

*Birth of Omni* began in the dark. Five years ago, when Nate Kinsella began writing his fifth album under the name Birthmark, his world, like that of so many others, felt upside down. This was early 2018, a year into the Trump presidency and amid the ubiquitous American fever of mass shootings and racist violence. Just months earlier, the dawning revelations of the MeToo movement had jolted him, ending his naivete and giving him insight into how the women in his life often saw the men in theirs. Nearing 40, he was finally a father, too, with a newborn daughter and another on the way. Into what kind of world, he sensibly wondered, was he bringing these kids? Early songs wallowed in this anxious question, the dim start of what he thought might be a not-especially-uplifting EP.

But five years later, *Birth of Omni* is a kaleidoscopic wonder of sound and sentiment, asking the same question Kinsella first posed for himself but arriving at a surprising answer—maybe a better world, in fact, if only we can all be a little more open. Opportunities to grieve and fret overflowed, he reckoned, but he also wanted to celebrate the possibility of change, the joy of wonder, the essence of being. The result is the most dazzling and dynamic album of his storied career, with heavy beats and heavenly harps, cascading harmonies and quiet hymns, brutal noise and blissful arpeggios woven into 10 songs that capture the highs and lows, the vexations and victories of marriage, parenthood, and life itself. Maybe you’ve heard every Joan of Arc, American Football, LIES, and Make Believe record, but you’ve never heard Kinsella quite like this, because he’s never sounded quite like this—totally open to every idea and emotion, unrestrained as he tries to frame the future in whatever light he can find.

The sequence of upending events that yielded those first sketches didn’t end, of course. But when the pandemic began two years into work on *Birth of Omni*, Kinsella took its suspension of reality as an invitation to forget his own rules. He warped his voice with software until he questioned if it was still his, fluttering as it did through electric fractals or stretched until it seemed to trickle with sweat. And in a series of residencies in isolated cabins and the New York City art space Pioneer Works, he dove in and out of genres like never before, fusing ASMR readings and sampled voicemails to mutated disco and cherubic pop and orchestral emoting. A panoply of guests and friends—Arone Dyer, Greg Fox, Jeff Tobias, Richmond’s Spacebomb crew, among many others—helped him reach these unexpected syntheses. What was the past in a present so unprecedented?

*Birth of Omni* is rooted in parenthood—specifically, the way it reflects back on one’s own prerogatives or prejudices. His voice distended into a codeine drip, Kinsella wonders during opener “Snowflake in My Palm (Not for Long)” if giving his time and attention to his kids means the end of his own life, or the thing that actually makes him matter. During “Butterfly,” as beautiful as an early Sufjan Stevens symphony, he cavorts with his giggling daughters in the backyard, only to realize that their innocent game of chase presages the way they may one day need to flee some toxic dude. (A cover of Joan Armatrading’s secretly devastating “Baby Woncha Come Home,” sung by Dyer, affirms such encounters.) Can his kids, as he sings, “help me change”?

“I’m Awake” steadily rises from a piano meditation on memory and ontology into an ode to maintaining a sense of innocence even as experience comes. Kinsella and his kids work through the spelling of “rainbow” until they get it right; the song shudders brilliantly, the future opening

like a break in ominous clouds. There's that change, cast in love. One track later, however, gunshots cutting through the sound of screaming children interrupt closer "Pretty Flowers." It's an honest reflection of the doomsday reel that runs through this new father's mind when it wanders, a jarring reminder of life's real stakes. But "Pretty Flowers" returns in a tribute to his children, to "the good that I feel." It's *Birth of Omni*'s arc, cast in miniature.

Many of these songs confront the realities of aging, or the exigencies of long romantic relationships morphing into domestic partnerships. He ponders how to recapture a bit of that youthful lust in "Red Meadow," offering up what he can—new clothes, a haircut, a romp in a field—to disrupt their routine "in a little box on a hill." But during "Boyfriend," he coos like Usher about washing dishes and taking babies on neighborhood walks; it is a fully adult seduction, Kinsella saying come hither above rattling bass and ricocheting synths, apron still on. Roles and the relational bonds between us change, he realizes, and it's up to us to make good on that.

Indeed, as he worked on *Birth of Omni*, Kinsella reckoned with his own sexuality, coming to grips with the acceptance that he'd never really fit into the social straitjacket of masculinity he'd tried to don neatly for 40 years. Now with a family and approaching middle age, could he admit that he was more than someone's straight husband? Could he deal with it? The gorgeous and compulsive "Rodney" is a lustful song for the would-be paramour that gives the track its name, countered by Kinsella's awareness that maybe the escapades of his youth are behind him, that he's got other commitments in his life. Shudder to Think's Craig Wedren backs Kinsella here, playing the real role of the supportive voice who has been here before. We make choices for those we love, Kinsella affirms during "Rodney," but the adventures of our imaginations can and should remain endless.

Kinsella has a confession about *Birth of Omni*: No one may care about what he calls his "dad record," his reckonings with approaching middle age, or the manifold musical fascinations of his chameleonic songs. Perhaps that's bad for business, he admits, especially since Polyvinyl has been such a steadfast advocate of his work. But isn't that kind of vulnerability and self-reckoning the point of *Birth of Omni*, to make yourself and hopefully your kids and maybe even the world a little better by being honest about and open with yourself? After all, he wrote, recorded, produced, mixed, and mastered this album alone, because these are notes to self, personal reminders of how he wants to exist moving forward. *Birth of Omni* began in the dark, but it exists now in the full light of an essential reality: Our roles change, as do we. There's hope in knowing there's still somewhere else to go.