

On *Harvest Highway*, Jimmy Rankin hits the road again, time traveling and traversing far-flung destinations—along with his native Nova Scotia, of course—through his singular brand of East Coast folk-rock. The Cape Breton icon's eighth solo album is rich in the narrative songwriting traditions that Rankin has been honing for nearly his whole life, filled with crackling yarns and poignant chronicles about feverish marriages in Thunder Bay, unmoored Newfoundlanders, lovers on the run, and fallen soldiers in France. Bookended by songs about home, the collection roams a trajectory not so different from Rankin's life, with narrators who relish in adventure while also feeling a yearning for the homeland from which they first pulled their roots up. It finds Rankin at the height of his songwriting powers. "I've been working toward this album for my entire career," he says.

Rankin nods to Nova Scotia's Highway 101—running through the fertile Annapolis Valley and down the southern shore of the Bay of Fundy—with the album's wistful title track, an Americana-tinged road tune with one eye on the asphalt and one on the figurative rearview mirror. He looks back, too, to his early years with traditionals like the lovesick "Peggy Gordon" and the bittersweet farewell "Banks of Sicily," both tunes he first heard as a kid on fellow Caper John Allen Cameron's records. There's plenty of kitchen party vibe in the toe-tapping "Irish Red;" the rowdy, vintage country-rocker "Sue St. Marie" runs roughshod all 'round small town Ontario; on the rollicking "Drunk or Sober," Rankin sings about true blue friendship in what's sure to be a fan-favourite sing-along chorus; and "Our Time Is Tonight" dials up a fiery intensity with its tale of forbidden love.

History abounds, too—sombre Wurlitzer carries "Marasheen Farewell," about a relocated Newfoundland community, and "Missing at the Somme" imagines the tragic life of a single, young 20th-century soldier who fought in one of human history's most lethal battles. Rankin takes a commanding turn at the piano on the penitent "Doors of Assisi" and for the album's heartfelt finale "My One Direction," a moving ballad about finding his way back to a different definition of home: the love of his life.

Some of the songs on *Harvest Highway* have been brewing with Rankin for over a decade, some have their roots more than a century back, and some are newcomers to his body of work. But all are informed by a lifetime in music. In his early years with Cape Breton's favourite musical brood—Mabou's The Rankin Family—Jimmy established himself as a torchbearer of East Coast folk and one of the most well-respected songwriters in Atlantic Canada, with songs like "Mull River Shuffle" enduring for decades through traditional renditions at Nova Scotia weddings and dance nights, and through the countless cover versions that pay homage to the Rankins. In 2013, CBC listeners voted the 1994 JUNO Award-winning single "Fare Thee Well" the #1 East Coast song of all time, and it was inducted into the Canadian Songwriters' Hall of Fame in 2020. If you live outside the maritimes—in Canada or internationally—and know the sound of East Coast folk music, it's likely thanks to Jimmy.

His reputation as a compelling writer and hitmaker spills into his solo work as well, and he's been a chart fixture since his 2001 debut album *Song Dog*, racking up awards for songs like "Followed Her Around," "Midnight Angel," "Morning Bound Train," "Slipping Away," and "Here In

My Heart.” With his solo and family band work, Jimmy has thus far earned five JUNO Awards, seven Canadian Country Music Awards, and a staggering 27 East Coast Music Awards.

*Harvest Highway* is a natural continuation of the sound that he fine-tuned with 2018’s *Moving East*. After leaving Nashville’s honky tonks behind and heading back to Nova Scotia’s coastal climes in 2017, he also wanted to return to writing and playing the music he was steeped in during his youth. Teaming up with fellow East Coast hero Joel Plaskett—who produced and played multiple instruments on both *Moving East* and *Harvest Highway*—Rankin established the earthy, down-home sound that serves his latest records so well, taking full advantage of Plaskett’s analog approach at Fang Recording in Dartmouth.

“Joel is a producer—he has the studio—but he’s also a singer and a songwriter and a touring musician,” Rankin says. “So he knows live and he also knows studio, and we have a similar interest in those albums from the ‘60s and ‘70s that have a sound that most modern recordings just can’t touch.”

Recorded to tape with vintage mics, the expertise of engineer Thomas Stajcer, and contributions from studio session all-stars JP Cormier, Ron Hynes, Dale Murray, Jordan Murphy, and Madison Violet, *Harvest Highway*’s organic feel comes from its almost entirely live-off-the-floor takes, along with Rankin and Plaskett’s combined love for classic production. Paired with Rankin’s masterful and evocative songwriting about place and purpose, the album’s warm, lived-in sound will resonate with anyone who’s ever left their home behind.

“I’ve traveled around the world and I’ve lived in other places, and I think like a lot of East Coasters, I feel a profound connection to the place,” Rankin says. “People really feel they need to come back here. It’s where they’re from, after all. It’s where their roots are.”