



I'm Right Here: A Q&A With Mason Jennings

By [Evan Schlansky](#) November 13th, 2011 at 12:11 pm

You wouldn't expect someone born in Honolulu to gravitate to the wind-blown, hardscrabble state of Minnesota, but singer-songwriter Mason Jennings has lived happily in his adopted home turf for 17 years. It's there that he conceived the nine love-themed songs found on *Minnesota*, his acclaimed new album. We asked the artist about the influences on his new album, the shadow of Bob Dylan, and the couples who often come up to him after shows.

You got to sing three Bob Dylan songs on the *I'm Not There* soundtrack. How did you get the gig?

Well, Todd Haynes asked me if I could do the songs in the movie that Christian Bale was doing. He said that Christian was doing them, but it was a really good job. But, he just thought it'd be fun for me to do them because I'm from Minnesota and I'm covering the early part of Dylan's career in the movie. I was stoked and I was really happy to do it.

Is he someone who is like a big influence on you or just someone you like casually?

I definitely like his music, and respect his songwriting a ton, but it wasn't like a huge influence growing up or anything.

Why'd you name the album *Minnesota*?

When we finished the record, I looked back to see if there were any themes running through it. It seemed it was a collage kind of album — all the songs had different sonic landscapes. I looked at the threads that weaved through them, and some of the threads were home and heart. I started to think, "well, home is Minnesota, and I'm based in Minnesota, and that's where they were all written and created." It just seemed like a good word to sort of sum up the process.

How long have you lived there?

Seventeen years. I live outside of Minneapolis.

How would you compare *Minnesota* to your last record?

For me, it's so different. You know, the last was a lot darker, the electric guitar is on a bunch of it. We've got a little slide on some of it.

There's nine songs as opposed to the traditional ten or twelve. Is there a reason for that?

I wrote about 35 songs for this record. It's just editing it down and carving the right shape for it for the final... For me, it's so important to do a sit-down and really listen to it the whole way through and really feel like it's one thing. When we were doing the editing down, this is the shape that just felt like the right length, and every song has its own spot and fits together that way.

Were those just the most 35 recent songs that you had, or were you trying to aim them towards this concept?

The most recent. As I'm writing, I'm sort of experimenting with different things and some songs definitely were three or four songs that were aiming in a certain direction. So, I would pick my favorite one out of the three or four that would go on the record. And a lot of them weren't totally finished, it's just a variety of different kind of things. And then there's a lot more extra recordings. For a song like "Raindrops on the Kitchen Floor," we've got like four or five different recordings of that.

Are you someone who is constantly writing?

For the most part, but over the last eight months, I haven't been. I guess right now I'm in a little bit of a break.

Does that feel good, or is it worrisome?

It feels pretty good actually. It's allowing me to focus a lot more on the live show and getting ready for touring, things like that.

These songs all deal with love. Did you consciously try to write songs around that theme, or did these songs that are on this record just submerge out of your subconscious?

The subconscious, for sure. Anytime I tried to consciously write about anything on this record, it would end up being not as powerful for me. It just didn't feel right. I would try to write something about something else. For me, it's a very subconscious process and it kind of makes more sense when you hear it back. The whole hard part of that is being open to that. Just being open to your subconscious. A song like "Raindrops on the Kitchen Floor", which would surprise me, because it's such a happy, upbeat kind of song. My conscious mind would be more into trying to write something darker.

Has your approach to songwriting has evolved over the years?

No, it's actually kind of pretty similar from that point from where it started. It's natural process for me, and I really feel like it's something I need to do. I mean, different songs have a different weight, but it's all about getting in touch with that subconscious and letting it flow, let it happen without trying to edit it too fast. It's sort of like a relief when a song happens for me.

For someone that has a family, where do you go to write your songs? How do you make that happen?

I have a studio that's about 15 minutes from where I live. It's out in the woods. A little spot that has the recording, too. I make sure to have separate areas for the two.

And when you're not on tour and stuff, do you spend most of your time in there?

Yeah, totally. It's like a 6 or 7 hour a day kind of thing.

Do you find yourself playing other people's songs to get you inspired? Or do you just try to focus?

I haven't in the past, but this year, what I have done a lot more of...I've just been sitting around and listening to Louis Armstrong a lot lately, and I've been kind of trying to play a bunch of his songs on guitar. Lately, I've been doing more of that. In the past, I haven't so much. So, I don't know what that means about the next step for my writing. But, I haven been more often.

Were there any artists you drew from when you were creating this record?

Well, for piano, I listened to Chopin a bunch. I hadn't really heard his music before, so I got some of his music and I was really listening to that. The Bad Plus, I like that band a lot, a piano trio. But other than that, what I was in the middle of was just working on my own music.

Are you primarily a guitarist? Or do you switch it up?

My strongest instrument is guitar. I like to worry about piano, and I like to play drums a lot. So, drumming is a big part of my life, too. I did all the drums on the record, too.

I've heard that couples would come up to you after your shows sometimes to tell you what your music means to them.

Yeah, it's just something we noticed over the years. Often times, when I go out and talk to people, it's often couples. And it's really cool to hear so many different stories about people using my music in their weddings. A lot of times people will admit that they will hear my music when they start dating and that will be the soundtrack for when they're dating. And people, when they get married, it's been a soundtrack for their relationship. It's always an awesome thing to hear. I just feel so fortunate because that's such a high honor.

Sometimes you would think the soundtrack would be someone like Sam Cooke or somebody like that. So when it's somebody who writes songs that are lyrically complex, it's cool to think of people having their relationship set to that.

This is your 9th record. How does it feel to have created so much content and be at this point in your career?

It feels good. To me, the fact that I'm still able to do it and the crowd seems to keep growing. And people hearing a lot of the music, it's fantastic. I feel really fortunate.

Have you ever done any co-writing?

I've never really sat with someone and written a song together. That's something I'm kind of interested in trying sometime. I think it could be fun.

Would you try to do a different genre?

I guess I would sort go with what the universe throws my way. I'm not really even sure how to approach it. It's such a foreign idea. I'm not really even sure how to approach it, because I just grew up doing it. It's such a personal thing, it's something that's so everyday. Everyday I write songs to record them. It's almost like having somebody co-drive a car with me or something.

