



# Life, Love & Dessert

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## MUSIC: FEATURE

### Denison Witmer



[upcoming shows](#)



Boy's back in town: Dennis Witmer in the beer room (photo: Jaret Ferratusco)

### Lonely soul

By [Omar Perez](#)

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Denison Witmer isn't looking to win any popularity contests. He's not looking to make teen girls bawl their eyes out at his shows, and he doesn't particularly live up to the hype cast by critics who hail him as being the next Elliott Smith. But the 26-year-old singer/songwriter certainly does not mind the fact that he's able to perform his music for a living.

"Music to me was always something that I did for myself," says Witmer. "I feel like music just kind of happened to me. I'm not out looking for success. It's a blessing to make music for myself, but it's even more of a blessing to just give it away and see if someone relates to what I'm doing."

On his latest album, "Philadelphia Songs," Witmer delivers a sincere batch of grass-roots rock that runs the thematic gamut of everyday human emotions:

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**[Innocence Mission Photos](#)**

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lost love, confusion, ambition. The songs read like the autobiography that they are, paying homage to his Pennsylvania roots without necessarily alienating listeners who may not have a clue what an Amish person is.

"I'm just trying to write honest music," he explains. "A lot of my songs have a somber tone. It has always been easier for me to write when I'm a bit sad, or maybe I spend more time alone. But to me there's always an element of hope in what I'm doing. There are themes that can appear hopeless, but I don't think there's ever any situation that is ever hopeless."

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Growing up in Lancaster, Penn., Witmer comes from a line of four brothers, the oldest of whom played in a band. Following his elder sibling's footsteps, he soon picked up the guitar, but couldn't learn how to play other people's songs, so he started writing his own. Upon drinking age, Witmer moved to Philadelphia. "I needed a change of pace," he remembers. "I wanted to be in a place that was faster and where there was more going on."

The first couple of years, Witmer floundered around his new home turf -- a lot of that time spent inside his apartment -- until he found a job in real estate, which eventually burned him out. "I was writing music and I wanted to do music, so I told myself the only way it can happen was if I went on tour." So he saved his money, quit his job, went out on a three-week minitour across the Midwest and lost all his cash during the outing. Despite the ensuing financial shortfalls, he views that first tour as a success. "If I hadn't done that, it would have never put music into perspective," he says.

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Another influence was Don Peris, co-founder of Pennsylvania's The Innocence Mission. Peris became a mentor to Witmer, offering a few lessons and -- impressed with his protégé's skills -- producing the singer's self-released "Safe Away" debut and the "River Bends" EP, pressed by the Huntington Beach-based label Velvet Blue Music. Still, Witmer continued to write music more for fun than anything else. That is, until Scott Hatch, owner of Burnt Toast Vinyl, approached him and asked about rereleasing "Safe Away."

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"At that point I wasn't even sure music was something I was going to be doing for a living, but [Hatch] was excited about the record. He was like, 'If you're not going to put it out, can I put it out?'"

The label has since released other efforts like "The '80s" EP and "Of Joy and Sorrow," which like his recent "Philadelphia Songs," showcases a less stripped-down, more band-focused Witmer performing with various guest musicians, including the Ohio instrumental postrock act Six Parts Seven.

A road warrior, Witmer has spent a considerable amount of time and miles on the road, often going on nighttime, cross-country treks by himself to perform, or going back and forth from Pennsylvania to his second home in Seattle. "I feel like it's part of my job to go out and support each of my records," he says. "You have to let the music industry control you a little bit before you can control it. But I can't complain. I really like it. I feel really lucky to have a record label that's willing to put out records as quickly as I can make them."