

BIOGRAPHY - DAVE MCCANN



We live in an era where the beautiful artform of songwriting has been recalibrated to be measured by fame, filtered through algorithms, and shaped to fit the contours of market demands - Roots Songsmith Dave McCann stands in defiant contrast. For him it's the Songs that Matter. With over two decades dedicated to his song-craft, McCann has quietly become one of Western Canada's most revered and underrated voices in contemporary roots music. Soothsayer's Blues, his latest offering, is not just an album, it's a journey into the heart of the folk process and a raw, reverent tribute to the traditional roots of North American music.

Born in Toronto and raised in Peterborough, Ontario, McCann headed West to Calgary, Alberta, where he formed Dave McCann and the Ten Toed Frogs during the first Alt-Country inclination of the late 90s. The band released a string of critically acclaimed albums, including Woodland Tea, Country Medicine, and Shoot the Horse, a live album recorded at Edmonton's beloved Sidetrack Café. In 2009, McCann traveled to East Nashville to work with Lij Shaw and Americana guitar icon and Producer Will Kimbrough. The result, Dixiebluebird, marked a sonic evolution with a pivotal release that redefined his sound under the new name Dave McCann and the Firehearts. 2014's Circle of Light, produced in collaboration with West Coast alt-rocker Leeroy Stagger, continued McCann's journey of reinvention. That path led to 2019's Westbound 'til Light, a stirring collection rooted in folk traditions and backed by his longtime band The Firehearts, alongside Peterborough's own Mayhemingways. Over the years, McCann's music has found its way into films, television, and compilation albums—always guided by a connection to the human experience.

Soothsayer's Blues marks Dave's seventh release and a collaboration with Oxford, Mississippi producer Jimbo Mathus. Jimbo's been a sonic ringmaster and collaborator with an impressive list of artists. (Elvis Costello, Bette Smith, The Black Keys, Ironing Board Sam, Andrew Bird, Vallerie June and Dom Flemons). His understanding of the Hill Country Blues of North Mississippi caught the attention of none other than Buddy Guy's producer, landing him a key role touring and on the acclaimed "Sweet Tea" Sessions. He is best known for his work with his swing revival outfit The Squirrel Nut Zippers but it's his service to the artists with the Music Maker Foundation that brought him to the attention of Roots Songsmith Dave McCann.

"I wasn't looking for a lot of sugar with these songs," McCann says. "Turns out, I needed more of a Sonic Soothsayer. Someone who could channel spirit over perfection. I had never met Jimbo, but when you listen to

his work it is apparent, he is connected to the source, he was the right guide for the process. He was instrumental at helping me abandon my expectations and surrender to the spirit of the room.”

The project was built at the historic Zebra Ranch - home of late, great Muscle Shoals Session player and legendary producer Jim Dickinson (Bob Dylan, Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, The Replacements and Big Star). The historic room was a good match for the project, with Dickinson’s beautiful old, red Baldwin Piano sitting central. Chasing first takes with Vintage RCA ribbon mics and Room Sound gave these songs the rustic light they needed.

The first track sets the tone. Rolling Down the Mountain is a ragged scorcher and it leans into the kinda inspiration you might expect from someone who admires early Blues expression. When the Crows Come to Carry me Home is a haunting spiritual. “When my dad crossed over he had told me he had always felt a connection to the Crows. I always thought it was a striking visual.” The typical vision of the afterlife might not work for folks who have been led into colonization by religious power structures. I’m just saying, If I saw strange folks in white robes trying to chase me down, I might run? Even if they had wings and harps, I might take my chances with the crows.” laughs McCann. The song also considers an artist’s vision, their arc and their motivations. There is a legacy of artists within the folk industry that stood up against oppression and fascism. “The song was also inspired by a story I heard about Pete Seeger at the Peekskill riots. It seems terrified patriots are nothing new. In the 1950’s they tried to shut Paul Robeson’s concert for Civil Rights down in Peekskill New York. The Klan stashed piles of rocks at the entrance of the concert site - they used them to smash out the windows of the folks headed into the concert site by car. Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, and Lee Hays rolled into the site in their stone battered car, its windows shattered. Inside were Pete’s young children, his wife, and his father-in-law—shaken but unbroken. Despite the danger and chaos, they made it through, and the concert went on. As a reminder Pete kept all the rocks and he used them in his chimney when he built his cabin in Fishkill New York. It wasn’t that long ago. History seems to keep repeating itself and there are blueprints left by the artists that came before. The Folk process reminds us about the power of songs and that power is about connection and inspiration.”

River Deep Blues explores the historic Nolichucky River - known to many as “The Devil’s Run.” Cutting through the Pisgah High Country of North Carolina and Tennessee, the rugged Cherokee territory is known for Ghost Towns and Moonshining. The River itself carries a dark reputation. Often called America’s most haunted river, its unpredictable floods and shifting currents leaves behind a legacy of tragedy, mystery, and folklore.

Angola is a prison song sparked by a documentary about the Angola Three. “I chased down everything I could find about the hideous Louisiana State Penitentiary. The storied work farm is still in operation today and it has a legacy built on slavery and a history of profound racism. Few inmates are ever released. A terrifying reality.” states McCann. Folk-Blues Legend Huddie Ledbetter better known as Leadbelly did some time there. He was discovered at the prison when folklorists John and Alan Lomax made their way to Angola to make field recordings for the Library of Congress. He was released after he penned the song Goodnight Irene for the Warden at the tragic passing of the Warden’s wife. Coincidence? Some say it was the power of song that led to Leadbelly’s release from Angola.

Pascagoula River is a song inspired from a chance encounter with a Mary Johnson song Key to the Mountain Blues. Mary was a Jazz and Blues Singer from the 20’s and 30’s who recorded for the Paramount Label. She was married to Lonnie Johnson. “I started researching her and found she came from Yazoo City Mississippi. I traced my finger down the Yazoo River on the Map and came to the Pascagoula River – an indigenous word. Upon research, I realized it was the last free-flowing river in the lower 48. It’s a song about the journey a river takes and the Pascagoula certainly flows with history and superstition. As legends hold it’s known as a Singing River, it’s been rolling since long before the American Nation was even a concept.” says Dave. It reminds us that time doesn’t flow in straight lines, some things change, but others persist timelessly, quietly, alive in their own power.

Soothsayer's Blues is a communion with history, a connection with place and an exploration of the mythology of the American South. Those first Blues artists are foundational to the origin of North American Roots Music. Those artists offered more than just songs. They showed us a path forward. They showed us how to find joy in defiance of those who choose to darken our world. Expression in Resistance. "Mississippi holds some real strong magic when it comes to that kinda song-lore. I went there chasing those ghosts. What I found was a spark. That's the folk process...You don't just play the songs, you carry them forward.

The songs themselves are a stark, soulful meditation on the folk process. They are grounded in a timeless magic, steeped in the shadows of the human spirit and wrapped in echoes of the Blues, Country and Rock and Roll. A humble reminder of the power of songs and their enduring ability to reflect, reveal, and heal.

While the industry chases financial probability, Dave McCann remains a striking outlier. In a world wired for certainty, he's still betting on the beautiful chaos of the creative process.

Because for him, it's always been simple: Songs Matter.