

Song Exploder
Nathaniel Rateliff - And It's Still Alright
Episode 181

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("And It's Still Alright" by NATHANIEL RATELIFF)

Hrishikesh: A quick note that this episode contains explicit language and deals with some heavy subject matter, including alcoholism and death. Nathaniel Rateliff is a singer and songwriter from Colorado. He's released four solo albums, and two with his band, the Night Sweats. Those two Night Sweats albums were produced by Richard Swift, who passed away in 2018. In a statement, his family said that he "suffered from alcohol addiction, and it's ultimately what took his life." Nathaniel Rateliff's new solo album, *And It's Still Alright*, was supposed to be produced by Richard Swift, as well, but Richard died before they could work together again. In this episode, Nathaniel breaks down the title track, which was inspired, in part, by his own complicated relationship with alcohol, and by his friendship with Richard Swift.

("And It's Still Alright" by NATHANIEL RATELIFF)

Nathaniel: I'm Nathaniel Rateliff.

(Music fades out)

Nathaniel: I was in a hotel room in Portland, Oregon. I had just flown in and I got in early, and so I was just kind of taking advantage of having time to myself. I don't get that a lot, and so I was playing around with the chords and then yeah. It was kind of a simple progression, but I was like, "ehh wait a second, I should probably record this."

(Acoustic guitar voice memo)

Nathaniel: Your playing sort of mimics your emotion or just like your feeling that day. I was trying not to get bummed and I thought, you know, working on something would keep me uplifted and keep me focused on trying to work. I was definitely thinking about Richard Swift, who I was going to make this record with. Richard Swift is a, or sorry, was a musician in his own right and a great songwriter in his

own right. But also, a fantastic collaborator and producer. I met Richard years ago backstage at the Borderline in London when I was opening up solo for Delta Spirit. I felt like I was kind of just treading water as a musician at the time. So I was just kind of overall discouraged. I had just finished playing and he was the only one backstage and we were just having a drink. He's like, "Hey man, you sounded good." I was like, "Thanks."

(Acoustic guitar voice memo ends)

Nathaniel: And then I didn't really hear or see much of Richard for a while, you know. And then, when I started the Night Sweats stuff, it was just demos that I was doing in my attic. I always loved to just do like kind of crappy GarageBand recordings. So I sent him like two or three. And just kind of out of the blue, he gave me a call or, you know, he texted me and was like, "Man, I really dig this." And then my A&R guy kind of came back to me and he was like, "Would you consider Richard Swift as a producer for this record, for the Night Sweats?" And I was like, "Yeah, I've already been talking to him." So it kind of just happened naturally. And we did the first Night Sweats record.

("S.O.B." by NATHANIEL RATELIFF & THE NIGHT SWEATS)

Hrishikesh: That album includes this track, S.O.B., which became a breakout hit. The song went platinum and the album went gold.

("S.O.B." by NATHANIEL RATELIFF & THE NIGHTSWEAT ends)

Nathaniel: And then we did the second full length, and then had also talked about doing this record, which I was really hoping to do. You know, you always felt good around Richard. When he left the room, you know, it's like, "Oh, the good times just left the room, I guess, you know." For a lot of friends and musicians, they felt Richard's loss as something pretty devastating. And also at the time, you know, I was going through a lot of stuff personally. My marriage of almost 10 years was falling apart and it led to a divorce, and I don't know, I just ended up having a lot of stuff I wanted to say as I went through all that. And then, you know, Richard's passing as well kind of added to things that I wanted to talk about. It was so heavy on my heart, I couldn't, I couldn't not write about it.

(Another acoustic guitar voice memo)

Nathaniel: The next variation of this recording is another voice memo where it starts to have a little bit more shape and form to what the song ends up being in the end. It's the next day that I was still in Oregon.

(Voice memo of vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Close your eyes, run around / Say, hard times, you could find / That it ain't the way that you want / But it's still alright")

Nathaniel: I knew there was a lot of stuff that I wanted to say about like he and I's journey together and like kind of the struggles that we shared. And so I wanted to be able to like tap into those feelings that I think we had in common together.

(Voice memo of vocals along with acoustic guitar: "It ain't alright / You keep spinning out ahead")

Nathaniel: "It ain't alright. You keep spinning out ahead," which I was like referencing Richard, like he kept spinning out. In the same way I would do sometimes, it's like you're holding it together and then you like fall back into the same bad routine or ideas of yourself or habits or whatever, you know. We talked a lot both about being sober. The second record and we did the Night Sweats was very drunk, excessively so. Like I think our first day was like, we went to the bar and then like came back and then started tracking. There's this energy that happens when there's a lot of, you know, there's like eight of us in a room and Richard, so you have this feeling amongst each other and you just keep like pushing, and, and that pushing us lets us be like, "Well let's keep drinking tequila straight," you know like. It was exciting and fun at that time. But I didn't know how much it would contribute to my own personal hardship, and even Richard's, you know.

