

DENISON WITMER

the ones who wait

Some songs leave little to the imagination, their intent as clear and simple as a stop sign. Others are packed with so much lyrical detail that a listener has no choice but to bow to the songwriter's wishes. Then there are the songs that are like doorways. They beckon you into a room with just a few pieces of well-placed furniture and plenty of atmosphere and vibration. They invite you to mix your own imagination with the songwriter's to deepen the feeling of emotional resonance and personal connection.

In short, they're interactive.

These are the kinds of songs you'll find in abundance on Denison Witmer's latest release *The Ones Who Wait*.

"I think of songwriting as building a space where truth can move inside," says Witmer. "One of the things I've tried to work towards is how to write something that's very personal to me, yet acknowledge that what it means to me might not be what it means to someone else. If I can create something that has multiple layers of meaning, and touch someone personally, that's what I deem a success."

That sense of openness and nuance floats through all eleven tracks as they make their quiet investigations into the heart's inner sanctum. Beginning with the Merseyside sway of "Hold On" and the bossa-flavored "Brooklyn With Your Highest Wall," the disc continues through the sumptuous, slow-motion gem "Your Friend" and sweet, banjo and bell-laden "Influence," then winds down with the hymn-like "Cursing" and "I Live In Your Ghost," a riveting meditation on filial love. With Witmer's fleet fingerstyle guitar work and confidential voice front and center, there's a melodic warmth throughout that recalls 70s-era singer-songwriters like Paul Simon and Jackson Browne, while still sounding contemporary and completely fresh.

Oddly, for such a cohesive collection, it came to life with piecemeal uncertainty.

"This is definitely kind of an accidental record," Witmer says. "It's a by-product of me wanting to work with my friend Devin Greenwood. We've known each other for years, and were both living in Philadelphia, but had never recorded together. At the start, I didn't have a record deal, but I'd gotten a few placements for my songs on TV shows, so I had a bit of money for recording. I said, 'Let's just do a song together and see what happens.' We had such a good time that we decided to turn it into an EP."

But a few songs in, the sessions came to a halt when Witmer's father, who'd been fighting cancer, passed away. While Witmer took time off to grieve with his family, Greenwood relocated to New York to pursue production full time. After he found a promising space in Brooklyn, he invited his friend to join him in a business venture. In a waterfront neighborhood, the two founded a recording studio called The Honey Jar. With hammers, nails and guitars in hand, they christened it by resuming Witmer's EP.

"We started designing the studio and building it and kind of working on my songs whenever we weren't doing construction," Witmer says with a chuckle. "There was a lot of wiring mic cables and moving Hammond organs in between the recording."

There was also a fortuitous call from Witmer's friend Matt Hoopes of Relient K, inviting the singer-songwriter to join the band's label Mono vs. Stereo. He agreed to deliver eleven songs, and then decide later if it was an EP or an album.

"It didn't feel like I was committing to a full-length at first," Witmer says. "But somewhere in the middle, it snowballed and I realized I was caught up in this thing that had kind of gotten away from me. But I was really excited to be part of it. It was freeing, the way it took me out of my comfort zone – far from the usual way I've always done things."

Now eight records into his career, the Lancaster, PA native first picked up the guitar at age 16, and was writing his own songs shortly after. Mentored by the Innocence Mission's Don Peris, and influenced by Carole King, Nick Drake and Leonard Cohen, Witmer forged a compelling ambient folk sound that *CMJ* calls "deceptively powerful" and *Pitchfork* says is "lavish but restrained."

And it was this sound that Witmer and Greenwood attempted to both subvert and embellish. "There was a mad scientist approach," Witmer says, "where we'd work on a song, and layer on thirty or forty tracks, with no idea of exactly what we were creating. But we were having the best time making music and adding harmonies. Then we'd come back with fresh ears, and decide which parts worked and which didn't. There was a lot of reduction going on. I'm really interested in that kind of creative approach. I used to never put anything on a song unless I thought it needed to be there. With this record, I threw everything I could at the songs, then decided later what needed to be there."

That distance and perspective also allowed Witmer to understand that the record was a way of saying goodbye to his father. "I think that theme is pretty prevalent," he agrees, "though I didn't really mean it to be. Some of the songs that I didn't even think were directly related to that, Devin pointed out to me afterwards that he always thought those were specifically about my dad. Sometimes we create things subconsciously. I think that's important. On this album, I tried to let myself fall into the creative space and not edit myself too much until I really needed to."

As Witmer looks forward to the next phase of what he calls "the cyclical life" of writing-recording-touring, he is philosophical, as always, about releasing an album in an overcrowded marketplace.

"I don't really have an agenda when I release my records," he says. "I just feel like I want to share something with people. I want to give back to the creative community that I've taken from as a

listener. My hope is that people can experience the music and it touches them in some way. I've been in this business long enough to know that you can't pick your fans. Your fans pick you. And you can make yourself crazy with expectations of what you want people to take from what you're doing. But my biggest concern is I want people to feel like I'm being honest with them, and for me, to know that I've created something that I really believe in."