

After ‘a moment of failure,’ John Mark Nelson holed up in a 100-year-old barn and captured his most honest album yet

by Andrea Swensson · [August 23, 2017](#)

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Photo courtesy of John Mark Nelson

Maybe it's because I'm getting older, or maybe it's because living in modern-day America feels like trying to meditate in the middle of a tornado full of barbed wire, bleating cattle and six lanes of rush

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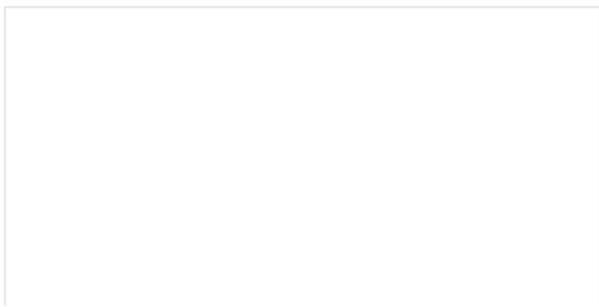
hour traffic, but lately I find that I only really want to listen to two kinds of music: the loud, jagged stuff that makes my heart race as fast as the world outside; or the overwhelmingly quiet kind that creates such a strong ambience that it rises up and blocks out all the noise.

John Mark Nelson's new album, *Four Days Away*, accomplishes a remarkable feat. It asks for stillness from its listeners, a little patience, and a block of uninterrupted time. If listened to correctly — ideally on headphones, with social media tabs closed instead of just minimized, push notifications turned off — it can give us 37 desperately needed minutes away.

How did he accomplish this feat? The way most Midwestern creative types tend to fantasize about: In a moment of creative desperation, he dragged his guitars, notebooks, and recording equipment out of the city and into a cavernous 100-year-old wooden barn in Western Wisconsin, slid that giant barn door closed, and did nothing but make art for four days straight.

Four Days Away was entirely written and recorded in that time period, and released on Bandcamp a short while later. It's a vibey album full of simple yet reverberating moments, and it captures something I haven't heard on a John Mark Nelson release in some time: jarringly honest lyrical passages drenched in melancholy, unadorned by heavy production or a jangling band. It reminds me of the first music he uploaded to the internet when he was still a teenager, undiscovered and blissfully unafraid of exposing his most vulnerable moments to the world. The experience of listening to it swallowed me whole.

After spending a few weeks listening to the album on repeat, I called up John Mark for a chat. The timing was happenstance; after quietly releasing *Four Days Away* online earlier this summer, he's planning to return to the Everwood Farmstead and the barn where he recorded it on [Saturday, September 16, to play an all-ages release concert.](#)



(Hover over player to toggle through album.)

Andrea Swensson: First things first, I love the new record. I'm really fascinated by how quickly you wrote and recorded it, and by the lines on songs like "This Wilderness" that hint that you're at a crossroads, or a moment of trying to figure out how to stay inspired. I'm going through that as well, so it resonates.

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John Mark Nelson: Thank you so much. The first thing I want to say is that it was like giving birth to something — but that’s really lame when men use that as a metaphor, because we don’t get to know. But maybe it was like, I don’t know, kidney stones or something; something grotesque like that.

Something that had to be pushed out.

Yeah, exactly. I put out a record two years ago this fall, and the last record I put out was the biggest production I’d done so far, I put it out on Dave [Simonett] and Mark [Gehring]’s label, and it was a whole new journey. Shortly after that, I got signed by a booking agent and was doing a bunch of road stuff, so it kind of felt like everything that I was cooking toward and aspiring toward was funneling in the right direction. By and large, I felt like that record cycle went well. I did this gigantic two-and-a-half-month tour with Little Green Cars, and then went out for three weeks with Tallest Man on Earth, and then immediately after that was let go by my booking agent.

Right after the tour?

Yeah. I was on Billions Corporation for a while and had the same agent as Bon Iver and Mumford and all these artists — so I was like, “It’s all happening!” And then it was like, “No, it’s not happening.” That definitely led me to question my motives for making music. Because I started with the most happy-go-lucky, childlike fascination with music — I had a microphone and a computer and I loved recording songs, and I left high school every day and went home and did that all day and into the night. It started out with this pure joy. And the longer I pursued it, the more this borderline seething intensity started to develop in me; not like being mean or aggressive to other people, but I just didn’t have the ability to see how much I wanted it to go well. I think that became more important to me than music. So this rug-out-from-underneath-you moment happens, and then I basically had to decide if I was in this because I love it or am I in this because it was going well.

