

# MATT MÆSON

Who killed Matt Maeson? Maybe the devil, who haunted his parents, two reformed teenage outlaws who played in religious heavy-metal bands and wouldn't let him listen to rock on the radio. Or maybe it was the volatile spirit that brought Matt to prison the first three hundred times. He played shows with his mom and dad, proprietors of a prison ministry since he was young. The family lived on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, and worked wherever the faithful wouldn't feel like they belonged. They drove south to Florida and west to Montana, rumbling through maximum-security lockups with fire and benediction, drums and guitars. Matt spent years on the road to prisons and biker rallies: he played songs about salvation in front of strippers and Hell's Angels at Sturgis, one of the biggest motorcycle rallies in the world.

Restlessness ran in the family, and it never went away. The men in Matt's life—his dad and uncle—were most comfortable in the margins, whether in glory or disgrace. They were all fighting an inner rebelliousness, against their own darker instincts as well as against a Southern community preaching that long hair brought men closer to hell. By the time he was playing with his parents, Matt had already gotten into drugs, and then into trouble—and then into drugs again, to pay off the trouble. For a year, he worked construction for twelve hours a day, doing community service on his one day off. “I was mad all the time,” he said. “People in my life were condemning me, and not with compassion. Not *this is wrong, and we love you*. It was *this is wrong, and don't ever come back*.”

But he came back—unevenly, in front of standing ovations in prison yards, traveling across the country with a notebook and a guitar. He posted his first songs online at the nexus of 2015 and 2016, and the phone started ringing the next day. There's a rare directness to Matt's music: he sings like the dead singer-songwriters, full of troubled and tensile grace. His sound is spare and rich and restless. Vines of guitar weave around his voice; half-remembered melodies drift overhead like ghosts. “Tribulation” is a love song about when love feels impossible. “Straight Razor” pairs its title with “stargazer” in the first two lines, an ember that catches fire in the track's anthemic gang vocal finale. “Cringe,” his debut single, feels like canon, as profound and arresting as Jeff Buckley or King Krule; it's got the stark, urgent intimacy of a spotlight trained on a pair of sinners in the dark.

Matt headlined his first US tour last summer, presented by Communion, an artist-led organization founded by Mumford & Sons' Ben Lovett. The pairing was appropriate in both aesthetic and name. Driving between venues alone, he slept his car, a dusty Hyundai named either Frank Elantra or Carmen Elantra, depending on the day. Journeying south to the middle of nowhere in Iowa one night, as the black country swallowed up every light around him, he saw a Walmart and an abandoned Wendy's in the middle of the dark. He bought a bottle of whiskey at Walmart, grabbed his blanket, climbed on top of the empty building, and wrote EP standout “Me And My Friends Are Lonely,” a raw confessional that crackles with strength. As with all of Matt's music, it asks the same questions his life has—about desperation, redemption, and love. The extraordinary *Who Killed Matt Maeson* EP arrives March 31st on Neon Gold/Atlantic Records.

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