

“I’ve heard that wisdom comes from two things: traversing the peaks and valleys that surround falling in, being in and staying in love, as well as good ol’ fashioned experience, the repetitions and mistakes it takes to achieve excellence,” says Wilder Woods, “but I don’t think you can understand either love or experience unless you’re willing to take the first step out of the “comfortable” and dive headfirst into the unknown.”

With his brilliant self-titled debut, Wilder Woods, also known to many as Bear Rinehart, is doing precisely that. A timeless blend of classic soul, infectious R&B, and modern pop, the record captures the sound of a veteran songwriter confidently breaking new ground, blazing his own distinctive trail through uncharted territory with comfort and style. Simultaneously vulnerable and self-assured, the songs reflect both the rich well of experience from which they’re drawn and the bold leap that they represent, pairing intimate, introspective lyricism with effortless swagger and monster hooks. Wilder Woods is a new side of Rinehart, but one that he’s more than ready to share.

Drawing the inspiration for his new musical moniker from his two sons, Wilder Rinehart and Woods Rinehart, Wilder Woods knew he couldn’t expect his sons to see the value in taking bold, potentially life changing chances if he wasn’t willing to do it himself. So, foregoing the comfort and security he’d built across a storied career in music thus far, he set about building a brand new sound from the ground up, one that was refined yet approachable, sophisticated yet raw, modern yet classic. He crafted songs with a series of collaborators in Nashville (where he and his family would soon move full time) and teamed up with rising producer Gabe Simon, whose indie pop approach proved to be the perfect counterweight to his own old school sensibilities.

“This music represents a new direction and something totally fresh for me,” he says, “so I wanted to find a producer that I had never worked with before who could match that energy. Gabe was perfect because he came from a completely different musical world, but he was still somebody I could get really deep into guitar tones and harmonic structure and rhythmic ideas with.”

While the early demos often included digital elements, Wilder Woods assembled an all-star band, including but not limited to Tyler Burkum, Jeremy Lutito, Ian Fitchuk, Darren King, Jesse Baylin and The Watson Twins, to record everything live in the studio, humanizing the intricate arrangements with passionate, explosive performances. The result is a singular blend of old and new, like a vintage Eldorado retrofitted with a 21st century engine. It’s a captivating duality, one that mirrors the split personality of the project as a whole.

“There are two distinct sides to this album,” says Wilder Woods. “There’s the Wilder side, which is all about love and flirtation and desire, and the Woods side, which is more serious and reflective. We all contain multitudes, and you have to recognize and honor all the different parts of yourself if you ever want to feel whole.”

The record opens with the seductive “Light Shine In,” a gorgeous meditation that revs its way up from a delicate whisper to a spiritual roar. Fueled by Woods’ stop-you-in-your-tracks vocals, the songs play out like a Wilder Woods manifesto, a stream of consciousness plea that sets the stage perfectly for an album all about understanding, forgiveness, and self-love in a world that’s conditioned us to feel like we’ll never be enough. The tender “Someday Soon,” meanwhile, wrestles with internalized doubt and shame, and the stripped-down “Religion” challenges conventional notions of happiness and success.

As much as Wilder Woods’ children inspired him to put pen to paper on this album, it’s clear that his wife, Mary Reames Rinehart, is an ever-present muse. He taps into the lightning he felt the first time they met on the explosive “Electric Woman,” offers reassurance in the face of uncertainty on “Mary, You’re Wrong,” and imagines the life ahead of them in their new home on the gospel-influenced “Hillside House.”

“Marriage and fatherhood have shown me that the hard times are what teach you the most about who you are,” he reflects. “Nobody else can give that to you. You have to experience it for yourself.”

His burning desire to experience the unknown reached an apex during a rare break in 2017 from his relentless tour schedule with NEEDTOBREATHE, the chart-topping rock band he co-founded in his hometown of Possum Kingdom, South Carolina. Bear Rinehart felt as if he was watching his sons grow up at light speed. He wanted to stop time, if only for a moment, and write a letter, both to himself and to his kids. Looking back on his own childhood, 15 years with NEEDTOBREATHE, chart topping releases, GRAMMY nominations, multiple sold out tours and the like, he asked himself the harder questions:

What would life look like if we strive to enjoy the journey as much as destination, the struggle as much the victory? What risks would we take if we could see our mistakes for the gifts that they really are?

In that respect, ‘Wilder Woods’ is as much about self-discovery as it is about leading by example, about daring you to be bold and take your own leap towards realizing your truest self. Think of these songs as little beacons of light, lanterns to help guide you on your passage into the unknown. As Thoreau put it, “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” Wilder Woods is proof of that.

