

BORDER SONGS

SOME OF THE BEST AMERICANA MUSIC IS BEING MADE BY A BURLY CANADIAN SONGWRITER

Matt Andersen, who combines soul and blues sounds with the folk vibes of his native country, is making inroads in the U.S. with new album *The Hammer & The Rose*

By **GARRET K. WOODWARD**

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Matt Andersen, a Canadian songwriter who just released the new album 'The Hammer & The Rose,' is putting his own spin on Americana music.

DAN JARDINE*

Canadian singer-songwriter Matt Andersen has an unrelenting work ethic. Since the early 2000s, he's seemingly always been on tour or recording new music. Andersen immediately cites his father, a self-employed tree logger who worked long days in the northern woods of Andersen's native province of New Brunswick.

"He always told me he wanted to work for himself," Andersen tells *Rolling Stone*. "And I always had that in my head."

Calling in from his home not far out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, the cell service is spotty and scratchy at best. It's a symbol of just how far away Andersen is from not only the United States border, but the southern origins of the music he champions and radiates so beautifully — Delta blues, Memphis soul, and Appalachian folk.

"A lot of the people who I listened to, who were playing the blues [in Canada,] they learned the blues from the first-generation guys that were coming across and playing the clubs in Toronto," he says. "And I got to hear the people who listen to them firsthand."

The culmination of those distinct genres is at the core of Andersen's latest album, *The Hammer & The Rose*. Recorded in his garage-turned-studio, the 10-song LP is a refreshing, uplifting voice in uncertain times — especially for Canadian musicians, whose access to the U.S. market is being increasingly threatened by President Trump and his tariffs.

"Darkness calls you to the sea/drags you down to the deep," Andersen howls in his powerful, soaring baritone vibrato in "Hold on to Me. "When the world's got ahold of you/you can hold on to me."

For Andersen, 44, the journey to the here and now has been long, but bountiful. Early on, he found himself at weekly family music jams in his hometown of Perth-Andover, New Brunswick (population: 1,574), gradually learning guitar. By age 14, he finally acquired his own six-string.

"Music is a big part of the culture there. We didn't do board games, we played music," Andersen says. "The closest movie theater was across the border, so everything was a trip if we wanted to do something like that. We made our own fun. A lot of times that revolved around music."

Held at his grandfather's house every Saturday night, the gatherings were a much-needed way to connect with others and pass the time in a very rural area, especially during the unforgiving winter months of ice, snow, and below-zero temperatures. Even then, Andersen was a sponge for music.

“When I was younger, especially being from a small town, we were at the mercy of whatever was on the radio,” Andersen chuckles. “It was a classic rock and a country station. There wasn’t really anything in-between.”



Andersen had to seek out other influences and musical rabbit holes when it came to the blues and folk, whether it be via the internet in search of guitar tabs for obscure tunes or simply discovering Eric Clapton’s seminal 1992 album *Unplugged*.

“I got more into the bluesy-folk stuff and just started to branch out,” Andersen says.

Beyond the daunting nature of touring cross-country in Canada, there’s also been the invisible line of breaking into America as an artist from above the border. In a credit to his father’s work ethic again, Andersen has been able to overcome those obstacles.

“The things that would make most people tired are the things that get me pumped up,” Andersen says. “Playing one end of the country and going to the other end the next night? I just love that. It’s places I would never go without my guitar. To get to wake up and play music is still amazing.”

A lot of that gumption comes from Andersen's love of traveling and bringing his music to new towns. That, and the "hell or high water" ethos he's always emphasized in his work, where it doesn't matter where the road takes him, so long as he gets to play for someone, somewhere.

"Growing up, making a living [as a musician] wasn't really something you can see. I might as well be an astronaut," Andersen says.

Much like his famed Canadian songwriting heroes — Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and Gord Downie, among them — Andersen distills the essence of life in the vastness of the country in songs about love, friendship, and passion.

"[With songwriting], you can kind of tell where people are from," Andersen says. "It's almost like an accent — how you talk, how you write. With my writing, local colloquialisms work their way in."

Once he hit the touring circuits, Andersen became a notable force up and down the highways and backcountry roads of greater North America. Averaging 200 shows a year, he found himself accepted into sacred America blues circles, soon touring and performing alongside the Tedeschi Trucks Band, Buddy Guy, and Bo Diddley.

"My grandfather loved to play, and he always thought as long as somebody wanted to listen, somebody could play," Andersen says. "I always kept that with me when I was starting out playing rooms with two or three people [in attendance]."

The Hammer & The Rose culminates in an ode to Andersen's father, who's now 77. Titled "Always Be Your Son," the poignant melody gives thanks to a man who has believed in his child's talents since day one — the ultimate fuel to the fire of one's intent within the creative realms.

"You'd tell me every morning/'time to rise and greet the day,'" Andersen sings. "You said, 'Give an honest effort,' and sent me on my way/with mum beside you crying, that was all you had to say."

"He was the first one to help me co-sign for my vehicle so I could tour, the first one to help me get a PA system," Andersen says on his father. "As we've gotten older, it's less father and son, and more friends. I like that idea [he instilled in me] that you get out of it what you put into it. It keeps me motivated." ®