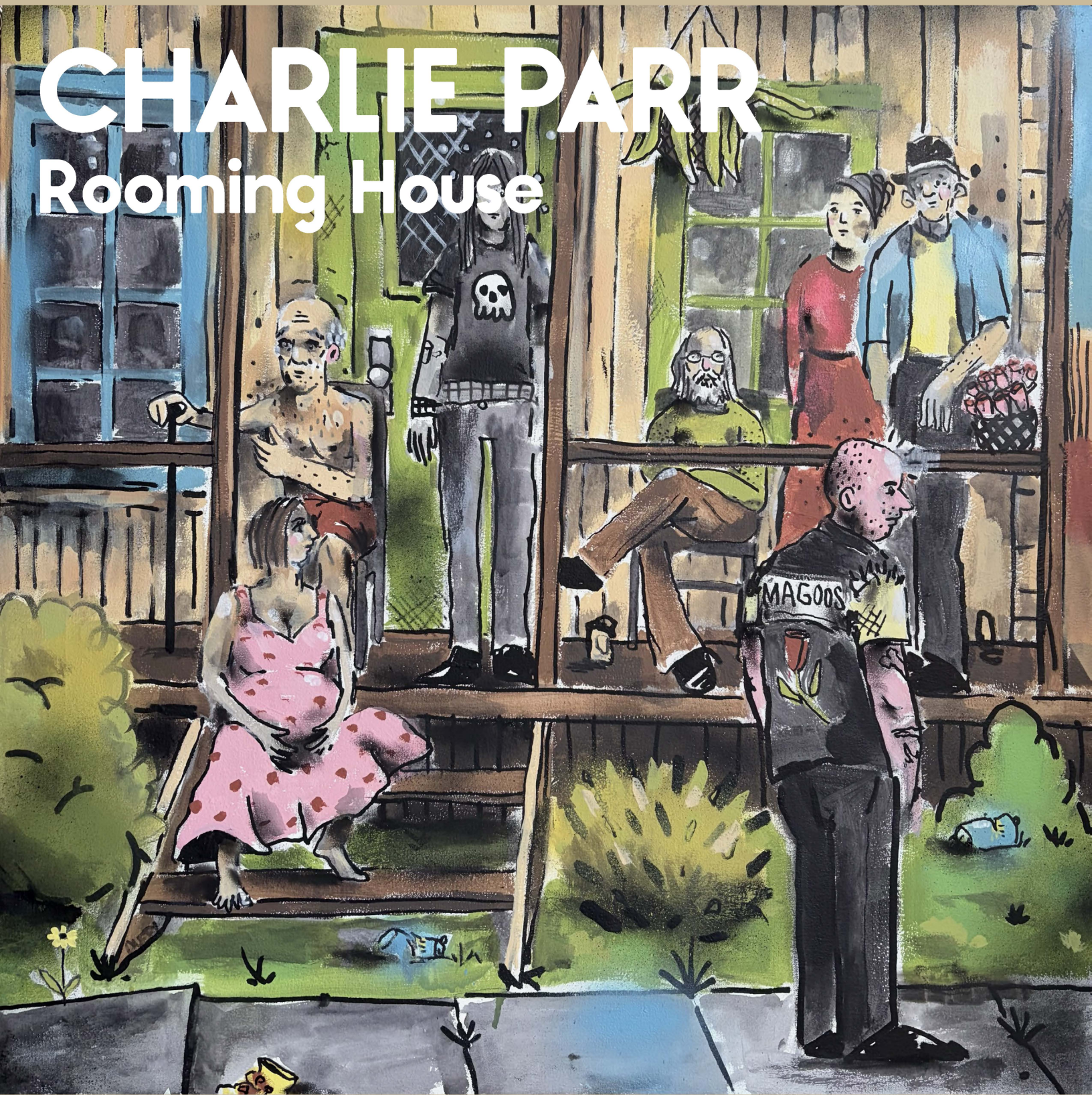


CHARLIE PARR

Rooming House



When I was a kid I nailed a number "2" to my bedroom door and announced to my family that I lived in apartment two and that now we were neighbors.