(Voice memo ends)

Nathaniel: I went to Richard's studio to start making this record in March of 2019, just after St. Patrick's day. He was based in Cottage Grove, Oregon, which is just South of Eugene. And you know, the spirit of Richard is still there.

Hrishikesh: Nathaniel met his bandmates Patrick Meese and James Barone at Richard's studio, National Freedom.

Nathaniel: Patrick Meese is a drummer for the Night Sweats. And James Barone is a long time friend. And actually when I had gotten like divorced, I was just kind of homeless and like moved into Pat's basement. So him and Pat and I were all living together, at the time we're making this record. When I, you know, first

talked with Patrick and James, we had all worked with Swift so, you know, felt confident in our abilities and also, you know, he kind of like trained us really. You know, he was like always eager to show us what he was doing. So we were definitely trying to make it sound like he was there with us.

(Acoustic guitar)

Nathaniel: After working with Richard on the first record, I really fell in love with the way he made things sound, which is kind of letting mistakes be in the takes and not editing them out, not being perfect, add some humanity to it, you know. It makes the recording process so simple. I'd play the song, sometimes just once. And Richard would be like, "Alright man, that's great. What else do you have?" So for most of this record, I recorded it in a couple of takes.

(Second verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I'll be damned if this old man / Don't start to counting his losses / But it's still alright")

Nathaniel: The initial take was with the steel string. I have this like older Gibson LG-2 that I really love. And I write on it a lot, and record with it. And then I usually end up adding another guitar.

(Electric 12-string guitar)

Nathaniel: It just kind of needed an extra flourish in the beginning. And I've had this fucking electric 12-string laying around forever and sometimes you're like, "Oh man, this thing is going to be the answer for everything," and it never ends up on anything. But every once in a while you're like, "Yeah, that's exactly what it needed, so."

(Electric 12-string guitar)

Nathaniel: I am a horrible pedal steel player. So we had a buddy come in and do just like really subtle things.

(Pedal steel)

Nathaniel: And then Daniel Creamer is actually playing organ on it as well.

(Organ)

Nathaniel: Sometimes I'll sit down and start writing lines that I just sort of like spit out. But then even as the words come out and I'm writing them down on the paper, it's like kind of a surprise. It feels like you're allowing yourself to be vulnerable to another voice that's different than your own.

(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Counting all the lines, it ain't so funny now / Say, times are hard, you get this far / But it ain't the way that you want")

(Acoustic guitar)

Nathaniel: "Counting all the lines" is actually like a reference to just like counting the lines on your face. But then also, "It ain't so funny now," is kind of talking slightly a reference to drinking. And that's obviously a reference to Richard and a bunch of the other things that was happening at the time.

(Acoustic guitar fades out)

Nathaniel: When I was first making the second Night Sweats record, my marriage was really falling apart and I was also drinking far too much. Even as the Night Sweats everything we do is just, I think people think of us as a party band. In our first like big song, "S.O.B.," it became sort of this like anthem for people who drink when it was really like, I wrote it about having delirium tremors. You know, I was having like hallucinations while I was detoxing, and I was young then too, I was probably only like man, 30, 31. But I just thought that was the kind of thing that happened to like old men. I'm surprised I made it, you know I was [laughter]. So we jumped right back into this tour, you know, and then kind of just like eating whatever comes your way, whatever drugs you can fill your head with, you know, and kind of spinning out of control. And it's a little hazy to remember, but at the end of all that, I was supposed to go right out of that tour, right into the studio with Swift and I was just like, "I can't. I am falling apart." So I did, I just like pushed it back our sessions back by about two weeks and I went to Tucson, Arizona to this like sort of like retreat. And I just made a decision not to drink. And then started talking with Swift and he's like, "I am on the same boat, man. I gotta knock this off." So I was hopeful. Swift and I, you know, we were excited about making a record. But I knew he was having a bit of a hard time, but there's that kind of ups and downs thing and I think he, you know, saw things the same way I did. It's like, "Is there a way to, you know, be sober at mind and still have an occasional good time or, you know, some wine or whatever," you know, but it's a very fine line, you know. I worked really hard to try to change my relationship with it. You know, I take long breaks, I've had like

bouts where I won't drink at all or, you know, be completely sober for like six months. But it's really hard, drinking has its own darkness that isn't like anything else I feel like.

