

Matt Masters, Western Gentleman

A young man's old-time revival

by Zak Pashak

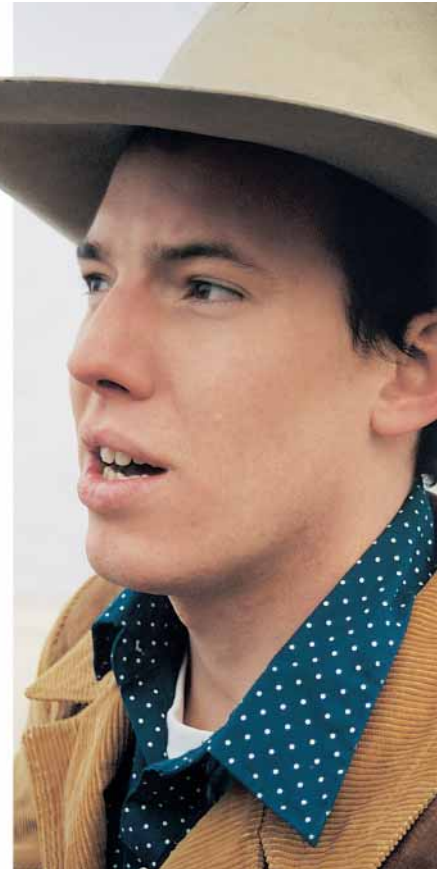
Matt Masters is on the phone with me, and we're trying to work out the details of his photo shoot. "I don't think we should do that photo of me on the horse statue in front of city hall," he says. "I can't line up a saddle for it, and I don't really have the right outfit. And I'm kind of saving that for my third album cover."

The first time I saw the name Matt Masters was on a business card tacked to a corkboard in my sister's kitchen. The card read, "Matt Masters, western gentleman." It had his phone number, a web address (www.moustacheweb.com) and, at the bottom of the card, only the words "Calgary, Alberta" for a home address. Calgary is a big small town, and although my sister was mysteriously coy about the card, I eventually found out who Matt Masters was.

I met Masters a few years later at a concert of his at the Liquid Lounge in Edmonton. My girlfriend had gone to high school with the gentleman and was eager to see him play. The stage show was simple. Masters, a tall, skinny young man, was wearing a dark brown cowboy suit and a big, cartoon-like cowboy

hat. He sang and played acoustic guitar. His back up band, "The Gentlemen of the Rodeo," consisted of Dave Anderson on bass guitar. Anderson wore a farm shirt, jeans and cowboy boots, and had a red bandana tied around his neck. The scene was surreal—an embodiment of the business card. With a deep Johnny Cash voice and a slight drawl, Masters sang about the Bow River, a speed train between Alberta cities and his wandering red boots. It was odd to see him on stage. It was funny, but no one was laughing. Masters had a full, well-rehearsed repertoire, and indie-rock kids from Edmonton were paying cover to see him sing country tunes. I don't know what an old-time western community concert would have been like, but after a few songs that's what it began to feel like. It was bright and calm, like a campfire. The room seemed altered by his performance, in the way one imagines a good sermon might awaken a church congregation. Masters was in his western element.

Matt Masters is the stage persona of Matt Burgener. Last year, on the day before Christmas, I met with Burgener in Calgary to find out



what's behind his shtick. We walked up 17th Avenue and decided to seek out the city's finest eggnog. Burgener carried a bag of comic books he had bought as a present to himself. He was wearing a Santa hat and his ever-present grin.

Growing up in downtown Calgary, Burgener said, he listened to the same music and watched the same TV as any other North



American kid. He listened mostly to indie rock and rap in high school. I tried to get him to tell me that his Matt Masters persona is an altruistic rejection of a forced culture, and that he is making a statement about the value of being interested in where you are and who you are. He didn't.

There is, however, some method to the cowboy routine. During an informed but rambling explanation of pioneer style, sodbusters, cowboy songs, the subtle lyrical differences between Eastern and Western folk songs and the true meaning of the term "folk song," Burgener paused to add, "By the way, I'm a super nerd." While working on his history degree at the University of Calgary, he did a project on folk music. At the archives of the Canadian Music Centre, he found hundreds of folk albums from Ontario but only three from Alberta. He did find many pictures of people with instruments in Alberta, though, and evidence of a fiddle maker in Calgary in the 1890s. He figured there must have been music being made in the province, but not recorded.

Burgener discovered this gap in 2001, but he had begun writing songs years earlier. In 1997, he was living in Vancouver and playing mostly Leonard Cohen songs. His friend Pat Downing, the bassist for the Calgary group "The Dudes," joked that he should start a band called "Matt Masters and the Gentlemen of the Rodeo." Burgener liked the idea, and began writing western folk tunes. But if Burgener is playing for the irony of it, he doesn't seem to let on—and it hasn't hurt his career.

Burgener describes his relationship to folk music as an arranged marriage that works. When he began writing songs, he didn't have the confidence in his guitar skills to try anything more difficult than folk songs, and he liked that the genre could accommodate lone, guitar-playing singers. "I just grew to love that type of music, and at this point, if you look at my CD collection, especially from the last

few years, it appears that I really have switched over from being an indie rocker to being an old-time country fan."

Masters was recently chosen to perform at the Alberta Songwriters Series, and at the time of our interview he had just returned from spending a few months in Toronto, where he shared the stage with a host of reputable Canadian musicians, including Jeff Healey. He plans on rerecording his self-pro-

duced 2001 CD, *The Alberta Reporter*, and already has his next two albums, as well as his career, mapped out. He says Country Music Television could use "a handsome young guy" like him, and he has little doubt that the masses, or at least a good portion of them, will appreciate his sodbusting revival.

Zak Pashak hosts "Stampede Radio," a local music spotlight Thursday afternoons on Calgary's CJSW 90.9 FM.

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