



Learning the Tides

The inward journey & outward expansion of Dave McGraw & Mandy Fer

By Ryan Heinsius



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SCREEN

Sponge Out of Water



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MUSIC

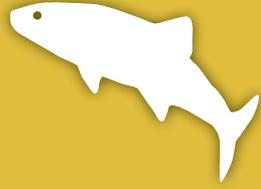
Jonathan Richman



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MUSIC

Dr. Dog



By Ryan Heinsius | Photos by Jenn Repp

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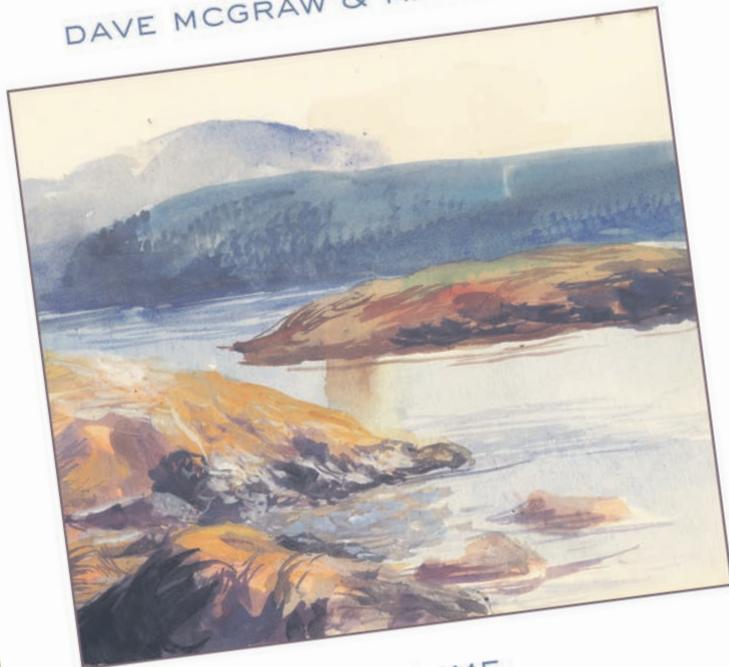
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Photos courtesy of Jean Repp Photography.



DAVE MCGRAW & MANDY FER



MARITIME

As the crow flies, the San Juan Islands are situated only a few miles from the U.S.-Canada border, just across the Haro Strait from Victoria, British Columbia. It's one of the most beautiful, out-of-the-way corners of the world imaginable, and among the northernmost spots in the Lower 48.

Depending on the tide, more than 400 islands make up this remote Pacific Northwest archipelago, but fewer than half actually have names. San Juan Island itself is the biggest and most populated, but at less than 7,000 people that is, of course, relative.

Pods of orcas cruise the coastline, rare seabirds dive-bomb their catches, the scent of lavender fields fills the summer air. It's easy to get lost out here. It's the kind of place that invites solitude and an almost mandatory slow down of life. For some, it's paradise.

It was here, in a 400-square-foot cabin on a heavily wooded farm, that singer-songwriters Dave McGraw and Mandy Fer wrote and conceptualized much of their newest album, *Maritime*, which will officially be released in the U.S. on March 3. The album's 12 tracks are flush with imagery of their sea-locked retreat. It's mellow and powerful, rich with their haunting vocal harmonies, beguiling, unorthodox melodies and multilayered, often mysterious, lyrical constructs. *Maritime* feels like this place.

"The island is where my body and soul feel most at home," McGraw says. "I guess it has become my place of calm, really. There is a quiet out here that is hard to find elsewhere. The communities in the islands have protected these places from big-box stores and fast-food culture and, for me, it has become a place where I can really try to focus on what is important."

This isn't McGraw's first sojourn to these islands. While attending college in nearby Bellingham, Wash., he would hop the two-hour ferry ride to spend weekends camping solo, writing poetry and reveling in the solitude. Eventually, he moved out here, and worked as a kayak guide and bird biologist while living in an old, yellow school bus parked in the woods on some friends' property. For several years, McGraw bounced back and forth between the islands and the desert Southwest—specifically, the Arizona Strip near Lees Ferry where he worked on the California condor reintroduction project. His seasonal migrations seeped into the songs he'd been writing, and he began getting more serious about making music. He started touring with two other musicians he met on the condor project and recorded two acoustically oriented, folkly albums.

McGraw moved to Flagstaff in 2008 and formed the band Crow Wing with three other local musicians (full disclosure: this article's author is one of these musicians). They recorded one studio album and a couple live albums and hit the road in their trusty Chevy van, Henrietta. But all the while, McGraw felt the undeniable pull of the San Juan Islands.



A Chicago native, Fer moved to Flagstaff in 2004 to attend Northern Arizona University where she sang choir and minored in music. Fer claims to have been singing since birth, but she's also played piano since age 6 and guitar since she was 14. In Flagstaff, she formed the jam-rock band Livelihood, which was fueled by her powerful voice and inventive guitar playing. Livelihood quickly became one of the town's most celebrated live bands, featuring the interlocking vocal harmonies of Fer's sister, Jennie. After graduation, Fer traveled to Spain where she studied language and culture, and tried her hand at playing nylon-string guitar. When she returned to Flagstaff, she again stormed the Flagstaff music scene, but this time as a solo artist.

In 2010, McGraw and Fer teamed up for a one-off gig in Flagstaff opening for the Canadian folk band Po' Girl. There was immediate chemistry, and McGraw and Fer began collaborating in earnest. They soon became romantic partners, and in 2012, made the leap to San Juan Island to pursue music full time.

