Singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Sean Watkins has long been known for his work as one-third of the Grammy Award-winning Nickel Creek and, more recently, for helming, with sister Sara, the itinerant, genre-hopping Watkins Family Hour ensemble. But in the last year he has more assertively – and impressively – taken on the role of solo artist. *What To Fear* is a follow-up to 2014’s acclaimed *All I Do Is Lie*, which had been Watkins’ first solo effort in nearly a decade, ten years that had been jammed with collaborative projects and a herculean amount of touring. On his own, Watkins displays tremendous warmth and soulfulness as a singer, a refreshing candor and humor as a lyricist, and prodigious skill as an arranger. And he doesn’t merely stick with the familiar: On *What To Fear*, he bolsters an acoustic lineup with a rock rhythm section, bringing drama and drive to these new tracks while keeping intact the emotional intimacy of all the stories he is telling.

As a writer, Watkins deftly juggles the observational and the autobiographical, convincingly taking on the personalities of others – a stalker, a preacher, a cynical newscaster – and then juxtaposing them with a voice that is clearly his own. Watkins’ singing unites disparate narrative threads; he’s disarmingly honest and sympathetic, no matter whom the character he is channeling might be. Similarly, he has managed to take the work of his acoustic collaborators - -the gifted young Northern Californian trio, Bee Eaters – with the robust bass and drums combo of Matt Chamberlain and Mike Elizondo.

The title track starts off in a deceptively simple way, just Watkins’ plaintive voice and acoustic guitar, before the band kicks in, bolstered by a dreamy, Mellotron-generated string section. It’s ominous, compelling and surprisingly topical. Watkins could be echoing the words of an evangelist, a sensationalist newscaster, or a fear-mongering political candidate. Watkins quips, “I kind of lucked out with that. I started writing before all the campaign stuff was happening. But something like that is *always* happening.”

Conversely, “Last Time For Everything” is “a mostly true story, from back in my early to mid twenties. The concept of ‘a last time for everything’ – a friend of mine said that once and I thought, there must be a song with that title. There wasn’t any song that I could find so I wrote it. The first thing that comes to mind with a phrase like that would be something like ‘the last time you saw someone’ but that felt cheap and sentimental. I wanted to celebrate the other side of it, the things that you are never going to do again and be grateful for that, the mistakes from the past, analyzing what you’ve done and sussing out what to keep and what to let go.”

Watkins began composing these new songs as he toured in support of *All I Do Is Lie* and prepared to hit the road for the first time with Watkins Family Hour, a project that until then had mostly stayed rooted at Largo, the group’s favored venue in Los Angeles. Watkins initially envisioned the album as an acoustic string-band session and reached out to the Bee Eaters, a trio he’d become acquainted with after participating in bluegrass camps they conducted in Northern California. Bee Eaters are led by Tashina Clarridge on violin and her brother Tristan on cello. Simon Chrisman plays hammer dulcimer with them, and his instrument gives both a percussive and melodic underpinning to several of these tracks. But, as Watkins’ songs developed further in the writing stage, he realized he also wanted to employ a rhythm section, and called on his friends, bassist Elizondo and drummer Chamberlain, who each boast a lengthy list of credits, from hip hop to rock to jazz. Says Watkins, “It’s mind-blowing how good they are.”

Watkins’ original idea was to cut tracks separately with these two groups of musicians. But he found himself with a few days of studio time and decided to record the same four songs with both lineups and then determine what configuration worked best for each tune. What he discovered was that these two approaches weren’t mutually exclusive. By combining elements from each session he came up with a unique sound, one that helped define, in a larger sense, where Watkins himself had arrived as a solo musician. As he explains, “I wanted to highlight where I come from musically, the strings and the solos and I wanted this album to more guitar oriented than my last one. I wanted this record to highlight my musical strengths but without getting to comfortable. I really enjoy music that it is, at once, satisfying and surprising. So this record is my attempt at approaching that balancing point between reaching forward and experimenting musically while also celebrating where I come from with regard to the acoustic, bluegrass side of the spectrum."

Unlike most of his peers, Watkins has been a performer for more than 25 years. He was a mere 12 years old when he played his first gig in Nickel Creek, with sister Sara on fiddle and Chris Thile on mandolin, at a San Diego pizza parlor. The trio’s star ascended quickly; within a few years, a progressive bluegrass following grew into a large mainstream audience. Its 2002 album, *This Side*, garnered a Best Contemporary Folk Album Grammy. Since then, Watkins has released discs with Switchfoot frontman Jon Foreman as the duo Fiction Family and with fellow guitarist Glen Phillips as Works Progress Administration, an eight-piece band featuring a stellar lineup of fellow L.A. session players. He also managed to release three solo efforts along the way. The Watkins Family Hour began as an informal event at Largo, where Sean and Sara could carouse on stage with an ever-changing group of like-minded friends. A core group of musicians became a regular part of the festivities, including pianist Benmont Tench, bassist Sebastian Steinberg and singer Fiona Apple. Together they recorded *The Watkins Family Hour* disc last year and took their convivial show on the road. *What To Fear* includes guest-star turns from Sara, as well as Tench, Steinberg and Petra Haden. In fact, the instrumental “Local Honey” was originally written as a kind of Family Hour theme song, for the live show and the group’s podcast.

Having friends and family on board has long been a hallmark of every Watkins project. He’s also been regularly invited to record and tour with many other musicians, among them Jackson Browne and Lyle Lovett. But *What To Fear* is all about Sean Watkins himself, front and center, as his songwriting matures and his persona as a solo performer blooms.

“For the longest time I didn’t feel comfortable in that role, “Watkins admits. “I loved being in bands. But now that I’ve done songs that I really like-- I’m proud of my last one, and even prouder of this one --that makes a big difference when you’re traveling solo, stepping on stage by yourself. It’s fun to go out on stage – anything is possible. It’s gone from feeling daunting to being hopeful and free.”

-- Michael Hill