

TOP STORY

Judah & the Lion member lived on island in Baltic Sea while writing solo effort

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

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Judah & the Lion mandolin player and vocalist Brian Macdonald didn't intend to write a solo album when he left Nashville for a remote island in the Baltic Sea, but he found himself inspired by his timeless experience there.

Courtesy / Lucky Bird Media

As the world grew complicated with the COVID-19 pandemic, one Nashville musician cast himself away to the remote island of Gotland, Sweden, far removed from the static.

The reserved mandolin player and vocalist of alternative folk trio Judah & the Lion, Brian Macdonald, followed his wife, Maddie, and their dog, Halyard, to the tiny windswept island in the Baltic Sea, where she was to attend grad school.

In its waters and medieval watch towers, he found his own form of enlightenment.

“It’s a rough place to learn to surf. The water got down to 33 degrees, so there’s a lot of surfing in the snow and then when you get out, you know, there’s ice on my beard,” Macdonald recalled with a quiet laugh.

“It’s just a stormy part of the ocean. It’s a little less predictable than if you’re on, say, the west coast of California where you have a kind of a predictable pattern of how the tides are gonna go,” he continued. “On the island, it’s just based completely on where the wind is coming from mixed with the tide, which could be different on every part of the island.”

The conditions make for a difficult endeavor, he explained.

“There’s a lot more exploration and finding where to surf, and that was a fun challenge to try and figure it out. I definitely found myself out there in some bigger storms, where it feels a bit like you’re in over your head,” Macdonald said. “But then there’s also some that are just perfectly beautiful. It took a lot of work for a little reward, but that reward was very rewarding, because you’ve been waiting for that moment for a while.”

It was back in 2011 when Macdonald first joined the now well-known crossover trio while studying at Belmont University with his bandmates.

Within four years, they were playing their brand of banjo- and mandolin-driven Americana spiced heavily with modern pop and hip-hop elements on “Late

Night With David Letterman” and charting on Billboard Heat Seekers.

They eventually found breakout success with singles like “Take It All Back,” and saw their second album jump to No. 3 on the Alternative New Artist charts.

Before he knew it, Macdonald had been touring extensively for eight years straight.

“I tend to be more of an introvert, and being on the road, it’s kind of hard to find the space and the time to really catch up and feel like yourself,” Macdonald said. “With this experience, there was reason to finally have time to really do that. And it was just life changing for me because I really, finally kind of felt more peace in my life and felt like I’ve come to a place where I can manage my stress and anxiety.

“Honestly, the slow pace of living just kind of has this low pressure. I don’t know if it’s just living on an island or if it’s something else, the timing,” he continued. “It just felt a little bit like all the stresses of the world kind of started to fall behind and you could really focus on being in the moment.

“It definitely felt like I was able to conquer some stress and anxiety that maybe came from the extensive touring and not really having a sense of home.”

The small, rural 13th-century town of Visby is characterized in part by its nearby stony beaches of smooth limestone and ocean cliffs. Now home to about 24,000, the cloistered, red-roofed town was built up in antiquity with that limestone, boasting ruins of ancient churches and a still-intact 2-mile wall dotted by dozens of lookout towers.

“When you walk through the town, you actually feel like you’re kind of going back in time in a way,” Macdonald said.

Guitar or mandolin in hand, Macdonald frequented those towers to listen to the ocean and write, shielded from the wind.

It's amid that serenity he poured himself into what would be his debut solo album, "Moonlight in Visby," to be released in tandem with a film and art installation May 13 under the moniker Victor Mucho.

Other songs, like "Many Moons," Macdonald had held onto for years.

"It is the heartbeat of the album. In my point of view, the moon is a symbol of love. When you look up at a crescent moon, only a sliver is visible, but in reality, the entire thing is still floating there," Macdonald said. "That's kind of how I view love: Even though the light ebbs and flows, and it can be hard to see the whole thing, the love remains constant and always becomes full again."

Macdonald and his wife lived in Visby for more than a year, experiencing each of its uncommonly distinct seasons.

"When the winter comes it's definitely this gray place where you don't get a lot of sun — very windy and stormy," Macdonald said. "I think that really mirrored my experience of writing the album in that I was going through some changes in identity and kind of rediscovering who I was through the time I was there.

"Really reflected in the writing is how that landscape changes from that kind of cold, blue winter feel into a really vibrant spring with long days where the sun is up for 15 hours a day."

The latter provided ample time for camping with their newfound friends.

"On one trip there was just this beautiful rainstorm that rolled in as dusk was coming in, so we ended up just huddling into one of our tents," he said. "I

remember sitting there and laughing. It was just a memorable friendship moment for all of us, nearing the time that we were going to be moving home.”

Long back in Nashville, Macdonald reflected on the meaning he found in his days on the Baltic.

“When (Judah & the Lion) finally did get off the road for a little bit, that was right when the pandemic started, and so I found myself on a journey to kind of discover what home meant for me,” Macdonald said. “And it couldn’t really be a physical place, because I was moving from Tennessee to Sweden, so I kind of had to find that home within myself and make peace with that.”



Victor Mucho - "Many Moons"

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