



## **Villages** *Upon the Horizon* (EP)

When the four members of Villages established the band in 2016, it was with the goal of writing original songs in the spirit of the traditional music of their home region, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. But from that simple foundation, the sound of Villages has consistently expanded into what is now a dazzling combination of indie folk and experimental pop, with dashes of sun-bleached psychedelia added for good measure.

The band's new EP *Upon the Horizon* - a taste of their next full-length album due in 2021 - is their most dynamic and exploratory work yet, recorded at New Scotland Yard studio in Dartmouth, just after Nova Scotia lifted social distancing rules in July 2020. But what makes *Upon the Horizon* stand apart from Villages' past efforts is its mix done by American indie rock legend Phil Ek (Fleet Foxes, Modest Mouse, Built to Spill, The Shins, Father John Misty, Band of Horses). For Matt Ellis, Travis Ellis, Jon Pearo and Archie Rankin, it was not only an honour to work with one of their heroes, but a validation of their distinctive musical approach.

Travis Ellis explains, "Back before we mixed our first record, I threw a bit of a Hail Mary and reached out to Phil to gauge his interest. He was into it but the timing just didn't work out then. Thankfully everything came together this time around, and it was a real treat to work with Phil. He did a great job and definitely took the songs to another level."

That was exactly what the members of Villages were after, since the songs as written aimed to transcend the sense of isolation and dread that accompanied pandemic restrictions. Matt Ellis says, "Being locked up naturally conjured visions of escapism. Escaping to the wilderness has always been a way to find peace, but when even that was not an option it was yet another thing that had been taken for granted."

He adds, "The songs were written on an old guitar with four dead strings that had been neglected for years. There was something fitting about it, given the current condition of the world. This guitar was once a prized possession and over the years just sat collecting dust. Yet, the moment I picked it up the memories it had amassed over the years flooded my mind. It was the comfort and inspiration that was needed—the feeling of a new instrument yet to be discovered, and of new beginnings and endless possibilities."

The fact that *Upon the Horizon* came together so quickly is a testament to the creative roll Villages have been on over the past few years. They had been touring Canada right up until March 2020, and began writing immediately after, with the EP's title track emerging first around the Easter holiday. It's a song the



band describes as a pure Covid daydream, and it set a high bar for what followed.

Jon Pearo explains, "In some ways, working remotely enabled us more freedom in terms of writing parts. Historically, our process has been to get together in a room but working individually with some vague idea of a song really allowed us to get creative, and probably pushed the songs in a direction we wouldn't have been able to achieve through our traditional method of writing."

The notion of fate also dominated some aspects of writing process, as internal questions arose as to why the world was suddenly experiencing a complete breakdown. The song "Poetry in Motion" captures this mood most effectively, while offering the hopeful message that just because something you hoped for didn't turn out, perhaps fate has something better in store. Such optimism is also expressed in the EP's final song "Glistening Hum," a rousing call to arms that radiates like a sunrise over the Cape Breton Highlands.

Although Villages' 2019 self-titled full-length debut album did earn well-deserved international praise, *Upon the Horizon* truly feels like the start of something brand new. The band's continuing evolution makes it increasingly hard to believe that they began as Mardeen, following in the footsteps of east coast indie rock pioneers such as Sloan and Thrush Hermit. But then, one late-night sing-along changed everything.

At first, the newly christened Villages seemed adamant in adhering to tradition, but the quartet soon realized they had too much creative energy to limit themselves in such a way. Archie Rankin explains, "We were very much acoustic driven in terms of instrumentation when we first started writing and recording. Over the years we've been adding in synths, drum samples, and different effects that take the tunes to new and exciting places. We definitely need a few more power bars handy now compared to when we first started the band."

What often makes music great are regional distinctions, something that is sadly being lost with the increased reliance on technology. Still, the ability to strike a balance remains, and often produces unexpectedly stunning results. Villages have done just that on *Upon the Horizon* and secured a place among Canada's most innovative and soul-stirring bands.

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