

From Isolation to Consolation: The pandemic recordings of David Summit



Personal Summit (Source: David Summit)

In the singer-songwriter tradition, the Earth's elevation often stands as a measure of life's ups and downs. Merle Haggard was always on a mountain (when he fell). While Burl Ives left a legacy down in the valley, Johnny Cash looked for the man on the hill and Dolly Parton found comfort in her Tennessee mountain home. More recently, Iron & Wine went upward over the mountain, Dom Flemons went backward up another one, and Conor Oberst looked inward from a peak he saw as upside-down. In a state known better for its sea level than its great heights, David Summit began to chart his musical ascent from a low point in a Rhode Island attic.

A former guitarist in Trophy Wives, a pop-punk band that played several dates on the 2015 Vans Warped Tour, Summit was in his final year at Rhode Island College studying classical guitar and music education when he suffered a concussion. The impact of his injury left Summit feeling like a different person, he said, and created a sense of distance from family and friends. In solitude beneath the eaves of the roof at his Warwick home, he wrote musical arrangements and lyrical accompaniments over a period of ten months, between November 2017 and July 2018.

"It was a lonely time in which I spent traveling inward to dark places of my being, and allowing that dark part to speak and do the writing," said Summit.

After emerging from reclusivity, Summit has released his debut, *Our June, Us All*, in 2019. The solitary accomplishment swirls with the layers of an ensemble, borrowing across genres to deliver a despairing yet spirited album with a poetry and musicality that shifts between sparing and soaring. In the wake of his seclusion, Summit said he found community at a regular open mic night for writers, musicians, and other artists at Twenty Stories bookstore (107 Ives St., Providence). He asked his new friends to contribute their own touches to his followup album — “a sort of artifact of our meeting,” he said. In all, sixteen collaborators contributed vocals or instruments in sessions recorded mostly as a series of live performances, without cuts or edits.

“I don’t really trust art that isn’t raw,” said Summit. “Art can be sold, but art isn’t selling anything.”

The resulting record, *In All My Travelin’*, reveals a more vibrant, optimistic side of Summit, anchored by a toe-tapping, harmonica-driven rhythm and a busker’s knack for storytelling. Released on March 28, 2020, less than three weeks after Providence venues shuttered due to Covid-19, Summit shifted his record release party from AS220 to an Instagram livestream.

“I do find it ominously ironic that it was released during such a dark time in which traveling is not only limited, but restricted,” said Summit while abiding by the state’s shelter-in-place order.

On the heels of *Travelin’*, Summit released four more albums since the beginning of the pandemic. *All In or Nothing* collects the folksy B-sides left over from the Twenty Stories sessions. *Only Joy*, recorded with an artist identified as Lillian Rose, serves as an acoustic act of adoration for Summit’s infant daughter that doubles as a soundtrack to a film of family footage. *Even Split*, which Summit describes as a “pretty sorrowful” album and “the ‘looking in’ to *Travelin’s* ‘looking out,’” opens a richer window on his internal state, with glimmers of possibility still peeking through. In early October, on Summit’s 28th birthday, he released *Red Fox at the Whippoorwill*, his first collection of covers, steering from Bob Dylan to Blind Pilot.

While *Whippoorwill* is titled in reference to the motel cabin in Lake George, N.Y., where Summit recorded the tracks, it also borrows from his closing rendition of Hank Williams: “Hear that lonesome whippoorwill / He sounds too blue to fly.” Stepping into his choice of covers with the comfort of a worn coat, Summit unfolds the rises and falls of others with his own touch. Playing John Prine, he reflects, “Hey, how lucky can one man get.” And like Don Williams and Jason Molina of Songs: Ohia before him, Summit excavates ground trodden by Townes Van Zandt to dwell in a state against which “All the mountains and the rivers / And the valleys can’t compare.”

“I am continuing to work on new projects all of the time,” said Summit. “I’m looking forward to seeing what opportunities open up as the world does.”



The recordings of David Summit: *Our June, Us All* (2019), *In All My Travelin'* (2020), *All In or Nothing* (2020), *Only Joy* (2021), *Even Split* (2021), *Red Fox at the Whippoorwill* (2021).