



## Wake Up: An Interview with Mason Jennings

By **Imran Khan** 26 October 2011

Mason Jennings is by no means a new kid on the block, having had a recording career well past a decade now. But his usual aversion (either willing or unwilling) to commercial radio has made him something of a cache artist. Jennings recorded a debut album back in 1998, which went virtually ignored by much of the record-buying public but elicited some hushed, excited murmurs in the quarters of the noted indie-folk scene. It wasn't that Jennings was doing anything radically left-field musically, but his strange musings on sex and religion (perhaps even the marriage of both) have made him at least a singular talent in the craft of interpreting emotion through song.

Jennings has the voice of a country & western singer, finger-picking a banjo on the back porch of a house in the weeds. But his musical scatterheart belies the excitement of a sampledelic hip-hopper; various snatches of sounds ranging from the frenetic charge of jazz to the anthemic power of rock find their way into the rough patch-work sewn by the folky strums of his guitar.

This fall, Jennings releases *Minnesota*, his open love-letter to the state he calls his spiritual home. Many of the rock influences from his previous effort, *Blood of Man*, carry over into *Minnesota* but much of the album is underpinned by Jennings' new method of communication, the piano. *Minnesota* explores a wide range of musical hues, from the chilly "Witches Dream" (a song swept in the storm of shuddering drums) to the plaintive lament of "Raindrops on the Kitchen Floor". As always, Jennings' eerie dream reveries give listeners plenty of clouds to lose their heads in while he journals his discoveries with a keen observational eye. No lyrical exploit is left unwritten; stories of drunkards stumbling their way back to sobriety sit comfortably next to surreal tales of myth-making magic. Jennings' newest album may not win him an entirely new fanbase. But it will remind his loyal following of what it is that makes his music impressionable.

\* \* \*

**PopMatters:** *Minnesota* is an obvious love-letter to the American state. Can you talk about why this place informed this record so much?

**Mason Jennings:** Well, All the songs were recorded there. This record has such a collage feel to me. When I looked for a main theme the theme seemed to be heart and home. I asked myself, where is my heart and home? Minnesota.

**PM:** Your instrument of choice has mostly been the guitar. On *Minnesota*, however, the piano is upfront and center and is usually driving the songs. Why did you decide to make the guitar take the backseat this time?

**MJ:** I think I gravitated to writing on the piano because when I got home from the “Blood of Man” tour I had been rocking the electric guitar for over a year and it was just a nice quiet breath of fresh air.

**PM:** In the past you have explored many other styles of music outside the perimeters of folk. On *Minnesota*, you dabble in a bit of vaudeville. It seems more of an attempt to expand upon your sense of humor in the music rather than musical genres. What are your ideas on this?

**MJ:** I am more interested in songs than styles. I just try to give each song the treatment that is right for it.

**PM:** Quite a number of your works do not feel like studio productions, meaning that while they were indeed recorded in a studio, your albums resonate with a much more “live” feel. Many of your albums seem to have a lo-fi element, almost like one-take bedroom recordings. Can you talk a bit about your approach to recording?

**MJ:** I believe that the most important thing in a recording is when the performer sounds comfortable. Comfortable to make art. So, that is the thing I aim for. Way before hi fi.

**PM:** A common thread in your music is the religious theme. This was most prominent on *In The Ever* but the religious themes have always been there in your work. For an artist, these themes can be a precarious thing; some artists manage to articulate their ideas on religion quite effectively (PJ Harvey, for instance). Other times, those ideas can be misconstrued since the subject can be a very sensitive topic. How do you approach this subject in your music? Am I wrong in detecting some irony?

**MJ:** I don’t detect irony. I just make sure I am singing how I feel And not aiming to preach. That works for me.

**PM:** You have been recording albums for over a decade now. Yet mainstream success seems to elude you. By now, everyone should suspect that that is something you probably don’t care too much about anyway. But what are your opinions on being labeled an “indie-artist” when much of what you do would appeal to a wide audience?

**MJ:** What other people think about me and my music is out of my control. I love making music and feel grateful everyday that I get to make it.

**PM:** Many artists claim that becoming a parent has a dramatic effect on their work that helps to shape and inform their music. Is this at all true for you?

**MJ:** Yes, it has had a massive effect on me and my music. Feeling that kind of love is an intense experience.

**PM:** Having been a recording artist for so long, do you see anything else you might like to explore in your future, especially now that you are a father?

**MJ:** I like animating and drawing. I like writing stories. We will see.