



## Villages – Dark Island Bio

*Away to the westward, I'm longing to be  
Where the beauties of heaven unfold by the sea  
Where the sweet purple heather blooms fragrant and free  
On a hilltop, high above the Dark Island*  
- Traditional Scottish folk song

The concept of the Dark Island is metaphorical: When you're at the end of your life, taking stock of it, what will you think about? No matter what you land on, good or bad, that island is yours - the dark surely looms, but it also covers all you've ever experienced.

For the folk-rock quartet Villages, the concept is also literal: Hailing from Cape Breton Island, on the farthest flung northeastern corner of Nova Scotia - itself already flung far - and jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean, it's a lush landscape of great complicated beauty, its rocky coast covered in sea salt and leaning defiantly into harsh winds.

On its new full-length, *Dark Island*, Villages marries metaphor to roots on 11 tracks that offer an experience meant to echo a visit to Cape Breton itself: Otherworldly, euphoric, sobering, celebratory, and reverent.

The band - Matt Ellis, Travis Ellis, Jon Pearo, Archie Rankin - tapped the JUNO-winning composer and soundscapist Joshua Van Tassel (David Myles, Great Lake Swimmers, Fortunate Ones) as producer, stepping into Joel Plaskett's Fang Recording for a whirlwind eight days. Van Tassel directed the band to play the songs fully live off the floor (three takes max) capturing the boisterous energy of Villages' live performances and making the album a series of present moments strung together.

The combination of Van Tassel - whose own work is largely instrumental and played on rare instruments - and Villages - the band has also made three indie-rock albums as Mardeen -results in a type of Celtic music that respects its heritage while taking sonic chances. *Dark Island's* opening seconds are comprised of birds chirping and Matt Ellis' voice stutter-stepping through "Good morning," before dropping into a full-on shanty in the form of "Wearing Through the Pine."

The lead single "Love Will Live On" is a gently rolling foot-stomper lamenting the hard times of modern-day life: "I'm too poor to be buying this round," Ellis notes whose upbeat chorus offers a hopeful solution: move to the country and live a quiet life on "an island in the Maritimes".

In between album-wide kitchen-party whoops, Ellis pulls his voice as high as it can go on "Easy When You Know How," sure to be a live sing-along challenge. The final minute of "Willow" hops into a classic Wall of Sound pop cacophony surrounding a chorus of traditional la-la-las and a refrain of high, airy oohs carries "Mother" to its gentle conclusion.



Nature is, aptly, a dominant theme on *Dark Island*, befitting men who grew up in a place wild and beautiful: fields, waves, trees, rivers, and rocks figure prominently throughout the lyrics, presenting the music as a kind of soundtrack to Island life, putting you in and at home. On perhaps the most Celtic-leaning track, "Play the Fiddle All Night," all of the album's themes are handily encompassed in just half of a chorus: "Play for me the 'Dark Island' / till the dew lifts off the clover / play the fiddle all night."

For the members of Villages, who grew up on traditional Celtic music, to create and perform new music in that tradition is no small feat, and no small responsibility. They know where they come from. They know how it made them. And they know where their Dark Island lies.

*So gentle the sea breeze that ripples the bay  
Where the stream joins the ocean, and young children play  
On a strand of pure silver, I'll welcome each day  
And I'll roam forever more, the Dark Island*

---

Reviving the Cape Breton sound of their ancestry and mixing it with contemporary influences and instruments, Villages are an intriguing case study in cultural identity. Escaping the trad-inspired sounds in their younger days through their acclaimed indie rock band Mardeen, the group has assuredly found their way back to their roots.

Their self-titled debut took a deep dive into the haunting and meandering melodies of the Cape Breton Highlands and presents them through atmospheric arrangements that recall the influence of groups like The War on Drugs and Fleet Foxes. *Villages* won Folk Recording of the Year at the 2019 Nova Scotia Music Awards. The group's 2020 EP, *Upon the Horizon* built on the unique sound of their debut and was mixed by Phil Ek (Fleet Foxes, Band of Horses).