I had a long stretch where I more or less stopped creating. I was trying to write things that would bring back that momentum, rather than just writing because I liked to write songs. I really felt lost as an artist. What is my role? What do I bring to the community of music? Seeing so much music happen around you all the time, there’s this sense that if I don’t keep up, if I don’t make something great I’m going to be forgotten and left behind. So I started creating from a place of fear rather than joy, and all of that stuff had to be shed. I came up with this idea of walking away from everything I’d been working on for two years and isolating myself, giving myself very limited parameters, and harkening back to the way I made music before. To take a limited amount of time, and whatever happens in that time, I’m going to put out. It doesn’t matter how raw, how bad, how unpolished it is.

Over the years I’ve developed a really great friendship with two folks here in town, Bill Underwood and Chris Everett, and they’ve started this foundation in Wisconsin. They have this [beautiful farmstead property](#) that they do concerts at, with this beautiful 100-year-old barn on the property. And so as I started to think about spaces, I called up Bill and said I had a crazy idea for him. Could I come and live in your barn for a few days?

Had people recorded in the barn?

No one had ever recorded in there. That is the space where they do their concerts, but they make it a point to not record their concerts. And so much cool stuff happens there; I’d done a concert there once, I’d done a songwriting workshop there. Bad Bad Hats have been out there. The day I tore all my gear down and loaded out, Charlie Parr was loading in to do a show that night. It’s just a beautiful space, with fantastic things happening. I can’t champion and celebrate those two guys and what they’re doing enough, for not only Minnesota music but their community in Wisconsin.

They graciously said that I could come and record there, so I did. I went in with a few random ideas jotted in the notebook and a couple lonely voice memos that had never made it to anything, and thought best-case scenario would be to do an EP or something. When I got into the barn it was like a creative tap flipped on, so I left with 10

songs. We did a basic mix of those, and then sent it off to my good friend Huntley Miller and he gave it a little polish, and then woke up one morning and clicked go on Bandcamp, just like the old days. It felt so good.

Tell me more about going into this barn and this tap opening. That's wild to me, because I just finished this very long process of writing my first book, and I tried to set aside time to take off work and devote myself to it fully, but at one point I was so uninspired that I was literally laying on the ground going oh no, I'm just wasting time, this is horrible. It's fascinating to me that you were able to line up the space and the time and then also creatively feel stimulated. Were there techniques or things that you did to make sure that you were going to be present?

Honestly, if you were to go out to Everwood Farmstead and slide the barn door open and walk into their barn, you probably could write another book in a week. I think there's two factors that came into play. One, I'm always trying to create large amounts of work because I know how much of it gets thrown away. Every day is like a race, because the percentage of what gets kept and what's thrown away is so stark. So I've always been trained to view time as extremely precious. If I just have two hours in a day to be creative, I've always tried to protect those ruthlessly because I know that they can evaporate so quickly.

I think part of the creative tap opening for me was because I stripped away all the obstacles that were keeping me from seeing something through. Once I realized that if I just have my guitars and a microphone and just write things because I love to do that, then the fear and ego goes away. I've been thinking a lot about those two concepts lately in the creative process – the role of fear and the role of ego. The fear asks, What if it's terrible? What if people hate it? What if people hate me or people assume X, Y and Z about me? And then the ego portion is like, if this goes well, that's fueling my tank to get further and further away from the joy that I get to do it at all.

So I gave myself these parameters — just make it because you love to make it, and put it out with no hiding behind a year-long production schedule and a recording studio and the best players in town. It's an exact snapshot of everything I'm good and bad at. I wrote everything, I played everything, I mixed and recorded everything, so all my strengths and shortcomings are all there. I'm only that good of an engineer; I'm only that good of a guitar player. I'm not any better or worse than anything you hear there. And the space is magical. I could hear the wind creaking and shifting in the barn. Birds are in every song.

What was the drive for you to write your first song? Where do you think that love of it comes from?

I remember this one really important moment for me. Early on, I was going to be a drummer. That's what made me fall in love with music – playing drums. I remember the first time I stole away my dad's laptop to record myself playing, and I realized, like, wait a second; if I can record the drums, could I not then make a new track in Garage Band and do some chords on the piano and then scroll it back? And then I listened to those two things together and thought, why can't I pick up the guitar and scroll it back? And honestly, I remember having this moment of pure elation. I realized at that point that no one instrument is ever going to keep me happy and satisfied, because the possibilities were endless. So before I developed the idea or the passion for writing songs, I just loved the idea of sound and how sound interacts, and the idea of layers and stacks.

