

Billy Strings

Highway Prayers

The book of Billy Strings has no shortage of blacktop hymns.

A Grammy Award-winning picker, Strings knows the power of a transcendent road song. Between nights packed with marathon gigs and evenings on scorching-hot festival stages, he's spent years crisscrossing interstates – logging long, blurry-eyed miles fueled by the company of a good melody.

Now, on his new album *Highway Prayers*, he's penned an ode to the curved lines that guide road-dogged travelers from the beginning to the end of a journey. A 20-song LP, *Highway Prayers* is out now via Reprise Records.

"There's a little bit of everything on there," Strings said. "It's a goulash of whatever comes out of my brain. I just try to write songs ... and follow them. Music, while you're on



photo credit: Dana Trippe

the road, while you're drivin', it's like meat-and-taters. I wanted to make a record people could listen to when they go for a long drive."

On *Highway Prayers*, Strings pumps the proverbial gas on his old Chevelle, taking listeners on a lead-footed journey through freewheelin' bluegrass, country-

western tall tales, psychedelic exploration and down-to-earth folk ruminations. He wrote most of the album in the last few years, cutting *Highway Prayers* largely at his home studio in Nashville with his longtime band: Billy Failing (banjo, vocals), Royal Masat (bass, vocals), Jarrod Walker (mandolin, vocals), and Alex

Hargreaves (fiddle). The album includes additional contributions from Jon Brion (bass, drums, percussion), Matt Chamberlain (drums), Jerry Douglas (dobro), Jason Carter (fiddle), Lindsay Lou (backing vocals), Nathaniel Smith (cello), Taneka Samone (backing vocals), Cory Henry (piano), Peter “Madcat” Ruth (harmonica, jaw harp) and Victor Furtado (clawhammer banjo).

Strings took the recordings back to Los Angeles, where the initial sessions took place with co-producer Jon Brion (Fionna Apple, Mac Miller, Elliott Smith) to polish the songs that became *Highway Prayers*. Or in Strings’ words, the band built Christmas trees in Nashville and took them out to Los Angeles to add the decorations with Jon Brion.

“Let’s throw some paint at the wall and just fuck around,” Strings said of the Nashville session. “I had this idea of us kids, finger painting, having fun, then taking it out to someone who actually knows what they’re doing – Jon Brion– and seeing if we could get it past him.”

Outside the studio, many recognize Strings today as a world-class showman – playing kaleidoscopic gigs rooted in bluegrass tradition but otherwise unbounded by genre – or sought-after collaborator,

hop-scotching from songs with Post Malone to Luke Combs, Willie Nelson and rapper RMR. But on *Highway Prayers*, he undoubtedly shines as a tried-and-true songwriter committed to his craft.

Like a driver on a winding road, Strings tries not to question where a song idea may take him.



album artwork

“Some of the stuff’s a little bit stream-of-conscious,” Strings said. “I put the pencil down and it did its thing. Not trying to keep sculpting it. Like, ‘Fuck it, man. That’s what I wrote down.’ There’s something about just doing that and trusting it.”

Highway Prayers opens with the aptly titled “Leaning on a Travelin’ Song,” a rollickin’ taste of old-school bluegrass, before taking listeners to cuts

like the introspective, fiddle-drenched “In The Clear” and pastoral instrumental “Escanaba,” which is named after a town in the upper peninsula of Michigan, Strings’ home state.

At times – like on “Gild The Lily” – the album may be as subtle as the tap of rain on a car roof. While at other moments, it can take listeners into far-stretching frontiers, like on “Seven Weeks In County,” a cinematic country-Western ballad that wouldn’t be out of place on a playlist next to Marty Robbins.

“A lot of them old cowboy songs are like that,” Strings said of “Seven Weeks In County.” He added, “They’re cool stories, like mini Western movies.”

Highway Prayers rolls on with songs like the relatable give-and-take folk number “Don’t Be Calling Me (at 4AM)” and “MORBUD4ME,” a

recreational song that’s sure to earn ovations on the road. In summer 2024, Strings debuted the first song off the release, “Leadfoot” – a cut that’s as fast-moving as it is undeniably catchy.

The album showcases Strings’ songwriting flexibility with “Stratosphere Blues / I Believe In You,” a two-part effort that begins with about 90 seconds of hallucinogenic crooning before

transitioning into a subtle, acoustic number delivered with grounded thoughtfulness.

“I’m just chasing the muse and trying not to get in its way,” Strings said. “I felt like this was a two-part [song] I don’t know why. We switch keys with that little dreamscape and I just started comin’ up with the other song.”

And *Highway Prayers* touches true-life shenanigans in “Catch and Release,” a spoken-word tune in the spirit of Townes Van Zandt and John Prine that

chronicles a run-in with the law on the way to a local fishin’ hole.

“I wanted to do a talkin’ blues song,” he said. “Me and Vinnie [Vince Herman of Leftover Salmon] got pulled over. It’s just a true story. I was tryin’ to get that fishin’ hole awful quick.”

Highway Prayers closes with a touch of spiritual influence on the two-minute “Richard Petty.” On the song, Strings and a small group of harmony singers lead the vocal-only number. Strings sings, “One of these days, I’m

gonna find me a better way to live my life/ And carry on without the strife.”

About “Richard Petty,” he said: “I love all the old Bill Monroe stuff like that, it’s like gospel music. I like ending the record like that. It’s like the credits at the end of the movie.”

And listeners can be assured that if Strings has any say in where the road takes him next, this won’t be his last batch of so-called “highway prayers” – not by a mile.

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