

JASON JAMES

Jason James' self-titled debut introduces a charismatic young artist whose effortless mastery of his chosen style serves as a deeply compelling vehicle for his vibrant creative spirit. The talented Texan writes rousing honky-tonk anthems, heart-tugging ballads and smart, sly-humored country-rock tunes that echo the vintage classics that are his touchstones, and sings them with a level of emotional urgency that makes it clear that he means every word.

A young veteran who's honed his songwriting skills and performing chops through years of live gigs in clubs and dance halls throughout his home state, James is equally adept at delivering heartbreak and humor, maintaining an earthy, organic honesty that stands in sharp contrast to the slick, gimmicky product that currently dominates the country charts.

"The love that I have for traditional country music is like a mission to me," James affirms. "For me, there's never been any consideration of 'Well, if I change *this*, I might sell more records.' For me, it's always been all or nothing, and this is how I do it."

The 13 original compositions that comprise *Jason James* make it clear that the artist is interested in making music that's timeless rather than retro, reflecting his interest in adding to country tradition rather than merely emulating it.

Such catchy, impeccably crafted numbers as "Here Comes the Heartache," "I've Been Drinkin' More," "Back in My Arms" and "Fancy Limousine" have the ring of classic country songcraft, embodying the mix of swagger, sensitivity and pointed lyrical wordplay that's James' trademark. Meanwhile, the stirring album-closer "Walk Through My Heart," co-written with fellow country tunesmiths Jim Lauderdale and Odie Blackmon, demonstrates James' uncanny ability to create stirring, heart-tugging ballads in the classic mold. And he delivers his compositions in a voice that's unfailingly persuasive, whether he's belting out a sly, infectious honky-tonk tune or ringing the heartache out of an aching ballad.

"A lot of people come up to me at shows and say 'I never liked country, but I like you,'" James notes. "I always say 'You're just not listening to the right country.'"

Although his songs and style demonstrate the inspiration of his vintage country-music heroes, Jason James is no traditionalist Luddite. By the time he embraced old-school country, he'd already accumulated a wealth of diverse musical experience. He's well-versed in punk and hard rock, and can knowledgeably discuss the work of Austin psychedelia pioneers the 13th Floor Elevators in detail.

Growing up in the small town of Texas City, Texas, James was surrounded by country music early in life and began playing guitar in his early teens. Yet his early musical efforts were in the alt-hard rock vein, fronting a punk-influenced band in his early teens which helped him get his stage legs and were his first forays into songwriting. But his direction took a sharp turn when he was in his early 20s.

"I had completely forgotten about country music," James recalls, "But one day I went over to my dad's house, and he was playing some old Hank Williams stuff. It was a revelation to me, and suddenly I was hearing it in a different way. It was the song 'Alone and Forsaken' that really got me," he adds. "The depth of the heartbreak in that song, and how real it was, just spoke to me, and suddenly everything I'd done before didn't matter to me anymore. Country was what I wanted to do."

"For me, country had the same appeal that punk rock originally had," he continues. "It was emotion expressed in a simple way, with sparse, direct lyrics that go straight for the emotional jugular. I started writing country songs and never looked back."

After getting his feet wet singing country covers at open mic nights, James assembled a new, country-savvy band and spent the next few years playing countless live shows throughout his home state, while honing his songwriting and recording numerous home demos of his songs. He eventually connected with New West after his mom sent them some of those demos without him knowing.

"I hadn't really thought much about making records at that point," James says. "My approach had always been to just make the music that I wanted to make, and wait for the right opportunity to come along. I didn't know enough at the time to realize how unrealistic that was, but it kind of worked out that way anyway. From the get-go, it seemed like New West really understood what I'm trying to do and didn't try to change it."

For the task of bringing Jason James' songs to life in the studio, artist and label recruited a stellar supporting cast that included a pair of celebrated producers and an assortment of prominent country-savvy musicians spanning multiple generations. For the album's initial sessions in Austin and Houston with producer John Evans (Hayes Carll, Corb Lund) and engineer Steve Christensen (Steve Earle, Destiny's Child), James was backed by a host of seasoned session players, with additional assists from New West labelmate Robert Ellis, who sings harmony on "I'll Set You Free" and "Welcome To The Blues," and Ellis' steel player Will Van Horn.

New West president John Allen was so impressed with the results of James' Texas sessions, and so convinced of the artist's potential, that he arranged additional recording dates in Nashville with noted studio vet Keith Gattis (Willie Nelson, Dwight Yoakam) and a studio band that included bassist Dave Roe, known for his work with Johnny Cash and Dwight Yoakam; fiddler Glen Duncan, whose extensive resume includes recordings with the likes of George Jones, Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton; and pedal steel player Steve Hinson, a veteran of Randy Travis' band.

Despite being recorded in two states with two producers over the course of a couple years, *Jason James* is a remarkably focused and cohesive set, thanks to the strength of James' compositions and the integrity of his performances.

"I know it's naive, but the only concept I had for the album was to just let the songs speak for themselves," James states. "That's why it's self-titled. It's like, this is me. It runs the gamut of all the different styles that I like to play with, and it's the foundation that I'm gonna build on. I guess it's also my first kid, so I named it junior."

Although he's fully aware that the country mainstream is currently dominated by gimmicky, contrived commercial product, James has no interest in diluting his music for mass consumption.

"I really think that what I'm doing is pretty universal and that people can recognize honesty and passion when they hear it," he says. "It's worth remembering that at one time, the stuff that was popular on the country chart were the guys who influenced me. So I know that it can work. I think people still hear music the same way they always have, and they're looking for the same things in music that they've always looked for. They just want to hear something that's honest and catchy, and that's what I'm trying to do."