This kind of thing happens more often than we'd like to think.

The desire to make neighbors out of families.

The desire to make families from neighbors.

Certainly not all the time.

Certainly not for everyone.

What's considered normal may be fluid.

I know people who don't have doors.

Or windows.

I've heard people say, in all seriousness, that if they were in jail at least they'd be warm.

I know people who can't afford to see a doctor.

I've heard them talking about "toughing it out," or seeking advice about home remedies that will never work.

The internet has a lot of ideas about health care.

I have a friend who knows someone who does his own dental work.

Can you feature it?

I can barely cut my own hair, looking into a mirror and holding a pair of scissors.

It's impossible to get it to come out straight.

What if it were more than a toothache?

Pointing to part of your body to show where it hurts but it's inside where your finger can't point to, and you can't imagine what it looks like in there.

A doctor would have a better idea, but not over the phone.

Each step in the process costs more than you have.

They have doctors in jail.

At least there I can see a doctor.

The safety net is laughable, a net with holes large enough to lose entire neighborhoods through has nothing to do with safety.

The folks here, in this record, they know about that net.

They've tumbled through it time and time again.

They've held on to the edge, trying not to fall through, working long-hour jobs for short pay.

Unaffordable insurance premiums.

Unavoidable illnesses.

It's not healthy to worry all the time.

It's not healthy to skip meals.

This happens more often than we'd like to think.

Folks make do.

These folks ended up here together, huddled under a roof covering tiny rooms and a community kitchen and community bathrooms and rent they could actually afford.

Now it's a neighborhood.

My room is my house — my whole house — and the hallway outside my door is the street.

My own mother was raised in a single-room home, the roof covering eight souls.

Her private space consisted of a drawer in a bureau she shared with her siblings.

Her socks had more privacy than she did.

She used to say, "When I was little, we made do."

While the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl raged just outside.

The Great Depression feels claustrophobic to me because of my mother's stories.

She used the word "neighbor" as a verb.

We neighbored with people.

We were occupied with the activity of neighboring.

Neighbors can help make do.

Someone knows how to fix the cars.

Hand-me-downs come from everywhere.

One neighbor cuts people's hair in their kitchen.

Another one is good at repairing small appliances.

We all come outside when the tornado siren goes off, and when we're certain it's going to be bad we all help each other get to safety.

Is that naive?

I don't care.

I know their names, I want them to be safe.

I've lived in small spaces surrounded by other small spaces.

I've had glimpses of another way of life.

I've lived in small spaces on top of small spaces.

I've met people who say things like this: "At least it's warmer in jail."

Or, "Three hots and a cot."

Out of desperation.

The Great Depression reminds me of claustrophobia.

My mother's stories about those times always feel that way.

But these days feel that way too.

At least the stories that I hear feel that way.

And the hardest times are worse if you're alone.

And being that alone feels like claustrophobia.

My own mother was raised in a single-room home, the roof covering eight souls.

Her private space consisted of a single drawer in a bureau.

One bureau for the house.

Her socks had more privacy than she did.

I've lived in small spaces underneath other small spaces.

But not like that.

My room is my house — my whole house — and the hallway outside my door is the rest of the world.

But the room is mine.

When I was a kid I nailed a number "2" to my bedroom door.

I got that number at the hardware store, with my allowance.

I told my family that I lived in apartment two and that we were now neighbors.

My dad suggested that my rent was due.

His Great Depression story was one of movement.

