the past can be helpful, too — particularly if they help inform our next steps.

"I felt the necessity to tell the story that wasn't told — now that Josie and I are friends, now that I'm sober, and now that I have more perspective on my life," he says of *The November Album*. "I have even more unreleased material that I might unleash, but I'm planning on cutting a fresh record in 2022. It's time for something new."

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