



T. Hardy Morris ***Dude, The Obscure (2018)***

Fresh outta high school, T. Hardy Morris caught his first show at the historic Georgia Theater in Athens. Up on stage, the late Vic Chesnutt (backed by members of Widespread Panic) played a benefit concert in the memory of Lee Lawrence, a locally renowned sound engineer from Morris's hometown who had died in a tragic tour van crash.

The sonic energy and raw emotion that night solidified in Morris the same call to adventure that had launched other Athens-born bands (R.E.M, B-52's, The Drive-By Truckers, The Elephant 6 Collective, and more) and put the artsy college town on the map.

"A lot of southern artists who might not feel quite right in their hometowns migrate to Athens. Drawn here by the sound of a weird Southern heart, I guess," Morris said. "I knew I had to live there."

At its heart, Morris' third solo-record, "*Dude, The Obscure*," released via the New West Records imprint Normaltown Records, captures the Athens songwriter contemplating the paradox of everyday life. In captivating songs, Morris sheds the traps of ambition and nostalgia and uncovers the strange satisfaction of living in the moment.

Morris beautifully warns us not to succumb to the fear of missing out that stands in the way of contentment on the album's defining moment, "Cheating Life, Living Death." *Every dream is an invitation/ To leave your love up on the shelf/ When you walk out every evening/ Cheating life and living death.*

On *Dude, The Obscure*, Morris deftly side-steps the nostalgic, storytelling perspective in his adored solo-debut, *Audition Tapes*, a collection of songs inspired by defining moments growing up on the edge as America's modern opioid epidemic struck the rural South.

Audition Tapes started as a handful of "back-pocket songs" Morris wrote while touring with Dead Confederate, the psychedelic southern rock project conceived with friends he grew up with in Augusta, Georgia.

Dead Confederate's first single, "The Rat" anchored their debut record and introduced Morris to life on the road. They played 200-plus shows a year, opened for R.E.M., toured Europe with Dinosaur Jr. and made their national television debut on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien."

"We did everything, played the big festivals, toured half the world, but after our original drummer left the band, it kind of changed," Morris said. "We still consider ourselves a band, somewhat, but we just needed to slow down after a while."

Out on tour, Morris met Deer Tick's John McCauley, a kindred creative spirit who invited him to join an impromptu Nashville jam session where, somehow, the indie-rock supergroup Diamond Rugs was born.

"I didn't know most of the guys. We just hung out and recorded whatever song came up. We didn't have a name, and weren't even a band until the first album was almost done," Morris said. "It was the purest way to start a band or make a record."

Diamond Rugs — Morris, McCauley, Bryan Dufresne (Six Finger Satellite), Robbie Crowell (Deer Tick), Ian Saint Pe (Black Lips) and Steve Berlin (Los Lobos)— produced two records at the converted garage studio tucked in indie-rock producer Adam Landry's overgrown backyard.

"Adam works like a maniac, gets invested in every song and doesn't let anything slide until we feel good about it," Morris said. "Right away, I knew I wanted to make records there with him."

Since then, Landry and his partner Justin Collins produced and engineered Morris' first two solo records, including *Drownin' On A Mountaintop*, a loud country-grunge affair recorded in a mad rush before his first child was born. Landry agreed, and his along-for-the-ride vibe, and so many for-the-sake-of-the-song moments cemented their personal and professional connection.

"My first impression of Hardy? Musically, this guy is out there, like, Jimi Hendrix meets the Sex Pistols," Landry said. "And personally, we value the same things outside of music. That's the stuff that makes creative partnerships last."

Morris made the familiar pilgrimage to Landry's studio to record *Dude, The Obscure* in a series of almost secretive recording sessions that were different from the others thanks to his journey.

Even the album title, *Dude, The Obscure*, hints at the songwriter's self-discovery. In the homage to English author Thomas Hardy's novel, *Jude, The Obscure*, Morris reveals his deep love for literature, philosophy and poetry — along with a secret about his stage name.

"Thomas Hardy is my given name, and 'Dude, The Obscure' is a moniker I considered using as an artist," Morris said. "The hat tip to the novel seemed appropriate for the album because it deals with doubts, joys, regrets and spirituality, a lifelong journey and such. Thankfully, my life hasn't endured even a fraction of the tragedy the novel holds, but life is certainly complicated and unique, an individual experience for everyone, no matter how obscure."

Morris and Landry took their time in the studio and gave each song the opportunity to grow unaffected by outside influence except the magic that happens when two friends lock themselves in a smoky shed to make music, and a few pals stop by.

"We tried to stay present in the recording process. We weren't concerned with genre or style to take songs in any direction other than where they seemed to take us. If it was creepy, we followed the creepy," Morris said.

"The record has a darkness but it's held in harmony with a light that acknowledges the other side of our personalities. It's not as important to drive out the shadows as it is to acknowledge their existence and keep them where they belong."

In a lot of ways, *Dude, The Obscure* flows from a conflicting creative space Morris found at the intersection of dreams and reality. Each song on the album seems compelled by Morris' desire to help himself— and others— conquer the void of everyday meaninglessness. It's an effort philosopher Maurice Blanchot described as the anguish of writing: "You have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend."

Morris takes that leap to find universal truth by navigating sometimes opposing perspectives within moments that change lives.

On “Homemade Bliss,” Morris’s haunting vibrato (backed up by McCauley) perfectly frames a fatalist view on our uncertain future with poetic precision: *“Wherever it is that you are standing/ That is the center of the earth / Wherever it is that we are going / We have been going there since birth.”*

“NY” is the familiar story of how the big city, for better or worse, changes people who search for better lives in different ZIP Codes only to discover you *“Can’t fight the everyday / No matter where you are.”*

“The Night Everything Changed” (featuring Vanessa Carlton) examines the dramatic cumulative effect of nights of debauchery from the perspective of a man confronted by the consequences. *“Chaos, brought on the spot / Got what we needed / Wanted it or not.”*

Lyrical, Morris doubles down on the theme of living through the aftermath of one’s choices on, “When The Record Skips”: *Where will you hide when I cave in / When the party is over, and the record skips.”*

With *Dude, The Obscure*, T. Hardy Morris has stepped into the sun and shed himself of the genre-bending labels critics used to define his earlier works.

Within 11 powerful songs, the Athens rocker reveals scars and shares lessons from an indie-rock odyssey that has taken him around the world and back home to find himself a little older and closer to something like enlightenment.

And just in time for a new journey to begin.