

Rachael Kilgour
My Father Loved Me

“I think I'm gonna make a Dad album,” songwriter Rachael Kilgour heard herself blurt out one afternoon in an Asheville recording studio. She was in the final days of tracking her EP *Game Changer* (2019), and in the final months, as it would turn out, of her father's life. She had just written a new song, “Dad Worked Hard.”

“I hadn't written any other songs about him at that point - I certainly hadn't considered making an entire album in his honor. I had no way of knowing how little time he had left or how much his death would transform me. But when the producer suggested recording ‘Dad Worked Hard’ for the new EP, I just knew I needed to hold onto it. So I said it: no, I think I'm gonna make a dad album.”

And she did. Kilgour's exquisite fourth full-length collection, *My Father Loved Me*, is a tribute to her late father, produced by JUNO Award-winning songwriter Rose Cousins and recorded in the senior Kilgour's native Canada. In the spare, often gutting language for which she is known, Kilgour gives us a complex portrait of a man as seen through his daughter's eyes. With unwavering acuity she poses questions about identity, inheritance, and grief, and affirms the value of one ordinary working man's life to an often indifferent world.

Like her father, Kilgour is a hard worker. She comes by her considerable skills honestly, honing her craft over the past decade in listening rooms, festivals, concert halls, and recording studios, and picking up accolades along the way. Kilgour first attained notoriety outside her native Duluth, MN as the grand prize winner of the 2015 international NewSong Music Performance & Songwriting Competition and winner of the 2017 Kerrville New Folk Contest. She has been featured at NYC's Lincoln Center, at The Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. and at the Sundance Film Festival. Her oft-noted “unapologetic lyrics” (*Rolling Stone*) and “master crafted indie folk” sensibilities (*Billboard*) are on full display in this latest collection of songs.

Created during the period of time spanning her father's dementia diagnosis, his death, and its immediate aftermath, the songs that would become *My Father Loved Me* were a way for Kilgour to keep pace with her shapeshifting grief. “Dad Worked Hard” speaks about the sorrow of watching her once steady father deteriorate in body and mind, and the injustice of not being able to afford appropriate care for a man who worked long days as a building contractor all his life. In the song “Heart on Fire,” Kilgour transforms one of her recurring intrusive thoughts—the image of her father's familiar form entering the crematorium—into a profound testimony to the persistence of infinite love beyond the finite body.

“I initially wrote these songs for myself, but I also was writing them for him,” Kilgour reflects. “My dad was very affectionate and playful, he was generous with his

time and energy and taught us each how to work with our hands and to earn a person's trust. But there was a through-line of anxiety or self-doubt in him that I, myself, am very familiar with." The songs, then, became a reassurance, of sorts, beamed out to her father beyond the grave: your humble life was worthy, your flaws were human, your love is still with me.

As Kilgour began to consider the recording process for the record, she felt animated by the idea of working in her father's home country. In *Rose Cousins* she found both a valuable guide to the Canadian music scene and a worthy co-creator in this labor of love. With an icy Toronto February as their backdrop, the two gathered at Union Sound Company in 2022 to begin tracking with engineer Chris Stringer. Cousins had enlisted the talents of some trusted collaborators, Canadian musicians Dean Drouillard (electric guitar), Joshua Van Tassel (percussion/synth), and Devon Henderson (bass), to bring the basic tracks into focus.

"Working with a songwriter in the producer's chair made a huge difference. Rose wasn't approaching the production from the perspective of 'What's a cool aesthetic? What sounds are hot now?' Instead, she took the time to understand the story I was telling and made sure that her decisions only enhanced the truth of it."

Cousins's restrained production has done just that. From the portentous establishing shot in the opening title track ("There's a sharp lookin' man with a farmer's tan in my baby book / Shoulders back, he leaned into a broken world."), through to the final decaying synth swell at the end of "The Smell of Autumn Leaves," Kilgour's incisive narrative, delivered through emotive, expertly contoured vocal melodies, guides the sonic choices.

Where Kilgour sings the record's thesis statement in the title track ("My father loved me / When he could not love himself") her voice and guitar are first wrenchingly alone, then gradually become swaddled in clouds of pedal steel and cymbal swells. In "How I Was Made," a song that imagines Kilgour's parents' courtship and admits to the challenges of marriage, a lush orchestration of strings and brass conjures the mythic love story Kilgour's father dreamed of.

To say that this is a sad record would be reductive. Yes, Kilgour traffics in themes of loss, regret, and pain, avoiding forced silver linings and facile lessons-learned. But her sober observations are part of what makes her writing feel trustworthy and, ultimately, hopeful.

"None of us are particularly emotionally literate, and 'sad' is an easy one to rely on when you feel yourself tearing up," she says. "But I tear up about things I'm extremely happy with as well. And the crying that happens when I sing these songs isn't, 'how horrible, my dad died!' The feeling is more like, 'oh! I really loved him!'"

This love is no more evident than in “Family Secrets” when Kilgour sings, from within a cluster of clarinets, about finding the beauty in all the qualities—yes, the good, the bad, and the ugly—that we inherit from our forebears. “To find a strength in what looked like a weakness / Take your old family secrets and wear them with pride.” Or songs, like “Bobby” and “Ontario,” where she looks back in new-found empathy at her father's early life in Canada, and the challenges that came with leaving his beloved homeland behind. “Ontario, Do you still love my father?” she sings from her childhood perspective, an epiphany brewing on a family car trip across the border to her father’s small hometown. “Ontario, Could you love a traitor’s daughter?”

“What does a dying man owe us?” is Kilgour's challenge to her listeners, in the existential waltz “Ghost of My Father.” If My Father Loved Me started out as a child’s elegy for her parent, in the end, it became something else. Through these songs, Kilgour has revealed something about what the living owe each other.

“With these mourning rituals, I think we're really convincing ourselves that our own lives matter, that we will have an impact and be remembered. My father had a very average life for a man of his time, a small life that didn't involve grandeur, of any kind at all.” Kilgour thinks before speaking again. “I needed to prove to myself—and to the world—that lives lived like that are still worth celebrating, still worth living.”

50 Word Bio

Rachael Kilgour is a Canadian-American songwriter and performing artist whose plain-spoken work and intimate performances have endeared her to listeners and fellow songwriters alike. The award winning songwriter (2015 NewSong Music, 2017, Kerrville New Folk) releases her fourth album, written in memory of her late father, in September of 2023.

100 Word Bio

Rachael Kilgour is a Canadian-American songwriter and performing artist whose plain-spoken, lyric-driven work and intimate performances have endeared her to listeners and fellow artists alike. The 2015 grand prize winner of the NewSong Music Competition and a winner of the 2017 Kerrville New Folk Contest, she has been featured at NYC’s Lincoln Center and The Kennedy Center in Washington DC. Her forthcoming album, written in memory of her late father and produced by Rose Cousins, will be released in September of 2023.