

EMILY BRIGHT: Musician Charlie Parr has been a mainstay of Minnesota's blues scene. He was born in Austin, Minnesota, and now splits his time between Duluth and St. Paul. He has more than a dozen albums to his name, and the latest was just released on Friday. It's called *Rooming House*. Charlie Parr joins me now in studio. Hello.

CHARLIE PARR: Hello. Thanks for having me.

EMILY BRIGHT: You call this album a conceptual folk opera. I'm intrigued by that. What does that mean?

CHARLIE PARR: I have no idea.

EMILY BRIGHT: You just grimaced when I asked you the question.

CHARLIE PARR: Yeah, well, I tried not to call it anything. You get record labels and stuff that call stuff stuff. It's seven songs kind of about one thing. So I guess it's a-- I think of it as an audio play, really.

EMILY BRIGHT: Yeah. You were writing how the inspiration for this album comes from the many places you lived in, Dinkytown in the West Bank, getting a room in a house with other people that you might not have anything else in common with. Take us back to that time in your life and what made you think about it now.

CHARLIE PARR: Well, that time I dropped out of high school in the early '80s. And I ended up migrating to Minneapolis. A lot of my friends from Austin did the same thing. You always tried to escape your hometown. And when I got up here, I found that the cheapest place I could live was a rooming house.

The one that I landed in first was on the West Bank. It was right behind the Mixed Blood Theatre. It was only \$60 a month. And I had a really nice room. I had a corner room with two windows. I just immediately felt at home there. You meet people immediately. You live in a house with people. You share a bathroom. You share a kitchen. You can't help but meet them.

Everybody was really friendly and kind. People shared food. It's hard to cook for one. So if someone was making food, if they didn't have their friends over, they would offer it around. So I tried to do the same. I fell into this kind of attitude of sharing and thinking about the people that lived in the house. And that felt really, really comforting to me.

EMILY BRIGHT: Well, a lot of that comes up in the title track from the album. Let's hear it.

[CHARLIE PARR, "ROOMING HOUSE"] Didn't take long for the fish to cook

Sara grabbed a fork and had a look

She said it was right out of the book

And we all got ready for a bite

But we all got sick that night

It gave old John quite a fright

To see the bathroom in the morning light

And us laying around the kitchen floor

EMILY BRIGHT: It was probably good the mic was off. I laughed when that we all got sick from sharing around that fish. Is this a-- tell us the story about writing this song.

CHARLIE PARR: I wanted to get all the characters together because these folks don't exist. I imagine that they're probably composites of people that I've lived with. But I couldn't put my finger on anything specific. In this song, I wanted to get everybody together. I wanted them to all to be in the same room.

I'm wanting to introduce the big problem of the record, which is a serious terminal illness, which, at the end of the song-- and it's kind of not a great transition, but at the end of the song, one character doesn't get better. The food poisoning goes away with everybody else, and this one character realizes that he's actually really, really sick. And that's where the song kind of ends. And so that's-- everything from that point on has got to do with this one character and his illness.

EMILY BRIGHT: I want to play a song that seems to get right to that in a moment. But first, are you always observing people?

CHARLIE PARR: No, no, I'm not. I try to keep to myself. I'm not trying to bother anybody. Just that I've-- when I left Austin, I liked living in the city. Austin, I lived on the outskirts. In the back of the house was soybean fields. And in the front of the house was the neighbor's house.

And when I moved to the West Bank and was immediately in a neighborhood that never seemed to go to sleep, at that time, you could go to the Global Cafe, which is now Hard Times, but you can go to the Global Cafe anytime of the day or night, have a cup of coffee, and play chess with a stranger. And you couldn't do that anywhere in my hometown, ever. And it was such a unique and amazing experience. I just immediately felt fascinated and comforted by that. I don't know why.

I had no job, and I could busk up \$60 over the course of a month. And friends of mine from the house and I could dumpster dive at various places that threw away perfectly good food. Or the new Riverside Cafe would give away food in the evenings. And you could eat cheap or free. And so just being around people all the time, you just absorb stuff. And I don't think I'm staring at anybody.

EMILY BRIGHT: No, I certainly didn't mean the question that way. But you seem to be-- you're such a storyteller. So I was just wondering if you're one of those people who's always gleaning stories or taking notice.

CHARLIE PARR: I guess. I'm interested. I'm always curious. Also, this is fiction. And the thing about fiction for me is I've made a world up in my head that I'm comfortable in. I have some mental health issues that I won't get into. But I have, from the time I was little, I have had a very, very vibrant imagination life. And it never went away. And it's still there. I'm making up stories all the time. Today, I'm taking the train over here, and there's all sorts of fun stuff happening on the train that just gets stored away somewhere.

EMILY BRIGHT: Absolutely.

CHARLIE PARR: I can't help it.

EMILY BRIGHT: Well, let's play another song. This one's called "What's So Funny About Universal Health Care?"

[CHARLIE PARR, "WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE?"]

Well, I took a look at that WebMD

It says, I'd get your affairs in order if it were me

Not what I wanted to hear

More fuel for my fear

Oh, John says he'll fix me up

Started mixing stuff in with my food

I'm in the bathroom again

He said that's part of the plan

Is it? I don't know

EMILY BRIGHT: Talk to me more about the health care story arc of this album.

CHARLIE PARR: Well, my character doesn't have insurance, doesn't have any money. He really doesn't have a lot of income, a little bit of Supplemental Security Income or something like that, but not enough to make a difference. The free clinics are long gone. And so he's really frightened, and he doesn't know what to do.

And I think in his fear, he's gotten kind of desperate. And the friends of his that live in his house with him are surrounding him and trying to help. But I think help in those kinds of times becomes desperate. And so the song is a good look at desperate measures that people think up when they're alone together in a place.

EMILY BRIGHT: Yeah. Well, Charlie, I wish I had a lot more time to talk with you, but I just want to briefly mention you have a show next week, State Theatre in Minneapolis. I understand the first act will be this album performed in its entirety.

CHARLIE PARR: Yes.

EMILY BRIGHT: Is that how you want people to listen to it?

CHARLIE PARR: Yes, yes. Dave King and Liz Draper and I will play the record.

EMILY BRIGHT: And specifically what day?

CHARLIE PARR: The 30th, Friday, October 30.

EMILY BRIGHT: Charlie Parr is a Duluth-based blues musician. His album *Rooming House* is out now. Thank you so much for coming into the studio to talk with us today.

CHARLIE PARR: Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.