

No sir, I'm a country-western singer

For Matt Masters, the cowboy hat does not make the man

MUSIC
»» **PREVIEW**

MATT MASTERS

Friday, November 17
Broken City

KENNA BURIMA

Let's get one thing straight. Matt Masters is no cowboy. True, he's been called many things — a honky-tonk troubadour, a country traditionalist and a self-professed western gentleman, but as the sun sets on the eve of the release of his latest offering, *Centennial Swell*, it's obvious the answer is in the music.

Filled with old-country soul, the music on *Centennial Swell* speaks of Masters' penchant for the personal, the profane and the down-right naughty — all presented in a deep baritone voice hearkening back to nights spent huddled around a fire, drinking whisky out of aluminum cups and sleeping under a romantic canopy of stars. Truth be told, more often than not, you'll encounter Masters ready with a bottle of whisky craftily hidden somewhere on his person, on tour, sleeping in the back of his van rather than under the stars. Though Masters may come across more as a gentleman cowboy raised on the wild Alberta range, his media savvy and boyish charisma belie his true upbringing as an urban-dwelling, white-bread fed scenester. Still, you won't catch Masters trying to be something he's not. He's too busy having fun being himself.

"Well, you're not going to hear any songs about riding horses on the album. OK, maybe there's one," laughs Masters. "But I'm a city guy. I don't know how to ride. I don't know anything about ranching or raising cattle, but I do have a song about drinking whisky."

Whisky drinking, "pumpkin" hunting, cheating, and maybe a few stories about being hard on luck and down-and-out make up the majority of *Centennial Swell*'s lyric itinerary. Though much of the material was recorded more than a year ago, Masters is still excited to finally see its release. By the time Masters decided to lay down the tracks for the album, he was already a seasoned performer with more than six years of gigging under his belt. In particular, a run of just over 100 shows to his credit with his summer Alberta Centennial Tour — a project that not only got Masters tons of press, but took him to all four corners of the province and beyond.

"I've never tried to be in a hurry with my career," admits Masters. "I've been playing shows since 1999, but this is my first record. I'm not in a rush. Just because you



PHOTO: JAMES STANGROOM. LOCATION COURTESY: RAW BAR AT HOTEL ARTS

Urban cowboy Matt Masters makes old-soul country music on new album *Centennial Swell*

can release a record doesn't mean you *should* release a record. And I gotta say, honestly, this record is awesome. The playing on it is awesome. My songwriting is steady. I perform well on it. The production is top-quality, too. It's just an all around awesome record."

Masters admits part of the trick was finding the right musicians to back him. Drawing from a rich Toronto scene including such luminaries as Canadian Country Music Association's seven-time award winner Wendell Ferguson, drummer Al Cross of Big Sugar and multi-instrumentalist Ken Whiteley, Masters amassed a team of musicians and a producer he trusted, Alec Fraser, to record what he calls "a kind of Matt Masters Greatest Hits package."

"I waited until I had a band that was really world-class and a production team that was world-class," says Masters. "I had to have a reason to release a record with national distribution, but I also wanted to make sure I had enough money in place to do it. Now, I have a large enough profile across the country that I can fill a room in Toronto, Winnipeg or Vancouver. I thought, why not? It's time to release a record."

Did things just fall into place? Mostly, according to Masters, and then it's also about getting what you want just by putting yourself out there.

"The saying I like to use is 'chance favours the prepared mind' and so yes, there's lots of happenstance, coincidence and surprises along the path," admits Masters. "But in the same breath, I've been preparing myself to do this for a long time."

Masters says playing music that he truly believes in (regardless of his upbringing) is what draws the right people to him. Admittedly, you don't have to be a card-carrying cowboy to appreciate Masters' traditional brand of country. The

recent "man-in-black" frenzy proves that. It's more about sincerity, something Masters oozes when talking about his music.

"There's a degree of honesty in my music that I think attracts certain people," says Masters. "It's like if you're a friendly guy, there's no reason you can't meet anyone in the world. You are who you are and where you are because of your friends."

"The kind of person that you are attracts certain people. The people that I met the first weekend I was in Toronto led to meeting more people. It's all a web. I think it comes down to the fact that I don't play songs unless I really believe in them. The musicians that I meet I think pick up on that."

It was his time spent in Toronto, being led around by friend and fellow musician Terra Hazelton, that spawned the collaborations featured on *Centennial Swell*; a roster of musicians that pushed Masters' sound into a maturity only hinted at in his 1999 bedroom recorded release *Alberta Reporter*.

"The guitar player Wendell Ferguson was someone I met the first week I moved to Toronto in 2002," remembers Masters. "Tara was already playing in Jazz Healey's Jazz Wizards when I moved and she just kind of put a leash around my neck and led me around town introducing me to people. She'd say 'here's Jeff Healey,' 'here's Brian Connelly of Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet.'"

"It was crazy. I think it was the second night I was out with Tara and we went to this place called Grossmans Tavern, which is a famous blues bar on Spadina and there was this woman there called Joanne Mackell with Brian Connelly. Laura Hubert of the Leslie Spit Treo was singing on stage and they were just all hanging out. That was the scene and it was through Joanne that I met Wendell. It just kind of built from there."

It's apparent that Masters knows how to work it. Maybe it was growing up the son of a politician (Masters admits they're just like everyone else). Maybe it's his ability to befriend anyone and everyone that crosses his path. Maybe it's just the way he rocks an eight

dollar vintage suit. Whatever it is, Masters is poised to take the music industry by storm with the necessary tools of the trade firmly tucked in his vest pocket.

"Everyone thinks networking is a dirty word, but I don't think it is," insists Masters. "I mean, who we are is based on human relationships. I don't understand it when people talk down about schmoozing or networking. I mean, we're all doing it everyday. When some indie rocker turns to his friend in a bar and slams networking, he's still networking. He just doesn't know it."

Whatever he's doing, it's working. Not many Alberta musicians can count the Mayor of Calgary, Premier of Alberta and Prime Minister of Canada ("The Harpster," as Masters likes to call him) as fans.

Must be the whisky.

Matt Masters will be celebrating the release of *Centennial Swell* at Broken City Friday, November 17 performing with Gentlemen of the Rodeo guitarist Greg Cockerill, drummer Jeff Sulima and bassist Rob Oxoby.

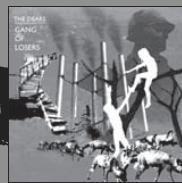
THE DEARS

IN CONCERT

NOVEMBER 23 WITH GUESTS

MACEWAN BALLROOM

TICKETS AT TICKETMASTER AND MEGATUNES
ALL AGES WELCOME.
DOORS 7 PM, SHOW 8 PM.



IN STORES NOW

www.thedears.org