

## Great Lake Swimmers

2023 Long form BIO *Uncertain Country*

Doubt, followed by discovery. Demos that ended up as finished tracks. New beginnings, rear-view reflections, and ruminations on the fluidity of time: *Uncertain Country* is a soundtrack that captures these feelings and so much more. In a time of uncertainty, one thing is certain: the Great Lake Swimmers first collection of new songs in five years is worth the wait.

This celebration, 11-songs long, follows a prolonged period of collective anxiety. Though recorded in different locales—and with a variety of musicians—a theme of questioning runs throughout. Even before the world turned upside down, singer-songwriter Tony Dekker felt mired in uncertainty: from the climate crisis and the ever-changing political landscape to deep shifts within the music industry. The “uncertain country” Dekker chose as the album’s theme is not a specific place. Rather, it’s a territory we, as humans, inhabit in the 21<sup>st</sup> century — a world that, more often than not, is confusing, unfamiliar and unsettling.

Twenty years ago, Dekker created Great Lake Swimmers as a songwriting vehicle with the release of his self-titled debut on Toronto indie-label weewerk. Ever since, the singer-songwriter has continued to create acoustically-inclined compositions — layered, lush and lo-fi recordings that linger long.

The landscape and human’s connection to our external environment has always loomed large in Dekker’s songs and been intrinsic to his aesthetic. No surprise to learn that relationship—and nature as an instrument—comes through on *Uncertain Country*. It’s something the artist feels in his bones and it’s a thread that weaves throughout Great Lake Swimmers’ body of work—a never-ending narrative that meanders along and finds its way, somehow, into every song.

The long journey from there to here started more than three years ago when Dekker took a 10-day trip to one of his favorite places: the north shore of Lake Superior. A pair of friends and collaborators: Adam CK Vollick (who filmed the experience) and Joe Lapinski (who co-produced *Uncertain Country*) joined him.

The concept: do some field recording and conduct an immersive musical reconnaissance mission. The plan was to return later to record songs in this milieu. The pandemic pause made this musical journey change course. Still, this trip was essential to capturing the album’s mood. Exploring the beauty of places like Sleeping Giant Provincial Park, Pukaskwa National Park, Bruce Peninsula National Park and Quimet Canyon, notebook in hand—and filled with curiosity—Dekker sketched out words, phrases and melodies for what would eventually become *Uncertain Country*. The songwriter not only connected with the land, but also learned about the people who had inhabited these places since time immemorial like the Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation and the First Nations of Manitoulin Island.

Dekker explains how *Uncertain Country* is not just a double, but also a triple-entendre. “The pandemic, for me, was such a fight versus the subconscious. On one hand I told myself, ‘we are fine, we’re safe, we just have to get through this’ and I tried to see the silver lining of the extra family time the lockdowns created. But then coming out of the pandemic two years later, I was like, ‘Wow! That was a struggle!’ It was like slamming the brakes on a train. There was all this subconscious stuff — anxiety and mental health issues — going on I did not want to recognize.”

The two songs that open *Uncertain Country*: the title track and “When the Storm Has Passed” were recorded at the Oddfellows Temple Hall in St. Catharines in September 2020. “It almost felt like there was this release that needed to happen,” Dekker recalls of these jubilant sessions following five months of pandemic unease. “It felt so good to just play together again.”

Making this joyful noise together set a tone—and direction—for the record. The music morphed from hushed and folksy to a more comforting, curated listening experience, acting as a kind of salve. One hears echoes of some of Dekker’s early 1990s influences: propeller-pop and indie lo-fi bands like Teenage Fanclub, Galaxie 500 and Buffalo Tom.

The rest of the songs on *Uncertain Country* were recorded in other acoustically distinctive locations close to Dekker’s home in the Niagara Region. Locales included the Silver Spire United Church in downtown St. Catharines, Ont. and a pair of buildings in Ball’s Falls Conservation Area in the village of Jordan Station: an old chapel that featured a pump organ and a historic barn on the same property.

Dekker wanted to keep the project local due to both pandemic logistics and the desire to tap into the depth of talent in the Niagara Region. Besides the Minuscule Choir, a local string quartet guests on a pair of tracks (“Quiet Before the Storm,” and “Am I Floating in the Air”). Seven-time JUNO Award winner Serena Ryder also lent vocals to two songs: “I Tried to Reach You” and “Swimming Like Flying.” Long-time Great Lake Swimmers’ member, multi-instrumentalist Bret Higgins is featured on many of the songs, as is keyboardist Kelsey McNulty.

### **Dekker dishes on the first two singles:**

#### *“When the Storm Has Passed”*

“I hate to say this was a pandemic album that came out of fear and anxiety, but there is no other way to put it. This song started on that field-recording trip to Lake Superior back in 2019. It’s about changes, moving ... looking backward and forwards ... the elasticity of time. That bizarre time that was the pandemic and trying to process and distil all these experiences.”

#### *“Moonlight, Stay Above”*

This is a lonely wistful tune. In a voice barely above a whisper, Dekker pleads: “don’t strand me and leave me alone.” The song ends with whistling, which is usually a

solitary act, but the 10-voices of Minuscule—an all-woman identifying choir based in Niagara Region led by choral arranger Laurel Minnes—rises behind him to offer hope and reassure the songwriter he is not alone in his anxiety. Dekker explains:

“It’s a reflection on grief, uncertainty, isolation, and trying to make sense of it all. I loved the way it came out. It’s a lonely sounding song but you have this beautiful backing choir lifting it up ... it’s like you are falling back into the arms of this choir. The feeling of isolation and loneliness is there, but you have the reassurance of the 10 voices singing behind you.”

Dekker adds that this song epitomizes what Great Lake Swimmers represents. “The band is fluid and always evolving. It starts and ends with me, but the songs themselves suggest what players and instrumentation might fit best with each new recording and live touring band.”

### *Uncertain Country*

#### **Track listing**

1. Uncertain Country
2. When the Storm Has Passed
3. I Tried to Reach You
4. Since January
5. Swimming Like Flying
6. On A Ship
7. Moonlight, Stay Above
8. Riverine
9. Quiet Before the Storm
10. Into It
11. Promise of Spring
12. Think, Think
13. Respect for all Living Things
14. Flight Paths
15. Am I Floating in the Air