

Finding perspective in music again

Indie folk rocker Bathgate plays Hanson Theatre, prepares to release new EP

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Chris Bathgate's self-described "vehicle curse" began shortly after releasing the most important record of his career.

After a decade toiling in Ann Arbor's music scene, "Salt Year," the singer-songwriter's 2011 album, led to an extensive cross-country tour, a Tiny Desk Concert for NPR, and being voted a top performer to see at South By Southwest (SXSW). While Bathgate's music career seemed to be coming together, everything else in his life — including a string of vehicles — seemed to be falling apart.

"The time leading up to the album was very tumultuous and the time after was very tumultuous, including what I call my vehicle curse," Bathgate says by phone from his home in Grand Rapids. "We threw a rod on the way to the NPR concert, we crashed the car we borrowed on the way back home. I've had a vehicle fire that almost burned down my house. I've burned through nine vehicles since then."

For Bathgate, the "vehicle curse" was symptomatic of some deeper internal struggles he was having romantically, financially and musically. So at a time when he should have been contemplating his next career move, Bathgate walked away.

"I was booking shows and selling out places that I had never played before and that all felt really good, but all the pressure was really immense," he says. "I was re-examining my life, as people who just turn 30 tend to do, and it felt like a good time to take a break. I had been working really hard for 10 years and sort of needed to collect my thoughts and make sure what I was doing was what I really wanted to be doing. So, I sort of dismantled my world and started to look at the pieces pretty closely and put them back together again."

Five years later, Bathgate feels like he is now reinventing rather than reassembling his music career. He's revisited a



Photo provided / Chris Bathgate

Chris Bathgate, the long-time Ann Arbor-based musician who recently moved to Grand Rapids, performs Friday as part of the Living Room Series in the Hanson Theatre at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center in Benton Harbor.

collection of songs penned in 2012, and will be releasing them in a new six-track EP, "Old Factory," due Feb. 4 on Ann Arbor's Quite Scientific label.

After a recent move to Grand Rapids, he's also begun reintroducing his brand of indie folk to Michigan audiences, including Friday's show as part of the Hanson Theatre Living Room Series at Lake Michigan College Mendel Center.

"I'm elated," Bathgate says. "I've lived with these songs for a long time and I'm excited for people to hear this music. I feel reinvigorated, and I'm excited to play. One of my favorite bands in Kalamazoo, The Go Rounds (Graham Parsons, Adam Danis, Drew Tyner, Mike Savina) are my backing band for this tour, and, in my opinion, they are one of the tightest bands in Michigan. It's incredible to hear them play my songs."

The first single from "Old Factory," "Calvary," which features layers of piano

IF YOU GO

Who: Chris Bathgate

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: Hanson Theatre, Lake Michigan College Mendel Center, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15, \$10 for students, seniors and Mainstage Series members

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.chrisbathgate.org

and sweet harmonies, has already been highlighted by NPR. Written while traveling and recorded in Detroit and New Orleans, the singer wraps an ambivalent but ultimately optimistic message with the lyric "Ain't it good to be alive / with

the wound still in your side?"

Another highlight of the EP that hits closer to home is a song called "Red Arrow Highway," written after Bathgate traveled through the area after an ice storm.

"There's this thing that happens where winter hasn't quite set in yet and there's this freezing rain and it covers the trees in these sheets of translucent ice," Bathgate says. "I was driving with someone who was asleep next to me and that's where some of the lyrics come from, that sort of moment of being really struck by a landscape and struck by other things as well."

Nature has played a significant role in Bathgate's life. He was born in Ames, Iowa, spent much of his early childhood in Kentucky and his middle and high school years in rural Illinois in a town

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Photo provided / Chris Bathgate

Chris Bathgate, who performs Friday as part of the Living Room Series in the Hanson Theatre at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center in Benton Harbor, will release his new EP, "Old Factory," on Feb. 4.

BATHGATE

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just outside Rockford.

"Most of my life has been spent in the rural Midwest," Bathgate says, adding that his penchant for music is a family trait. "My brothers are superb musicians and really got me hooked on music at a young age. Before I could play guitar – before I was 16 – I would obsessively listen to records. I would copy down lyrics and try to quantify the song. From a really early age I was interested in song and its form. I guess to try to understand the power they seem to hold over people."

Bathgate landed in Ann Arbor as a

student at the University of Michigan, and quickly found opportunities to play.

"There's a lot of room for artists to grow in that city and in that scene," he says. "There's a lot of open mics that the university offers and The Ark is this huge resource for people. They have an open mic where people vote for you and if you win enough times you can actually win a full set, which was actually my first full set at a proper venue back in 2005 when I won their open mic."

That caught the attention of Quite Scientific, which released Bathgate's studio debut "A Cork Tale Wake" (2007), featuring one of his most widely heard songs, "Serpentine." The UK label One Little Indian picked it up and Bathgate

began one of several European solo-tours.

"I'm used to playing back yards and coffee shops and suddenly I found myself in London," he says. "It was quite the shock to have my dream seem viable."

Bathgate released five additional albums with Quite Scientific, including his most recent and prominent album to date "Salt Year," before his self-imposed hiatus, which including a stint teaching poetry and creative writing in New England, doing soundtrack work in Detroit and California, and "spending as much time outdoors as I could." He also became the songwriter and producer for a collaborative piano project called Skulls, which he describes as "mostly maraud-

ing, sad music."

But when Ypsilanti musician and friend Misty Lyn asked Bathgate to open a few shows for her band, The Big Beautiful, last fall, he realized it was time.

"When she asked me to open a show, things had finally become clear, and it seemed like a good time to come back," Bathgate says. "I spent a lot of time engaging in music but not in the public eye. I was still writing and composing the past five years, and then I suddenly decided to come back to this music because it made sense and I was ready. I think I learned that perspective is really healthy when making art."

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