

BIOGRAPHY - DAVE MCCANN



If you've never heard of Dave McCann, you are probably not alone. He should be famous. The problem is, he's never been fuelled by fame or the rad stage veneer so essential to catching light in the superficial cloud of today's music world. He's pushed it all aside to work on songs, well-honed songs.

Raised in Peterborough, Ontario, singer-songwriter Dave McCann rolled west and landed in Calgary, Alberta during the first Alt-Country inclination of the late 1990's. He founded Dave McCann and the Ten Toed Frogs and released a string of critically acclaimed projects - "Woodland Tea", "Country Medicine", and "Shoot the Horse" (a live capture at the historic Sidetrack Cafe, one of Alberta's fondest and long gone venues). In 2009, he followed the road south to East Nashville to record with Lij Shaw and Americana guitar icon and producer Will Kimbrough (Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell, Mavis Staples, Todd Snider). The resulting work "Dixiebluebird" brought a name change and was an inspiring benchmark release for Dave McCann and the Firehearts. He made a move south from Calgary to Lethbridge, Alberta to get married and raise a family and, in 2014, conspired with fellow Southern Albertan Leeroy Stagger at his Rebeltone Ranch to build the "Circle of Light" release. After close to two decades, Dave McCann has locked himself firmly into hearts and minds of the Alberta music scene as one of the best untold singer-songwriters working in contemporary roots music.

His newest effort "Westbound 'til Light" is no exception. This is an unyielding collection of songs - story songs, train songs, disaster songs, and message songs - all informed by some aspect of North American folklore. It's definitive roots music, steeped in Dave's unique vision and story based narrative.

"I've got family roots scattered from Cape Breton to Fogo Island to the Irish colonies of Lucan, Ontario. My Grandmother on my Father's side gifted me a strong Leni Lenape bloodline that stretches from the Six Nations of Ontario to, most likely, pre-revolution New York. This might help explain my interest and connection to stories and folk tales."

The project was recorded in a series of isolated sessions over the period of a year in Nanton, Alberta with producer and audio ace Steve Loree (Ian Tyson, Corb Lund, Jr Gone Wild). It features the new and longtime members of Dave's band the Firehearts, solo captures, as well as contributions by Peterbor-

ough, Ontario's Mayhemingways.

"We talked about the power of collaboration and Steve connected me with Josh Fewings (drums, percussion) and Benj Rowland (banjo, tenor guitar, accordion) of the Mayhemingways and the connection was immediate and incredibly intuitive. I have that same connection with longtime friend, guitar mentor, and bandmate Dave Bauer (guitar, bouzouki, mandolin). The magic came full circle once we added bass player Shawn Worden, harmonica fiend Ethan Askey, and Canmore, Alberta, singer-songwriter, Lori Reid on background vocals to the mix. It felt good to switch gears from the last few recordings and return to my earlier acoustic roots. It's hard to find that sometimes without feeling like you are working backwards, but I think Steve really pushed us till we captured something truly magnetic," says McCann.

Unerring "Westbound til Light" fires straight for the sun with the first cut, "Can't Cheat the Mountain". A contemporary disaster song about Canada's deadliest rock slide. In 1903, the Frank Slide took out the coal mining town of Frank in the Crowsnest Pass area of Alberta. With lines like "The wind here carries voices from the ones who built this town" and "Time ain't bought you know it's borrowed" the song hits hard and will send shivers down your spine if you have ever witnessed the site where Turtle Mountain collapsed and close to a million tonnes of stone buried the town and robbed 70 people of their very existence.

"Swing Your Lantern" is another standout. A narrative about hobos caught in a Lake Superior Blizzard at the tail end of the Great Depression.

"By the 1940's the Iron Mines of the Mesabi Iron Range in Minnesota were re-opened to build steel for the war effort. America was about to join the fight to end fascism. Searching for work was competitive and for many included desperate travel, starvation, seeking better times down the line, defiance against all odds, and sometimes no choice but to surrender to the Westbound ride that never ends. The mythology of the Great American hobo has been something that's haunted me ever since I read the last paragraph in Woody Guthrie's book "Bound for Glory". It's so easy to lose touch with the hardships previous generations endured for all we enjoy today," adds McCann.

Johannah's Line is another strong story song on the album. It's based on the History of one of Canada's largest unresolved murders. In 1880, Jim and Johannah Donnelly and members of their family were murdered and burned in their Lucan, Ontario farmhouse by an armed mob of neighbours. No one was ever held accountable for the crime. They became known as the Black Donnellys.

"My grandfather was born in Lucan and the history feels close to home. I can remember my dad telling me the story when I was a kid. Jim Donnelly killed a man in self defence and was sent to prison for seven years. I took the perspective of his wife Johannah, left as a single mother trying to raise her boys and a daughter in a pocket of iron-fisted, feud ridden, religious, old world Irish culture that Lucan was at the time. Brutal times in the Dominion, and brutality always seems to be the evident end result of ignorance fuelled by suspicion, hatred, and racially and religiously charged polarization," states McCann.

The final track on the recording is a hopeful road hymn aptly titled "Ain't No Highway Can Hold Me". It trails off with the resistive line "I will not falter, I will not heed their ways, before she came to take my reigns, I was lost to stray". Overall, "Westbound 'til Light" proves to be a captivating record. The musical collaboration is strong, the songs have substance, and it is clear to see Dave McCann is advancing his creative capacity to recount the world with inspired interest. The songs are heavy and swirling with an unspoken darkness but they are balanced with hope. History shows us that, with hope, we can move through the darkness to lighter times. It takes patience and it's hard work, not unlike well-honed songs.