A story of running.
Another kind of claustrophobia, I think.
The story here in this record feels claustrophobic to me.
It was only going to be about one person but I couldn't stand it.
Being isolated becomes unhealthy.
Illness and isolation can be fatal.
I needed to write him some friends, a family he would've chosen if he'd had a choice.
This must happen more than we realize.
It must happen a lot.
Some folks don't have the benefit of any kind of family.
Even fictional families.
Someone to know their name and to care if they're safe or not.
Empathy aids in healing.
But it's not always easy to come by, and some folks believe that empathy is weakness.
Or even sinful.
But that's not true.
These characters practice empathy, I wrote them just so they would do that.
The hardest times are worse when you're alone.
I must admit, though, that sometimes my best friends can lead me astray.
Innocently.
But my imagination is worse, and in my imagination there are no opportunities for debate.
At least my friends can be diplomatic.
My imagination is despotic.
It always thinks it's right.
If I thought I could fix my own teeth with glue and bits of plastic and no one was around to dissuade me?
I can see where that might happen.
I've been that alone before.
Things can get distorted when there's no one else around to talk about it with.
It's not a bad idea to get a second opinion.
If your friends are empathetic, that is, and not mean.
But true friends won't be mean, will they?
Sometimes, maybe.
It still might be better to bounce those ideas off of your neighbors than to trust yourself when you've been alone for days with a toothache.
Even the guy down the street I've only nodded at.
I bet he'd say, "No ... no, no, I don't think that's such a good idea."
Sometimes, though, the people around you will agree that it's not a terrible idea.
Sometimes even a large crowd will agree that it's a damn good idea.
There's a collective mind, maybe, that takes over when you live within a group of people in close quarters and rarely interact with anyone outside the group.
Like a cult.
Like a hive.
So that kind of negates the positive impacts of group debate, I suppose, at least in this case.
Meanwhile, back at square one.
This kind of thing must happen more often than we realize.
Groups of people can be isolated.
Even large groups.
Entire populations might be isolated.
Being isolated becomes unhealthy.
They might decide on some crazy, outlandish rigamarole and all agree that it's actually perfectly sensible.
That makes sense, history certainly bears it out.
Maybe this record is about a group like that, a group who rarely interacts with anyone outside of their group, outside of their house.
And they might agree that terrible ideas are good ideas.
When you're trying to help a friend and there's actually nothing you can do but you need to do something, right?
Anything at all.
Tiny things are important.
Even symbolic, when there aren't any other options.
When you know there aren't any other options, you might make some kind of a gesture just to be able to do something.
These folks here, they know it's not going to come out alright.
But they need to do something.
I've heard people say, "Well, I'll just do [this thing]."
Meaning, "I know this isn't going to help."
Being helpless is a horrible feeling.
But a meaningless gesture in the face of helplessness isn't meaningless at all.
Tiny things are important.
You could say that the tiniest things are the most important things of all.
What are you made of?
Tiny things.
This record is a tiny thing, too.
And meaningless, in its way.
But I did it anyway, because I felt like I needed to do something.
Because I felt helpless.
I thought, "Well, I'll just do this, then."
It must happen all the time.
This must happen more often than we'd like to think.
Listen: in an emergency I'm sure I'd know what to do.
In the moment, some kind of overdrive will kick in, some hidden well of powerful strength.
Mothers-lifting-cars kind of strong.
Mothers-doing-mother-things kind of strong.
In a crisis, I mean, not every day.

I'm not strong every day like mothers are strong every day.
But mothers have even more strength ready, in an emergency, you know.
What is the emergency though?
I'm not trapped under a car.
Maybe I'm sick.
Maybe it's not obvious to anyone else.
But it's still a crisis.
I've heard people say, in all seriousness, that if they were in jail at least they'd be warm.
I know people who can't afford to see a doctor.
I've heard people say, "She doesn't look sick."
Or "I've never heard of that."
Point to a part of your body to show where it hurts but it's inside where your finger can't point to.
Ask someone to look where you're pointing.
These folks here, in this record, have no idea what's wrong.
Or how to help.
They are sick with the longing to make everything better.
And they can't.
Tiny things are important.
This house could be anywhere.
These things could happen to anyone.
There is only one thing.
Is that naïve?
I don't care.
There is only one thing.

