



The One Stop Solution  
for your Ad Management!



[BLOGS](#) | [FEATURES](#) | [COLUMNS](#) | [FILM](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [24/7](#) | [FOOD](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [PROMOTIONS](#) | [SPECIAL SECTIONS](#)

[Home](#) » [Articles](#) » [Music](#) » [Music Features](#) » *Such Great Heights*

Monday, December 8, 2008

## Such Great Heights

Talking up the Tallest Man on Earth

By Paul McMorrow



The obvious place to start a story about Tallest Man on Earth is with a joke about his height. It's obvious, and it's wrong—and not just because it would be cheap and easy. Any focus on Tallest Man on Earth's physical stature necessarily steers attention away from his voice. It's a wailing, swelling, cracked voice that spits pain and heartbreak and manages to squeeze beauty from handfuls of gravel. It's wonderful. That voice is what makes Kristian Matsson the Tallest Man on Earth.

And it's also why speaking to Matsson on the phone is such an unnerving experience.

Sitting an ocean away, speaking into a cell phone and patiently fielding questions about the origins of his particular brand of Swedish Americana, Matsson sounds uncomfortable. His speech is raspy and hushed. At times, he's practically whispering. He's gracious, but our conversation is undeniably awkward.

There are people who will speak at great lengths about the very deeply rooted (and readily articulated) philosophies behind their art. Matsson isn't one of them. "I play the guitar, I sing," he ventures. "I don't know how to put it in other words—I'm just trying to make beautiful songs. I guess." Asked what point interviewers usually miss about him, he replies, "I don't know how much I could, or would, want to say about myself. I can't tell you a thing I want to get out there. It doesn't feel that real to me. Just trying to talk about it, make sense of it, it's always a bit boring. Sorry, I know it's your job. But you know? You'll never be able to get what you want, anyway." The only way he's going to adequately express himself, he says, "is to play the music."

Before he became the Tallest Man on Earth, Matsson sang in a Swedish rock group called Montezumas. They played standard indie fare—videos of some electric live performances still live on the Internet—but the genre did Matsson few favors. Montezumas recordings betray none of the roughness in Matsson's voice. And because of that, they lack the haunting intimacy that distinguishes his current work. When he stepped away from the band and began plucking away at his guitar, he found something profound inside himself.

Matsson recalls taking guitar lessons, "going through the whole jazz thing, learning every chord in the book, stretching fingers like a madman." He wanted no part of it. Instead, he turned to old American bluesmen, men like Son House, Skip James, Lightnin' Hopkins, Dock Boggs, Charley Patton and Mississippi John Hurt. "I figured from the old blues recordings, you can just make a tuning of your own and make it effortless." His voice evolved, he says, because "I had to sing over my guitar. You just take easy chords and sing like hell over it." And the name? "I just needed a great name," he says. "You have to write good songs, you have to sing good, to get away with that kind of name. I have to force myself to make good music. Otherwise, the name sounds stupid."

So far, so good. Matsson has released two records as Tallest Man on Earth, a self-titled EP in 2007, and the full-length *Shallow Grave* this past March. A third is nearly finished. Each was recorded at home, with one microphone, much of it on reel-to-reel. The lo-fi production lends Matsson's work a warm, organic quality, one that's more forgiving to his pluck-and-moan style.

And that's the problem. Kind of. Yes, Matsson sounds like a young Bob Dylan. And, yes, he says, "everyone points it out." "You live like the ones where your inspiration comes from," he says. He worries that the comparison will pigeonhole him, though Matsson thinks his voice sounds more "like an old bluegrass singer," like the guys Dylan borrowed so liberally from.

### Related content

William F. Buckley, Jr. on Hillary,  
Staying Alive  
Imperfect Strangers  
Strapped Scribes' Summit  
Playing With Desire  
OPANA: A BRIEF HISTORY

### Related to:

nypress new york tallest man on earth  
kristian matsson

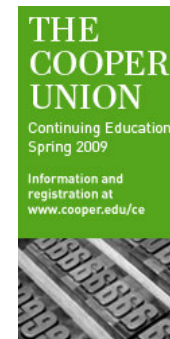
Text to search

[Movies](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Music/Club](#)

### Search Movies

Theater   
City, State or Zip   
Movies

[View more movies](#)



Video Editing  
Art History  
Personal Finance  
Book Arts  
Knitting and Crochet  
Drawing  
Painting  
Digital Photography  
Photoshop  
Foreign Languages  
NYC History  
Calligraphy  
Business Writing  
Letterpress Printing  
Chinese Art: Ink + Brush + Paper  
Green Building Design  
LEED Exam Prep Course

Follow on Twitter

Worried about the future?  
Feeling depressed?

