In 2023, after ten years of living in Los Angeles, Berninger (along with his wife and teenage daughter) moved to Connecticut. This change of scene suited him; he began to spend his days outside, painting, reading, smoking weed and listening to music, much of it his own. He wrote lyrics all over old baseballs, and arranged dust-covered items in his barn into strange and surreal works of art. It felt good to be creating and to understand why he loves what he does.

Throughout his work with The National, Berninger is known for his contemplative narratives in which characters peer over the cliff’s edge. He has always been forthcoming about his own mental and emotional pitfalls. “Our heart’s are like old wells filled with pennies and worms,” he explains. “I can’t resist going down to the bottom of mine to see what else is there. But sometimes you can get yourself stuck.” In 2020 he went through “a long period of writer’s block and self-disgust. I just got sick of of asking myself ‘Why am I like this?’” For him, identity is amorphous and ever-evolving, and stretches beyond individuality. This is the driving force of his second solo album Get Sunk. Under water, everything moves in slow motion and Berninger saw his creative voice slipping away. But sometimes we have to drown to remember how to breathe. Get Sunk is the inhale, bringing blurry memories to the surface.

Berninger worked with Grammy Award-winning producer and engineer Sean O’Brien. The pair would get together once a week to “fuck around for five or six hours.” The sonic world blossomed with the help of of friends and musicians, including Booker T Jones, Meg Duffy (Hand Habits), Julia Laws (Ronboy), Kyle Resnick (The National), Garret Lang, Sterling Laws, Mike Brewer, Walter Martin (Walkmen), Paul Maroon (Walkmen) and Harrison Whitford to name a few. Some recorded individual parts, most recorded together in a basement with Berninger.

The collection of songs spans the last few years, but Berninger re-recorded vocals and rewrote lyrics for many of the older compositions. “I got my voice back, so I needed to say something new,” he explains. Inspired by the flora and fauna of his new home, he recalled his childhood on the edge of Ohio, and spending summers on his aunt and uncle’s farm in Indiana with his five cousins. They would hike in creeks, cracking open “crystal apples” (a Berninger term for geodes) surrounded by Osage orange trees and dirt, dust and bugs. They harvested Christmas trees and tobacco––Berninger admits he’s loved nicotine since first chewing on a tobacco plant when he was 12––and camped out. On one particular freezing night, Berninger kept close to the fire and woke to find the soles of his shoes sizzling blue-violet.

Get Sunk is not necessarily an autobiographical album, but the narrator is processing how he became himself. Who is he compared to the kid on that sepia-toned farm? What is his idea of happiness? What the hell are we all searching for? Berninger is an expert in what it feels like to lose all bravery, and Get Sunk points to an undulating reflection in the water. It’s about realizing that you are not yourself without a thousand others; parents, friends, siblings, spouses and exes, college roommates, childhood best friends, cousins and kids, strangers even.

Get Sunk’s opener “Inland Ocean” matches propulsive, marching keys with a choral chant: “God loves the inland ocean / Lost cause, I have no emotion.” Berninger often drifts to water in his lyrics––ocean sounds and kids' voices are heard on the Ronboy-featuring “Silver Jeep” and album closer “Times of Difficulty” speaks of “how long we’ve been staring out to sea.” He says this is not an intentional motif, but rather a more expansive metaphor. “It’s a sea of wildflowers, or crickets. It’s that drowning feeling of life. It’s a sea of stars,” he says, adding, “dead stars still delight us.” It was important to Berninger that these songs be delightful and romantic. He wanted the sun to come out, to find the colors and bright spots, but also encourage the shadows to coexist. “Times of Difficulty” points to this reach as he sings “I’ll think of you if you think of me / The way the sky thinks of the sea.”

Get Sunk’s “Bonnet of Pins” highlights his knack for world-building, pointing to the tiny details that make this stuff palpable. There are cigarettes and styrofoam cups filled with Nabokov cocktails, miscommunication and sorrow. It’s a reminder that grief can also be a little funny. “Breaking Into Acting,” which features Meg Duffy (Hand Habits) on vocals, laments on the plasticity of performance. “Your mouth is always full of blood packets / You’re breaking into acting / I completely understand,” the pair sing over a slow acoustic sway. “Sometimes you have to fake forgiveness before you can actually forgive,” he explains.

Get Sunk is an ode to the infinite. The others that make us who we are; the possibilities our paths can take and the abyss of both misery and bliss. Never static, Berninger dissolves the border between process and product, and surrenders to the many shapes both he and these songs will take. These shapes oscillate throughout Get Sunk but coalesce just enough to offer catharsis, and something that feels tangible and real. “I was able to get the blurry picture as close to just right for me,” he says. That the picture ever comes into full focus isn’t the point; it’s by being happy that we can make out anything at all.