

West of Mabou

High-energy fiddling, Scottish Lowland Border pipes, smooth whistle tunes, rocking guitar, and drum solos are just a few of the things you might see in a West of Mabou stage performance, as the Western Canadian band taps into their strong Scottish, Irish, and Cape Breton roots to deliver a unique brand of high-energy, traditional music with a contemporary flare.

The band's latest album, "The Bridge", was produced by master Cape Breton musician, Wendy MacIsaac, and released in March 2018. "The Bridge" is the English translation of the name Gaelic settlers gave to Mabou-the Cape Breton town after which the band is named. Shortly after its release, the album reached #3 on the iTunes Canada World Music Charts, receiving radio play across four continents.

West of Mabou's fusion of traditional and original fiddle and pipe tunes earned them a nomination for 'Instrumental Group of the Year' at the 2018 Canadian Folk Awards, and a nomination for 'World Artist of the Year' at the 2018 Western Canadian Music Awards. The band was also named as one of the *Irish and Celtic Music Podcast's* 'Top Bands of 2017.'

Originating in the golden prairies of Canada, the band was formed at a weekly traditional music session in a local pub. "We were the the players who showed up week after week," recalls Benson. "At one point I had a gig booked but the band fell through, so I asked if I could bring my friends from the session. They agreed, so we had to quickly pick a band name. When the first video we made in our practice space went viral, we knew we were onto something good. We end up selling out that first show!"

"The Eagle's Whistle", the opening track kicks off with a contemporary drum and guitar groove before the pipes kick in with a traditional Scottish tune. Halfway through, the fiddles join in and the tempo kicks into the reels before finishing the set with a traditional Irish waltz. "Adding a waltz onto a reel set is something that you often hear in the piping world," says Rasmussen. "It's an idea I got from my years in the pipe band, and I think it really worked well for that set."

Caiomhin's Jigs, Eamonn An Chnoic, and Piper's Despair all provide haunting and varied midsections to the album, while the band features some original jigs on "The First Pint".

Wendy MacIsaac hops from the producer's chair to the piano bench on "Lime Hill," providing traditional Cape Breton piano accompaniment to the album.

“The Lost Passport Set” features some original tunes by Easton and Wallace, and was inspired by the band’s time on the road. “During our first tour in the United States, I lost my passport,” laughs Wallace. “There were some nervous moments, but Air Canada found it and I was able to get it back with a little stress but not too much hassle.”

The album finishes with another full-band blast of tunes; “The Moving Cloud”. The set kicks off with the pipes before the fiddles join in and close out the record on some up-tempo reels.

West of Mabou unites the talents of Scott Benson (fiddle), Jared Dormer (percussion), Justin Easton (guitar/bass), Alex Rasmussen (pipes/whistles), and Roberta Wallace (fiddle). Each of the band members is an experienced performer in their own right, having performed at festivals, ceilidhs, pubs, and stages around the world.

Rasmussen has performed extensively across North America and Europe, both as a solo piper, and as a member of the City of Regina Pipe Band. Rising up through the pipe band ranks, Alex has gone on to pipe alongside artists such as Sir Paul McCartney, Natalie MacMaster, and Donnell Leahy. No stranger to the competitive pipe band world, he has won several competitions as a solo piper, and has received several honours as a senior member of the City of Regina Pipe Band.

Growing up together in Southern Saskatchewan, Wallace and Easton have performed extensively as a duo, and have taught at fiddle and guitar camps, competitions, and schools across North America. Their long-standing friendship is evident with their on-stage chemistry and musicianship, and with their great love for old-time fiddle music: They’re never shy to rip into some old-time reels and waltzes at West of Mabou performances, creating a temporary and varied departure from the band’s traditional Celtic sound.

Equally at home on the drum kit, bodhran, and cajon, Dormer is the driving force behind West of Mabou, seamlessly transitioning between time signatures and tempo changes. Entirely self-taught, Dormer grew up playing the kit and cajon to many of his favourite recordings, and in full millennial style, even took to YouTube to teach himself the traditional Irish bodhran.

Benson wanted to pick up the fiddle at the ripe age of three years old. Thinking he was still a bit young, his father encouraged him to wait until he turned five before starting lessons. To his dad’s surprise, Benson woke up on his fifth birthday raring to go and hasn’t looked back since. He completed grade 8 in the Royal Conservatory of Music before falling in love with Cape Breton fiddle music. Unable to find an instructor in his

hometown, Benson accumulated as many recordings as he possibly could of Cape Breton and Scottish fiddlers, studying the technique and learning the tunes.

With a strong respect for tradition and a unique contemporary style and sense of humour, West of Mabou continues to charm audiences with their impossible-to-sit-still tempos and their ability to fold Celtic sounds with modern inflections into a recipe for dance.

"The Bridge' is a superb album and a worthy successor to the band's debut, not to mention additional confirmation that this is a group of truly gifted musicians who are doing something very special here. We cannot wait to hear this new material live and, speaking from personal experience, we know that the live versions will be tremendous. Highly recommended."

-Great Dark Wonder, Pennsylvania, USA

"Deserving of a front and center stage position for sure."

-Bob MacEachern, 101.5 The Hawk, Cape Breton, Canada

"Lively, Celtic music highlighted by its virtuoso fiddle players and jubilant attitude."

-Bucketlist Music Reviews, Montreal, Canada

"Great band. Great CD... I can't stop listening."

-Calum Macdonald, The Celticset, Scotland