Change your life for the better with  
short-term therapy that empowers  
you to solve your own problems fast

**FREE 20 minute phone consultation**

212-741-9792 [www.flatironpsych.com](http://www.flatironpsych.com)

**Flatiron Psych Group**

156 5th Avenue • Blocks from Union Square  
Major Credit Cards Accepted

**MOST READ** | **MOST COMMENT** | **MOST EMAILED**

1. Flat N All That
2. A White Woman Explains Why She Prefers Black Men
3. Bash Compactor: Red Carpets and Blonde Bottoms
4. The Black List
5. The East Village Isn't What It Used To Be... And It Never Was

Nobody tells Matsson he sounds like Roscoe Holcomb. And, ultimately, that's on Dylan, not Matsson.

He was drawn to those old blues and country recordings, he says, specifically because "you can't hear all the things they do." He compares it to looking at a blurry, dull painting and suddenly seeing "this little flower, this little piece of hidden beauty. These recordings are kind of messy and scratchy and you can't hear all the words that they sing. But those little flowers keep popping up everywhere. That's what's so good about it. You can't imitate it, because you can't hear everything. So you end up with something different. Something you can call your own."

Dec. 9, Mercury Lounge, 217 E. Houston St. (at Essex St.), 212-260-4700; 7, \$10/\$12. Also, Dec. 10 and 11 at Town Hall and Dec. 12 at Music Hall of Williamsburg.

**Also in Music Features:**

- The Guys are Dolls
- Thirty Years On, The Music Remains Strong
- Out of Step
- Girl Trouble
- Learning Something From School
- Powers Surge
- She's High Strung
- It's Too Easy Just To Fall Apart
- The Pleasure of Pains
- Swinging the Blues

- 6. Milk That Dead Horse, Cowboy
- 7. Flathead
- 8. If You Liked It, Then You Shoulda Put a Wig on It
- 9. Bash Compactor: They've Stopped Being Polite, Started Getting Real
- 10. Bash Compactor: No New York...Just Queens

**Welcome to the new NYPress.com**

As you probably noticed, we launched our new website. Hooray! We would love to hear your feedback on how you think the site looks, how easy it is to navigate, and what other content and features you might like to see.

Please send feedback to [editor@nypress.com](mailto:editor@nypress.com) and we will do our best to accommodate.

**User Profile** (click to open)

**Horoscope**

- |                                |                                     |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Aquarius</b><br>1/20   2/18 | <b>Leo</b><br>7/23   8/22           |
| <b>Pisces</b><br>2/19-3/20     | <b>Virgo</b><br>8/23   9/22         |
| <b>Aries</b><br>3/21   4/19    | <b>Libra</b><br>9/23   10/22        |
| <b>Taurus</b><br>4/20   5/20   | <b>Scorpio</b><br>10/23   11/21     |
| <b>Gemini</b><br>5/21   6/21   | <b>Sagittarius</b><br>11/22   12/21 |
| <b>Cancer</b><br>6/22   7/22   | <b>Capricorn</b><br>12/22   1/19    |



**CALL NOW!**

**212.  
419.  
1278**

**NEW YORK**



voice.lavalife.com

**RUSSIAN & TURKISH BATHS**

*The Best Heat Is At New York's Oldest Spa*



**RUSSIAN & TURKISH ROOMS**  
**REDWOOD SAUNA**  
**AROMA THERAPY**  
**STEAM ROOM**  
**ICE COLD POOL**  
**SWEDISH SHOWER**  
**SUN DECK**  
**MASSAGE ROOMS**

**268 E. 10th St., NYC**  
**212-674-9250**  
**212-473-8806**



18+. Charges may apply to certain features.