And then somehow, someday I started singing over them, I guess, with whatever the horrible musings of a 14-year-old boy are. But it was really more of a snowball experience than like I woke up one day and was like, "I shall be a singer/songwriter." It was this constant what-if question. There's this fantastic interview where Conan O'Brien interviews Jack White, and Conan's asking Jack about the White Stripes and that progression. And he said a similar thing. He was like, "We woke up one day and said what if we could play a show? And we played a show. And then what if we had a CD?" And they figured out how to do that. And then, "What if we could go on tour?" The what-ifs just get bigger and bigger. I think that's maybe similar to lots of things in humanity, but definitely the artistic journey is that you check off something and you live in that very fleeting moment of accomplishment and success, and then your mind is like wait, what if...

Yeah, that feeling of accomplishment only lasts for like five minutes.

Yeah, five minutes, max. On a good album cycle there's maybe five minutes of joy when it's done. [laughs]

When did the what-if turn into something more sinister in your mind, like an "I have to" or "this must happen"?

I think it's when I started to invert the question; when I stopped asking, "what if I could ____" and started asking, "what if ____ happens to me?" Like what if I put out a song and it's terrible? What if I put out a record that's awful? What if I invest all of my time and energy and money and 30 years goes by and I'm like the guy coiling cables at the venue and bitterly telling the bands I used to be out on the road? What if I end up a kind of bitter, almost-made-it person?

I like that your worst-case scenario is that you grow old and run sound at a venue and are kind of crabby.

That was a quickly fashioned worst-case scenario. I think that would be the external scenario, and then the internal is that I'm wildly depressed all the time. That's a pretty good worst-case scenario. I actually wouldn't mind running sound in my old age. That'd be pretty fun. I admire sound guys at venues. They have the best stories. They've seen it all.

That's true. The reason I ask about these beginnings is that there is something about this new work that reminds me of your very first album, and it goes beyond the fact that the songs are stripped down to just you and the guitar; there's an emotional presence and honesty that really resonates with me. Where's that pain coming from?

I think it's a lot of different things. I've experienced more life changes in the past couple of years than I had in all of my life combined. I got married a year ago.

Wow, I had no idea. Congratulations.

It's a huge change, and I think for me this record is this snapshot of the last year of my life — realizing the vulnerability and the depth of artistic expression, but also just the human journey. When I first found out that I wasn't going to tour anymore, I had just maxed out all these credit cards. I'd bought a tour van. I owed a bunch of money. It was bleak. Even though I'm now realizing it wasn't, it felt at the time like the nail in the coffin. And that happened at the exact time that I got married. So then I had to wrestle with the fact that this beautiful, lovely woman is marrying the worst of me that I've ever been, in need of so much healing and so much perspective. This record to me is like coming out of the water and breathing, and realizing it's going to be okay. I have someone that, thank the good lord, loves all of me, and loved that part of me when I was bottomed out. I was angry and bitter, and that's no place to create from or be a human from. So I think to me it's a record with a lot of emotional gravity, but it's also a record of healing for me.

Ultimately I want to live a life that pushes through; like the waves are going to come, the storms are going to come, the ups and downs are going to come always. Yes, it's part of life. But if everything were to hit the fan, the core of who I am and the core of what I found in being in love and being married, that bedrock doesn't change with the success and failure of what you strive to do outside, whether that's profession, career, craft, trade. I think I was so laser-focused on what I wanted out of my career or artistic expression, I truly bought into the idea that succeeding means happiness, and that not succeeding means I've failed and I'm no good. I think having a moment of failure combined with a moment of the total vulnerability of being married was like wow, I have so much work to do as a human being. And so I chose to include songs that are from those moments. There's straight up sappy love songs for my wife on there, and there's straight up darkest hour songs, and things that we've experienced together, and hardships. It's a record of me finding who I am, my wife and I finding who we are, and rediscovering a hope and a joy for the fact that I get to make music.

At the end of the day I hope I don't say on my deathbed that I should've gotten more digital premiers, and then I fade away and die. I would hope that at the end I feel that I spent my time in ways that mattered, and I invested not just in myself but in people. That's why it became so clear that I had to give this project away. I'd rather be measured by an actual investment in my family and my friends — the people that matter to me — and give gifts into the world rather than expect the world to meet a certain bar that I've made up in my mind. So I wanted people to have it. This is why I make it. I make it to share it.

John Mark Nelson returns to Everwood Farmstead in Glenwood City, Wisconsin, to play an album-release concert on Saturday, September 16. 2 p.m. picnic; 4 p.m. show. \$10-\$20, all ages, with [tickets available online](#). And in the meantime, you can stream and download his new album on [Bandcamp](#).

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