It's a somewhat counterintuitive move given the island's total disconnect from any semblance of the music industry. But, in their three years there, much of that time has been spent honing their sound and writing. They've also toured the U.S. heavily, and for the last two summers traveled to Europe, where they've become a celebrated live act. Despite those extended absences from home, the island remains the place they return to regroup, make sense of the world and create.

"Living here on the islands is unlike anything I've ever experienced before," Fer says. "There is a certain peace you start to find in yourself when you live on a sleepy little island tucked away in the sea. When we first moved here we lived off-grid in a cabin and had the bulk of the summer off the road to adjust, nest and write."

And that strategy seems to have paid off. In 2012, McGraw and Fer released their debut album together, *Seed of a Pine*, which received critical praise throughout the U.S. and Europe. Then, last spring they began recording the follow-up, *Maritime*. They reconvened the

personnel from *Seed of a Pine*, a crew McGraw calls their "dream team": Los Angeles-based producer Zach Goheen, along with Chicago bass player Christopher Merrill and Flagstaff drummer Andrew Lauher. They rented an isolated house on San Juan Island, set up next to a large stone fireplace, and hammered out the album in eight days, recording almost entirely live.

"It was all about capturing the feel of the song," McGraw says. "There were no perfect takes, but the vibe was captured and we thought that was the most important part."

For Goheen, that raw recording style was crucial for *Maritime*.

"I prefer recording everything live if the musicians are up to it," he says. "There's just a natural ebb and flow to a song that gets lost if you separate the recording up into overdubs."

"Nothing flashy, we were going for honesty,"

continues McGraw. "The property was forested and very quiet and relaxing. We wanted to have the same environment in recording that we had in writing the songs. The album is mellow. There is no doubt that the guys felt the island in their playing."

Fer calls it "island time."

"You unplug, slow down, and spend more time outside looking at the trees and listening to the birds more than you normally would. No cell phone coverage, no Internet, no distractions, just us and the music," she says.

Goheen, Merrill and Lauher lived in the house during the recording process, bonding over morning coffee and nighttime whiskey. And that family-like atmosphere transferred directly to the music.

"What (Dave and Mandy) wanted was for us to be as relaxed and comfortable as possible so that the songs flowed. And, that's exactly what the record does, it flows ... there was no pressure ... There was nothing difficult about making this record," Lauher says.

McGraw and Fer both describe the songs on *Maritime* as a more collaborative effort than their first album. And it shows. The evolution that has taken place for the two artists between albums is immediately apparent from the album's low-key opening salvo, "Helicopter."

"We're all little sponges to all of the experiences and lessons that place offers ... We learn from each place, take with us little seeds of inspiration that we gather from the people or the landscape along the way." – Mandy Fer



McGraw and Fer sing in close harmony, displaying their deepening musical and personal connection: “We are slowing down, taking time,” they sing. “Leaving all those demons behind.”

Several of the songs on *Maritime* reference places both loved and loathed. Fer’s shuffling song “Could Be Ghosts” was inspired by the tail end of a 10-week winter tour, during which, beleaguered and exhausted, the two drove long, harrowing stretches between Colorado, Montana, Idaho and Oregon.

“On the road, I guess your awareness of your own mortality is heightened,” she says.

But, McGraw’s “Carillon” sprang out of a cherished experience while in Amsterdam during their first European tour. It chronicles a musical conversation between the player of the city’s massive church bells and an eccentric trumpeter who navigates the local canals in a small boat while performing.

“Hearing the call and response from up in the belfry was perhaps one of the single most magical moments of my life,” McGraw says.

“Dark Dark Woods,” written by both McGraw and Fer, offers what might be the clearest glimpse into the nature of their bond. The song succinctly captures the challenges, and even occasional battles, inherent in maintaining a relationship, charting a course in life, and fighting for what matters. They sing: “Lay with me now while our hearts are young ... Prove to me now you are who you are, and follow me, follow me now so the storm may pass.”

This is all driven by the slowly intensifying playing of Andrew Lauher, who eventually lets loose in a snare-drum fueled rage well past the song’s halfway point before it all abruptly

culminates, trailing off with a brief vocal harmony.

Maritime was released in Europe last summer to near-universal acclaim. Britain’s *Telegraph* placed it among the best albums of 2014. And, the EuroAmericana Chart, an aggregate of critic reviews, listed it at number one for two months last year, ahead of famed veterans like Old Crow Medicine Show, Richard Thompson, John Hiatt and Natalie Merchant.

But for McGraw and Fer—whether exploring the back alleys of Europe, watching the odometer turn over on the highways of America, or retreating to the Arcadian tranquility of San Juan Island—the priority is living moment to moment.

“I guess I’ve been really trying to practice the art of *paying attention* for much of my life now,” McGraw says. “When I get too busy to notice what kind of ducks are on the pond, I feel disconnected and unhealthy. I think our very own biology as humans craves connection and knowledge of place; our survival has depended on it for thousands and thousands of years.”

Says Fer, “We’re all little sponges to all of the experiences and lessons that *place* offers ... I guess for us, in traveling so much, we try to make whatever place we are in feel like home. We learn from each place, take with us little seeds of inspiration that we gather from the people or the landscape along the way.”

Dave McGraw and Mandy Fer will perform two Valentine’s Day shows at the Coconino Center for the Arts, 2300 N. Ft. Valley Road. The 7:30 p.m. show is sold out, but \$15 tickets are still available for their 3 p.m. matinee. For more info, call 779-2300 or see www.daveandmandymusic.com.



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