(Fourth verse vocals along with acoustic guitar and pedal steel: "It was cold outside when I hit the ground / Say, I could sleep here, forget all the fear / It will take time to grow")

Nathaniel: "It was cold outside when I hit the ground" was like me talking about me fucking up. I refer back to a memory I have that no one else knows that I was like walking home years ago, drunk from a bar. And one of those things you do when you're really hammered is to like only take the alleys home, which is really stupid [laughter]. And I fell in the snow and I passed out. But I was at kind of a low point and I was like, "Well, it doesn't really matter if you get up." I remember laying in the ground and being like, "If you just fall asleep here, it's, you know, everything, you'll just be a memory to everyone. It won't, it'll all work out. You'll be safe. You know, all this horrible shit that you're feeling won't exist anymore, you know."

(Pedal steel)

Nathaniel: But something kind of inside of me like forced me to get up out of the snow. I don't know if that's just like sort of like some other instinct that takes over [laughter], tries to keep you alive.

(Electric guitar)

Nathaniel: That's me playing guitar.

(Electric guitar ends)

Nathaniel: I was trying to create a guitar solo that wouldn't sound like a guitar solo. I intentionally left the space there to have like sort of a musical section. And so I kind of turned it up pretty loud and it has no distortion or anything. And then I roll the tone back on that, then I did another take, which sort of follows the same melody.

(Second take electric guitar)

Nathaniel: But then it sometimes competes with it so it's slightly dueling. But then it, you know, panned left to right, kind of has this weird sound.

(Both electric guitar takes play together)

(Both electric guitar takes end)

Nathaniel: We were trying to add flourishes to it, to like, to build and just create tension. And we felt like it needed something going into that section. You know, the organ was there, but it just needed something else. And we had been trying for hours, and jokingly, I leaned into the Juno and just went

(Nathaniel mimics the sound along with the Juno swell)

Nathaniel: and we were like, "That's it! Let's keep that [laughter]," so it made it into the song, so yeah.

(Juno swell fades out)

Nathaniel: And so the song kind of, you know like, I was just so excited that I had finished it like, you know, it was some task that had been on my mind for months, but then I just started to realize what I was talking about and I was like, "Oh man." You know, line by line, you're listening to it over and over again, it just continues to sink in. You know, and you're just like, "Fuck."

(Third verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "They say you learn a lot out there / How to scorch and burn / Gonna have to bury your friends / And then you'll find it gets worse / Standing out on the ledge / With no way to get down / Start praying for wings to grow / Oh, baby, just let go")

Nathaniel: There's a handful of lines in there that are definitely, you know, just feeling like you've arrived, you know at something you've struggled for forever and then, you know, it's not what you thought it's going to be. It's not all it's cracked up to be. It's not as easy as you thought it would be. With each hardship that you get over comes another one. So how do you look at life? How do you measure some success in there without just measuring hardships? It's that question of like, "Man, I've worked so hard to get here and then it's just still so fucking hard." You know, and those like things that you feel personally, they never go away. So those things that were a whisper become overwhelming.

(Fourth verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Your idle hands are all that stands / From your time in the dark")

Nathaniel: That's kind of a greater reference to like somebody kind of calling you out on your shit and telling you like, "Hey man, like, you know, you're only fucking yourself up by getting fucked up because it's just a waste of your time. And this whole time in the dark, the only thing that you have to show for is you not doing anything, but it's like, but it's still all right, you know." Like I keep trying to tell myself like, "It's still going to be okay, you know. It's like there's a reason to get up off the ground and get out of the snow, you know."

(Fourth verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "But it's still alright")

Nathaniel: You know, I wish, I don't know if it would have helped Richard, but I sometimes think that like if he would've had, you know, a way to talk about all this more openly that I don't know, maybe he'd be here, maybe it would be different. But I feel like it's, you know, important to at least start a conversation with myself, you know.

(Pedal steel)

Nathaniel: It's not always very fun. It's like trading in drinking for running, it doesn't sound very fun, you know. But [laughter] that is the reality of your life as you walk through it. But I do feel hopeful, and I just want there to be a more sense of hope. It's just dark times we're living in, it feels like to me. So I want to put something out there that's like, accepts the things that look hopeless and then like continuing to move forward and fighting our own struggles, regardless of, you know, circumstances surrounding us. You know, I have my own demons, but I really want to be around, you know, I want to be around for a long time.

(Pedal steel ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "And It's Still Alright," by Nathaniel Rateliff, in its entirety.

("And It's Still Alright" by NATHANIEL RATELIFF)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Nathaniel Rateliff and Richard Swift. You'll also find the link to stream or buy this song. Richard Swift was on an episode of Song Exploder with his band, The Arcs. If you want to listen to that, it's episode 55 from November 2015.

Song Exploder is made by me and producer Christian Koons, with production assistance from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder

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