

By the time 2019 came to its fitful end, Andrew Marlin knew he was tired of touring. He was grateful, of course, for the ascendancy of Mandolin Orange, the duo he'd cofounded in North Carolina with fiddler Emily Frantz exactly a decade earlier. With time, they had become new flagbearers of the contemporary folk world, sweetly singing soft songs about the hardest parts of our lives, both as people and as a people. Their rise—particularly crowds that grew first to fill small dives, then the Ryman, then amphitheaters the size of Red Rocks—humbled Emily and Andrew, who became parents to Ruby late in 2018. They'd made a life of this.

Still, every night, Andrew especially was paid to relive a lifetime of grievances and griefs onstage. After 2019's *Tides of a Teardrop*, a tender accounting of his mother's early death, the process became evermore arduous, even exhausting. What's more, those tunes—and the band's entire catalogue, really—conflicted with the name Mandolin Orange, an early-20s holdover that never quite comported with the music they made. Nightly soundchecks, at least, provided temporary relief, as the band worked through a batch of guarded but hopeful songs written just after Ruby's birth. They offered a new way to think about an established act.

Those tunes are now *Watchhouse*, which would have been Mandolin Orange's sixth album but is instead their first also under the name Watchhouse, a moniker inspired by Marlin's place of childhood solace. The name, like the new record itself, represents their reinvention as a band at the regenerative edges of subtly experimental folk-rock. Challenging as they are charming, and an inspired search for personal and political goodness, these nine songs offer welcome lessons about what any of us might become when the night begins to break.

"We're different people than when we started this band," Marlin says, reflecting on all these shifts. "We're setting new intentions, taking control of this thing again."

When 2020 dawned, Emily and Andrew hatched a plan to break old habits: For the first time, they'd leave Ruby with Emily's mom and escape with their longtime bandmates to a cabin on the edge of Smith Mountain Lake, a sprawling hideaway at the foot of the Appalachians. Also for the first time, after a decade of Andrew engineering and producing most of the music the band made, they'd bring help—Josh Kaufman, the producer and multi-instrumentalist who had wowed them with his work alongside the likes of The National and his trio Bonny Light Horseman. There were no expectations. This was simply a full-band retreat with a new friend and co-producer, working together in the refulgent sunshine of grand lakeside windows.

Almost immediately, they realized this wasn't some audition; they were making *Watchhouse*. On the first day, Kaufman told Emily and Andrew to imagine this were their first record and to realize that conceptions of how they had worked, recorded, or even sounded belonged only in the past. In a way, Andrew had new permission and space to lean into his vision for what Watchhouse might become.

"Andrew is so confident in what he wants to hear, so full of ideas. Even beyond what we'd worked out together on tour with these songs, he knew what he wanted," Emily says. "Having Josh in the studio meant Andrew didn't have to bear the whole weight of getting there."

Alongside drummer Joe Westerlund, guitarist Josh Oliver, and bassist Clint Mullican, Andrew and Emily indulged novel structures and textures. “Better Way,” a kind-hearted meditation on online meanness, shifts slowly from a bluegrass trot into a spectral marvel before an immersive acoustic drone frames a new future. The gentle harmonies of “Belly of the Beast” eventually turn into a tangle above baying strings, Andrew and Emily guiding each other through the shared perils of whatever comes next.

These songs, after all, started with a fundamental shift in Emily and Andrew’s life. In the first few months after Ruby’s birth, they split the day into shifts: Emily minded Ruby during the waking hours, while Andrew sat beside Ruby all night, watching their firstborn sleep as he quietly strummed strings. In those wee hours, he allowed his writing to wander, capturing the uncanny sense of wonder and intrigue that pervades the darkest parts of night. “If I didn’t have Ruby in my hands, I had an instrument in them,” remembers Andrew. “And watching Ruby sleep, being surrounded by that mystery at night, led to a feeling of magical realism in these songs. I used melodies and ideas I’d never use.”

Long-lost relatives, for instance, gather with him around the crib in communion during “Lonely Love Affair,” mentoring him through this staggering upheaval. He expresses the fears of a new father, alleviated by the possibility and goodness he sees in his sleeping baby. These songs allowed Marlin and Frantz to take the chance Kaufman proposed because they’re about the value of doing exactly that, of trusting in grand acts borne of personal uncertainty.

Likewise, Emily’s dual turns here as lead singer are absolute breakthroughs, equally wrought from the confidence of past success and the excitement of present energy. As Emily coolly considers the ups and downs of mere existence, “Upside Down” pirouettes from the country thump of Neil Young in 1971 to the surging epiphanies of Radiohead a quarter-century later. Andrew wrote “Beautiful Flowers” after crashing into and presumably killing a butterfly with his car—this quiet triumph is a history of the automobile that doubles as a poignant chronicle of the modern tragedies and miracles we normalize. It reckons with climate change and the fatal side-effects of our industrious, industrialized nature with beguiling humility. Emily delivers all this with a gospel conviction, astral horns slowly unspooling beneath her as a reminder of the fragility at work.

With harmonies so easy they sound like kitchen-table talk, Andrew and Emily sail through “New Star,” an ode to the self-sacrifice and renewal of trying to create something, like a child, that might make the world better. Revolutionary kindness, social responsibility, collective understanding: These simple but staggering ideas are the unseen threads of *Watchhouse*, a miraculous expression of measured domestic protest.

In our era of recalcitrant typecasts and incessant cultural churn, it is rare to witness anyone press ahead into the unknown while holding fast to what’s best about their past, too. That’s what Watchhouse have done with their self-titled debut. Emily and Andrew have discarded neither their tenderness nor thoughtfulness; instead, they’ve enriched those essential qualities by submitting to the risks of new sounds, structures, and inputs. They’ve embraced surprising notions that make their steadfastness stronger.

It will be tempting to summarize this record as Watchhouse's inevitable parenthood record, or maybe the one where they got a little strange, or maybe the one where they change their name. It is, instead, a record about growing up without growing old, about experiencing the world and letting it change you, whether through the mystery of a newborn or the vagaries of improvising or the comforts of familiar and wondrous love. *Watchhouse* is a perfectly rendered link between their longtime allure as Mandolin Orange and an unwritten future as the band Watchhouse, one that's only as hopeful as we can imagine it might be.