

Matthew Check – *Without a Throne* (Out on 9/30/22)

“The music I record is written when I’m in the depths of despair,” muses Brooklyn-based singer/songwriter Matthew Check about his process of composing music. “It’s usually very painful, dark and depressing.”

That may come as a surprise upon hearing the often uplifting melodies on this follow-up to Check’s 2020’s *The Condesa Queen*. Push play and immediately, the stirring piano chords of the appropriately titled “The Very Beginning” kick the tune and seven-song-set off on a ‘70s pop/rock tear.

The Newtown, Penn. bred artist boasts a resume that even the word eclectic can’t fully encompass. Check moved to New York City initially to take graduate classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary. But he spent much of his time playing bluegrass banjo in jams downtown. Eventually, he would combine his love of bluegrass and Judaism into something he dubbed “jewgrass”—which yielded an album colorfully entitled *The Bluegrass Kabbalat Shabbat Experience*. He was also the first banjo player for Gangstagrass and played on the 2010 Emmy Nominated Song “Long Hard Times to come.”

He then joined The GRAMMY-winning Joanie Leeds for a 2019 set of organic folk/rock credited to Joanie and Matt. That led to a solo stint, where he remains. It has proven successful, attracting positive, often rave reviews from publications as diverse as *Holler*, *No Depression*, *Glide* and *Americana UK* for previous EPs and the aforementioned album.

Check’s attraction to the rootsy, honest pop/folk/introspective rock of the mid-late ‘70s eventually took hold. The resulting hybrid of that sound—with his authentic vocals, somewhere between Jakob Dylan and the Waterboys’ Mike Scott—dominates and energizes *Without a Throne*’s approach.

With lyrics ranging from old testament tales (“What a Father Would Do [Absalom]”) to the grim reality of alcoholism (the country strains of the wincingly candid “Old Wooden Floor” about his [last](#) month of drinking - he’s been sober and in AA for many years), Check creates a moving,

occasionally haunting, and melodically vibrant palette—one that feels contemporary yet grounded in the music of a few decades ago.

Check had to look no further for material than his own family. His brother Jonathan is credited with writing the Elton John-styled “The Way That You Are,” an upbeat pop rocker that deals with unrequited love (“Somewhere deep inside you baby there’s a woman, who needs a man like me /And she’s testin’ the water, in tryin’ to be a friend of mine”). “The Shape It Appears,” another Jonathan song, is a soulful country waltz about being able to see an era so clearly, only after it’s over (“Cause life won’t be special for a couple of years/“Til you look back and realize, the shape it appears”), incredibly penned when its author was in his late teens. The closing Loggins & Messina/Grateful Dead inflected “Because You Can” dates back nearly 15 years. It finds Check in breakup mode again, albeit to a breezy, tropicalia beat singing warm harmonies with backing vocalist Miss Tess.

There is also joy squeezed between these generally melancholy episodes. On the lighthearted country twang of “Pretty Mama,” Check finds himself dancing in a honky tonk singing, “Come on pretty mamma won’t you take me down to this little hole in the wall on the edge of town/Wanna stick around until the break of day and let a little song take our troubles away.”

These performances feel alive and frisky. That’s due to how they were recorded, captured live in the studio, generally in a single take; it’s an unusual tactic with today’s technology of isolating tracks and overdubbing.

Check recorded in Nashville with an ad-hoc group he hadn’t met, assembled by producer/multi-instrumentalist Thomas Bryan Eaton. He’d sent Eaton (who owns a home studio) his demos, letting him do the groundwork in hiring sympathetic musicians before flying down from New York. “It was like someone else got inside my music and arranged it for the band,” he explains. “I’ve never done it that way.” Only longtime drummer Glenn Grossman accompanied Check to anchor the percussion.

This old-school method put pressure on Check, who played guitar and sang the songs live. “I was so nervous about it. I can’t f**k it up ‘cause we can’t overdub,” he laughs. “It was terrifying...When you record live it’s like you’re your own stunt double. You’re proving to people you can do it.”

The camaraderie Check felt with these professional musicians is obvious in the synergistic, flowing vibe of the sessions. While some songs emerged from challenging times, the music—underlying these dusky tales of life’s trials—feels as alive as the finest, most memorable albums from the late ‘70s, an era Check clearly admires and emulates.

Add yet another notch on the artist’s belt, a diverse and winding career path, as *Without a Throne*’s unorthodox creation proves to be a wildly successful next step in Matthew Check’s continuing and flourishing artistic journey.