

Covenhoven's Fourth: Joel Van Horne discusses his fourth album and playing Willits venue

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Andrew Travers

Denver-based musician touring new songs with Friday night stop at TACAW

As singer-songwriter Joel Van Horne, who performs as Covenhoven, began work on the new songs that would eventually comprise his fourth album, "IV," the Denver-based musician found himself starting not with the poetic lyrics or piano or six-string guitar.

He started instead with a drumbeat.

Van Horne is no drummer ("I dabble," he said in a recent phone interview) but still he found himself building these new folky tracks from the drums up.

"I just thought, 'What if I kind of turned songwriting on its head and started with the drums, which are oftentimes the last thing — or one of the final things — that you start to flesh out on a song,'" he explained from home in Denver.

Van Horne just returned to Colorado from a five-week run of shows on the West Coast, Montana and Utah. He



Denver-based Covenhoven will headline the Arts Campus at Willits on Friday, May 13. (Steve Stanton/Courtesy image)

has steadily grown a national following over the past decade and occasionally made his way to the Roaring Fork Valley for intimate performances at Belly Up. He returns Friday to perform at the Arts Campus at Willits.

The new starting point, naturally, led to different results in the songs.

"It causes me to go down a totally different path when I pick up the guitar or the piano or whatever comes next," Van Horne said. "It was a new way to explore songwriting."

He has toured the new songs, released in the fall of 2021, in different forms and with varied arrangements, including solo and duo configurations. He is coming to TACAW with a quartet

version of Covenhoven — with Van Horne on vocals and guitar with support from a drummer, bassist and rhythm guitarist/synth player — which serves the new songs well and allows him to play some new tracks that he can't do solo.

The latest single, the evocative road poem "Monterey," for instance, was among the drum-born songs and is driven by a slow-building beat.

"That's such a drum-heavy song," Van Horne said. "The groove is so important that I can play it solo, but I prefer not to."

The new album wasn't purely a pandemic project born of quarantines and the

long 2020-21 shutdown of the live music industry.

Van Horne had begun to record songs for what would become "IV" in early 2020 and continued as the world shut down and changed. Elements of the stay-home experience and its mental and emotional shock made their way into songs and the spirit of the record, slyly and inevitably.

"It is certainly not intentionally a pandemic record," Van Horne said. "It's not something that was in reaction to the pandemic. But the fact that it was recorded through lockdown, through that period where things felt really anxious and strange and nobody really knew what was happening and where we were headed, that certainly had an effect on me and found its way into some of the songs."

Among the pandemic-inflected songs is "Everything I Said Yesterday," a quiet ballad about, as Van Horne put it,

"everything moving too quick for a lot of us to keep up" and grappling with strained relationships. It started as a demo in 2019 but he added new lines and let the weariness of pandemic seep into it enough that it could be read as a song about pandemic stress.

While Covenhoven's first three full-length albums were inspired by specific locations, "IV" takes a broader view and doesn't constrain itself to a single theme. In keeping with its ambitions, the album includes a large cast of guest musicians and producers including Denver stalwarts like Ben Wysocki of the Fray, Gregory Alan Isakov and Julie Davis.

Van Horne grew up in Lakewood in a musical family and has been on the Denver indie music scene since his teen years alongside those artists and their bands, bouncing around coffee shops and the Mercury Cafe, listening to OpenAir 102.3, playing several

times at the Underground Music Showcase.

Van Horne is just now starting to write new songs for his next album and plotting a fall tour through the Midwest and East Coast. But this summer he is staying close to home, playing around Denver and the mountains.

"The musical community here has been amazing," he said. "It's been really inspiring. I feel pretty lucky to have grown up here and been a part of this."