

# Reckless Son

## A One-Man Show For a Generation of Lost Boys

“I’ve never been the kind of writer who just sits down and writes a love song,” says Matt Butler, the folksinger and traveling storyteller behind *Reckless Son*. “I’ve always been drawn to deeper, darker, more intense subject matter.”

A willingness to explore life’s shadowy corners and forgotten spaces is what first led Butler to prison — not as an inmate, but as a songwriter. Raised on punk and hardcore music in New York City, he grew up with an appreciation for DIY artists who embraced the unusual. A love affair with Bruce Springsteen’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* pushed him in a new direction as a young adult, and Butler began writing acoustic songs that had more in common with The Boss’ working-class narratives than Fugazi’s free-form fury. Even so, he remained committed to thinking outside the box.

“My tour schedule was as unorthodox as it could possibly be,” he recalls of his earliest days on the road. “I’d occasionally play clubs, but I’d also play anywhere that sat outside the traditional touring circle: jails, churches, rehabs, homeless shelters, halfway houses, community centers, and detoxes.”



photo courtesy of artist

*Reckless Son*, a one-man show and accompanying soundtrack, was inspired by Butler's experiences inside places like Ohio's Chillicothe Correctional Institution, Utah's Gunnison Prison, and the New York City Department of Correction's facilities on Rikers Island. It's a collection of music, monologues, personal history, and lessons learned from those behind bars. "People who have lost everything or have had everything taken from them are often truly in touch with what matters most," Butler says during the show's final stretch, delivering the line with the empathy of a songwriter who visits prisons not only to sing, but to *listen*, too.

Filled with Americana songs inspired by Woody Guthrie, Townes Van Zandt, and other troubadours, *Reckless Son* is more than a show. It's a calling. A service. A pledge to, as Butler puts it, "bring healing through the arts to those behind the walls." The work is ongoing. During the Fall of 2022, Butler began performing *Reckless Son* monthly at Rockwood Music Hall in New York City, merging the worlds of theater, confinement, and the singer/songwriter circuit into a rare hybrid.

**When many people think about music in prison, Johnny Cash's performances at San Quentin and Folsom State Prison come to mind.**

That's a common reference I hear all the time, but when Johnny Cash started playing jails, he was already a famous star. I'm not! Most of the time, I walk into a prison auditorium and these guys look at me with expressions, like, "Who is this guy with a guitar? What's he about?" They don't know what to make of me. But the most gracious audiences I've ever played for have been incarcerated. I've never felt such a strong sense of communion with an audience, and I'm not sure it would be that way if I were a big star like Johnny.

**Where does that communion come from? You've never been incarcerated, so how do you build trust with your audience?**

I get the impression that it's very easy for the incarcerated to feel like nobody cares they're there. I think they can feel very forgotten, very lacking in agency. Before I even start playing, I think it means a lot to them that I cared enough to show up. Once the show starts, I think they can see themselves in the music, especially with a song like "Good Friday." It was actually disturbing to learn how many people had similar stories to the one in that song.

**The narrator of "Good Friday" is a self-professed junkie who knocks on his mother's door, hoping she'll let him come inside to warm up. She refuses. Is that a personal story for you, too?**

Sometimes the character in one of my songs is actually me, sometimes it isn't, and sometimes I blur the lines between fact and fiction so much that I've forgotten what's true and what isn't. Every song is based on some nugget of truth, though, otherwise it just doesn't work. I've certainly struggled with demons before, I think most people have. I think that's a necessary part of life in general, and a central part of this story. "Good Friday" is a hybrid of my own experiences and the experiences I've seen all around me.

**Reckless Son is a hybrid of sorts, too.**

It is. You could call it a one-man show with music. It's a coming-of-age, a vision quest initiation, a rite-of-passage story. I've performed it in its scripted version three times, which is a lot less than the amount of gigs I've played for the incarcerated.

**"Time To Be A Man," the show's first song, traces an inmate's path from childhood to lockdown. In each verse, he's faced with the opportunity to do the right thing or take the easy — and often illegal — way out. What makes that song a good opener?**

It's about being accountable to oneself and responsible for one's life. When I began playing jails, it occurred to me that the only rites of passage that seemed to be available to a lot of the guys I met

inside were addiction or incarceration. It seemed like those were the ways they were qualifying themselves as adults, as men, and I had to put that into a song.

**The show is organized into nine chapters, each one featuring a monologue followed by a related song. Those monologues paint compelling pictures: a rough-and-tumble inmate putting his arm around an emotional cell mate during one of your performances; a group of prison guards engaging in taser practice while you conduct interviews several feet away; an auditorium full of death-row inmates, shouting their encouragement toward the stage after you choke up during a song. It's heavy stuff. How did those spoken-word passages evolve?**

They are stories that I used to share with people who asked about my work in the jails. I'd tell some of the stories onstage, too, in between songs when I would play clubs back home. The script is an evolved version of that classic troubadour stage banter. I'm a big reader and I also work in a bookstore, so getting to write a script was an exciting challenge for me. The songs were already finished. The stories had already been told. I just had to organize everything together.

**Reckless Son's soundtrack includes music from the show itself. When you perform Reckless Son, though, you're accompanied by little more than your own acoustic guitar. The soundtrack is more lush, with keyboards and other instruments contributing to the sound. What influenced you to add those layers of atmosphere?**

I spent a lot of time during the pandemic listening to ambient and instrumental music, and that informed the palette of the record. We didn't make choices that lent themselves traditionally to folk or Americana music. *Reckless Son* is a big cross-country odyssey, and the studio album is an attempt to capture a sense of the landscape that the story describes. I saw America by traveling to its prisons, whether that means crossing the East River to reach Rikers Island or driving through the Utah desert to Gunnison Prison. The music summons that landscape, and not just the interiority of those facilities.

**You've played those songs in prison many times before, but you've never performed Reckless Son in its entirety for inmates. Why not?**

One day I will, but *Reckless Son* wasn't written for the incarcerated. It was written for those who *haven't* had the privilege of meeting these people and hearing their stories for themselves. For the longest time, I never knew how to describe my work to my friends and family. The show is as faithful a rendering of the truth of my experience as I can offer, and it's meant for everyone else. The people in jail know their own story already. *Reckless Son* is more about getting that story heard.

**How do others get involved?**

People often ask me, "Hey, can I do that, too?" I was given a gift — the ability to do something I love in the service of something bigger than myself — and I feel a responsibility to pay that opportunity forward to other people.

I have a small, adjacent non-profit that's connected to *Reckless Son*. The name is Art That Serves. The intention behind Art That Serves is not only to serve the incarcerated, but to give other artists and teachers the opportunity to have a transformative experience. Finding a larger purpose for my art really changed me as a human being. My goal for the non-profit is to try and pass that experience on to other artists.

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