

M A R K E R E L L I

During a performance in summer 2020, **Mark Erelli** looked down at his guitar neck and couldn't believe what he saw. Or rather, what he couldn't see: his fingers on the frets. Soon after, a diagnosis of retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a degenerative eye disease, would bring some answers, but it also yielded new questions. Does diminished eyesight correlate with lesser insight? Does your songwriting change when your perception of the world around you changes? These questions, and **Erelli's** hunt for creative agency, are at the heart of his new album *Lay Your Darkness Down* (due Feb 3 on Soundly Music).

Initially, **Erelli's** new physical limitations created a feeling of immense isolation. In need of connection and catharsis, he turned as he often did to songwriting. *"The only way I could console myself was to know that I was still going to be able to have some creative agency," Erelli notes. "I could then bring whatever I was feeling or wanting to express into reality."* He began to craft songs with an intricate, labored approach like never before. *"It's much more like an oil painting, where you're layering different tones and colors one at a time."* His initial painstaking approach was inspired by '70s musician Jeff Lynne, former ELO member and famed producer for George Harrison and Tom Petty. *"I've never gotten this finely attuned to the level of musical and technical detail that I did this time around. That was probably a way of compensating for the lack of control that I had in other parts of my life,"* he reflects on a time in the immediate wake of the diagnosis.

"I'm still very early in it, but there is also no way to know how quickly or how incrementally this will progress," he says. *"There's a definite diagnosis, and embedded within that is this uncertainty. Will my condition remain fairly steady, or will I lose more sight?"* It is this very uncertainty, however, that has brought **Erelli** mental clarity and a creative hunger.

Erelli turns adversity into finely embroidered rock songs that burn with urgency. Following full-bodied rock forebears Tom Petty, George Harrison, and Roy Orbison, *Lay Your Darkness Down* reflects on the unknown glories of this planet and love's healing power. With an excited finger plucked acoustic guitar and vocal coos on "Sense of Wonder," we're reminded to dive into the world's vibrancy with awe and unabashed joy. *"It's a fantastic world that we live in. It's easy to forget, as the emails pile up and the deadlines and errands and all the bullshit, those small details that are both the small details that make the world so fabulous, along with the cosmic ones,"* he adds.

Throughout this album, **Erelli** contains a similar sense of resolve and relatability to Petty's Full Moon Fever. Although there's plenty of shadow and light play on the album, **Erelli** makes clear that this project isn't about blindness. Rather, these tracks document an artist's reinvigorated lust for life. *"I could not have accessed the emotions and the observations that inspired these songs without realizing that I was losing my sight."* He adds, *"In some way, I am grateful for that."*

Older songs took on new meaning. Metaphors became literal. *"I got my diagnosis and the song became literal."* "Up against the night / It's coming on strong," he sings with resolve on "Up Against the Night." *"The sun would start to go down, especially in the winter, and before I was aware of what was happening, I would be freaking out,"* he says. The song nods to fear and doubt. Can he keep strong against the impending darkness? After singing and playing nearly every note and instrumental part, **Erelli** was ready to call in his normal rhythm section to replace his bass and drum parts, and enlisted co-writers like GRAMMY-winner Lori McKenna to help with songcraft. Lay Your Darkness Down morphed into a literal reconciliation of life's trials and human frailties, the sound of adversity transformed into finely-embroidered rock n' roll, burning with urgency. These songs are not only affirmations to keep moving forward with love and inner light, but a siren song for anyone lost amongst the shadows. Lay Your Darkness Down doesn't hold grandiose answers for how to specifically maneuver unknown.

Mark Erelli reminds us to push forward through the fog; because we can't see a path ahead, doesn't mean we won't get to the destination we're in search of. Such as he sings on "Fuel for the Fire," "You can't live in fear / But you can use it as fuel for the fire."

<https://www.markerelli.com/>