Lyrics

1. Duluth 1964

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

Mary abandoned John when he was only 12 years old
She left him on a January night and she walked out into the cold
And he awoke the next morning to find his mother gone
And he ate his breakfast and went to school and then he came back home
There he stayed in that old house in his same old childhood room
With the landlady serving as his boss and his new mother too
He cleaned and painted and fixed and cooked and studied his lessons too
And rented the garage to a biker gang who called themselves the Magoos
He rented out the attic to an old man named Ben
Who walked downstairs to cook his dinner and then walked back up again
Sara's room at the top of the stairs used to be a porch
John closed it in and sealed it up and hung a brand new door
The landlady died one summer day, she left the house to John
He cleaned her room and rented it out before her ashes had been returned
The ashes in their urn sit on my windowsill
Her tabby cat lives in my room and I guess he always will
John stays in the room he shared with his mom when he was young
He says he's not waitin' for her but I think that he's wrong

2. Rooming House

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

We met in the kitchen there
Old John in his underwear
But nobody really seemed to care
We were all together then
And Ron caught some fish and Ben
Cleaned and filleted them when
Sara came downstairs with a pan
And we stood around the stove to see
The fish sizzle in the grease
Joining the smell of kerosene
Old John went upstairs to pee
And told us "now don't you eat it all"
With leftover coleslaw
From that diner out by the mall
It's not far from the Union Yard
But it's quite a ways on foot
It 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
But I closed my bedroom door
And held my guts, they were so sore
With a pain different than before
And it wouldn't let me sleep

3. Mother Sara

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

Sara on the sidewalk by the house
Sweeping leaves into a fire in the gutter
She'll have a baby in just a month
Sara in her bedroom up the stairs
Nursing her baby while the radio plays
Her roommates hate the smell of dirty diapers
It's been too easy for you to turn away
I'll hide my longing for another day
And I'm not willing to take all the blame
You should've been here all along anyway
Sara bringing her son to class
The other students stare or look away
The teachers all try and be kind
Daycare takes all of her pay
Her tips barely pay for their room
In a houseful of people trying to sleep
Sara's baby knocked over a glass
She can't afford a place of her own
She apologizes and takes him upstairs
On a bus back to her hometown
Sara and her son watch the trees go by
She wonders how they'll get along
It's been too easy for you to turn away
I'll hide my longing for another day
And I'm not willing to take all the blame
You should've been here all along anyway
Sara's son grows up quickly
In a basement room in his grandma's house
(But) she can't remember who he is

4. (what's so funny about) Universal Healthcare?

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

One thing has led to another
And I know I should get to a doctor
But I ain't got a dime
So they ain't got the time
There's something painful inside me
Don't like the food I eat, won't let me sleep
But it's not so bad I guess
I can still get out of bed
I guess you gotta be feeling pretty hard
For them not to ask you for your insurance card
If you can't pay the doc you best stay home
You'll waste a trip downtown if you ain't got the dough
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
Old John says he'll fix me up good
Started mixing stuff in with my food
So I'm in the bathroom again
He says that's part of the plan
If I had money I'd go and see
Just what the hell's wrong inside of me
And I'd get some pills
And I wouldn't worry about the bills
I got a buddy who went to the pen
They took out a tumor and eased his pain
Now he's feeling good
Warm bed and plenty of food
I guess you gotta be feeling pretty hard
For them not to ask you for your insurance card
If you can't pay the doc you best stay home
You'll waste a trip downtown if you ain't got the dough
He says there's room for me
All I gotta to do is get caught by the police
For doing some crimes
And I'll do the time
I packed a bag with all my things
And wrote a note for the bank down the street
Just gimme a buck
Then call the cops

5. Bank Robber

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

Hello Missus Moore, did you have a good day?
Is there anything to eat, or have you put it all away
Hello Missus Moore, you won't believe the day it's been
My life has been threatened, again and again
Hello Missus Moore, is there any more wine?
If you're not finishing yours, I'll just pour it with mine
Hello Missus Moore, the bank was a madhouse today
But the first of the month is always that way
And I got threatened, Missus Moore, by a derelict bum
Who gave me a note saying that he had a gun
I was a hero, Missus Moore, and I saved the day
When I asked the old man to get out of my face
Hello Missus Moore, are you listening at all?
My life was in danger, and the cops were called
But they left him right there, Missus Moore, where he stayed for the day
Until we closed, and he had to go away
I have the note, Missus Moore, do you want to know how it reads?
I'm sick and I'm tired and I only want some peace

6. Duluth 2026

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums

Back at the house once more
The cops left me at the door
Saying they don't want to see me anymore
And they drove away
And Ben shrugged and said "anyway
Maybe you can try another day
You oughta just hit the hay
And see what tomorrow brings"
So I unpacked my things
And wondered what there was to eat
Old John was just down the street
I'd see him when he got home
And we'd all sit by the stove
And I'd tell 'em how it did go
And Ron would say "I'm sorry, Joe,
You'll get 'em next time around"
But the pain has got me down
And my heartbeat makes the loudest sound
I'm surprised that it hasn't found
Its way into everyone's ears
But we all have the same fear
There's nothing to say when death's so near
And words can never make it clear
And I got up from my seat on the floor

7. Lilliput Park 2026

Charlie Parr, guitars and vocals; Dave King, drums; Jacqueline Ultan, cello

The morning sky had just woke up
And we had gone to sleep
When the men who said they owned the place
Told us all to leave
So we carried him to the park
To his favorite bench
And propped him there in his overcoat
And put his dollar in his hand
And when the evening star appeared
We stretched our legs and then
Old John led us onto the bus
That would take us home again
The sidewalk was blocked on our street
So we walked out in the road
And on and on to our old house
To shut his bedroom door

Charlie Parr
Rooming House
SFW CD 40274
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Produced by Charlie Parr

**All songs written by Charlie Parr / Little Judges Music,
ASCAP**

Tracklisting

- 1. Duluth 1964 (7:32)**
- 2. Rooming House (4:24)**
- 3. Mother Sara (3:44)**
- 4. (what's so funny about) Universal Healthcare? (3:26)**
- 5. Bank Robber (4:16)**
- 6. Duluth 2026 (2:55)**
- 7. Lilliput Park 2026 (8:45)**

I don't know what I was expecting, this hasn't felt like a normal album from the moment I had the idea for it. The songs are about as loosely structured as they can get, and every take was different in every way from the take that preceded it. We could've gone on for days and nights recording the same song and getting different results, burying ourselves in a sea of choices when it came time to choose one. At some point they aren't takes anymore, they're separate songs entirely. Dave King is the perfect person to play songs like this, every time we start again is a new beginning for him, and he listens and reacts as intently as he did when we first sat down to do this, creating an atmosphere where it's okay for me to begin again anew, without a care for what the song sounded like last time. Our time with Jacqueline Ultan was sublime, and her cello was immediately an essential part of the song and I could have easily sat there for hours surrounded by those tones. We chose the second take on nearly every song here, but probably could've been perfectly satisfied with the first take. It ended all too soon, the sun hadn't even set on Nicollet Avenue in South Minneapolis when I put my guitar back in my truck and headed for home. This is one song, really, it makes the most sense when the album is heard in order and in its entirety, but it's yours now and you can take from it whatever you take from it. I'm grateful to you for your listening—I'm grateful for the folks who played and worked on this album—I'm grateful for my family and friends who continue to support me—I'm grateful for the opportunity to sit down and play my guitar again today, and today is all that there is.

Credits

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