

# Interview - James Thompson

By Kelly Meacock



**Kelly.** When did you first begin your music career?

**JMT.** It wasn't until early 2004 that I started getting back music after playing throughout high school in a heavy metal band. This was in Perth mainly in the Fremantle area where I did some open mic type gigs then started getting some humble pay. I hassled a guy called Lloyd Spiegel for a support gig when he was on tour here in Perth late 2004 and that really stepped up my attitude toward making music more seriously.

**Kelly.** You've been described as a true bluesman. Who were the major music influences in your life?

**JMT.** Listening to Blind Willie Johnson changed everything for me. I had grown up listening to my dad's record collection which was mostly made up of Johnny Cash and Marty Robbins. I'm really grateful having the opportunity to grow up on that stuff, but blues and particularly Blind Willie changed everything as there were no choruses or bridges, just guitar and vocals - so it became more about conveying some sort of emotion or feeling. Since then I've really enjoyed some of the later blues of Howlin' Wolf, RL Burnside and Muddy Waters but Cash, Robbins and Johnson are still the main guys.

**Kelly.** What are some of your major music achievements?

**JMT.** All the material I've put to disc has been something I'm proud of. Live shows of course are really great to be a part of also. I've been a finalist for the WAM song of the year which was cool but the best achievement is when a music festival contacts me for a gig and I don't have to hassle them.

**Kelly.** What festivals have you played at in the past?

**JMT.** I've been given some great opportunities such as the East and West Coast Blues and Roots Festivals as well as Bridgetown Blues and The Australian Blues Festival. Also I got a shot at Fairbridge Folk Festival this year, which was something different again.

**Kelly.** Tell us about the instruments you play with. Didn't you make an 8 string guitar?

**JMT.** The 8 string guitar is certainly a beast. It was created by Andrew Ellis (Ellis Guitars) with a bit of help from myself in the design and manufacturing stages...but he is the one who had to make it work. He had built a 7 string guitar previously and we wanted to go a bit further. The videos of the guitar have done really well on Youtube etc so it seems other people find it cool too. That was in the days when I was still largely playing solo but these days with the band I've gone back to electric guitar and it's been a great experience to go back to square one. I'm using a Gibson 335 guitar which is a versatile instrument. I just use the guitar and a Fender Blues Junior amp which is a little howler and a few pedals. The band takes care of everything else. I've also got an Ellis acoustic which I use for solo acoustic shows which have become a lot of fun recently as well.

**Kelly.** What instrument do you enjoy playing the most?

**JMT.** I'm really liking the electric guitar at the moment. There is something about having an electric through a low watt valve amp that I really like. I haven't been into lap slide guitar for a while but recently I've enjoyed playing lap slide with other musicians getting a real country music sound. The acoustic has also been great fun. I love them all!

**Kelly.** What song/s do you enjoy playing the most? Why?

**JMT.** Favourite songs change all the time...I'll get right into a song a play it over and over and then I'll get sick of it then a few months and drop it from the set list. Slowly it starts to pop back up in the set list and we go through it all again. It's going to be really exciting with the new album because I'll have enough original material to really construct a solid hour and a half where the songs can be chosen for their intensity or speed or aggression so they become ingredients which can be changed for any particular night depending on what the crowd is after. Favourites at the moment include Between the Eyes, In My Time of Dying and Poor Danny. I'll also put a bit of Cash in for good measure.

**Kelly.** What do you think has been the turning point in your music career so far?

**JMT.** Two things. Meeting Lloyd Spiegel and picking his brain on how the industry works in 2004. This really made me think about taking music seriously how to approach the industry. Also getting on board with Rella Music in early 2005 was a big point which started initially as CD manufacturing but later into album projects, DVD projects and further development. This has certainly culminated in the most recent project which is totally unencumbered by any external distractions, it's just music and I'm sure it couldn't have been any better than it is no matter what. That is all due to the work Rella has put in to my work.

**Kelly.** What was it like recording your second album? Did you enjoy the process – and was it different to the first album recording process?

**JMT.** The second album has been a very rewarding process. It was different from the first album in terms of the timeline. 'The Good News Blues' was largely recorded in a single day from 8am to 11pm. The whole day is a bit of blur looking back. We touched up a few things later and that was it! It was certainly an interesting experience doing it like that. We were really well prepared and just went in and nailed all the songs. This time around was a bit different in that it was much more of a collaborative approach with other musicians. Half of the album was essentially songs that Wade (Saunders, Drums) and I had been playing for over two years on the road, so they came out really easily. They were then pushed further with the addition of bass guitar, blues harp and some Hammond organ parts. These came out really well. Two songs were acoustic tunes which are actually hymns that have sort of been rearranged for a contemporary release. These were done in a couple of hours with James (Newhouse, Producer), Thom (Bull, Keys) and me in no time at all. The remainder of the album was really like skeleton songs that I had which were then moulded by James and Gav (Kerr, Drums & Producing) as they arranged and produced these songs they just got better and better so that the demos I had were just like little seeds and what ended up on tape was still based on that seed but had become so much more. It was hard to give up that creative control but once you see where the material is going you increase your trust in the guys who have more experience. Again Rella played a huge part in that there was no pressure of pressing time schedule. This ironically actually made the project come together quicker and we certainly got a lot of work done in the 4 or 5 days we were actually tracking. In fact it was actually good for me to go in with unfinished material which pushed us to do something with the,.

**Kelly.** Did you already have a certain feel in mind for your album or did it just happen?

**JMT.** Something which I had thought of before this album was hooks. Traditionally blues music doesn't seem to have much in the way of hooks. Pop music has heaps of hooks of course and that's what makes some Pop songs memorable - for good or bad! I really wanted to introduce that memorable aspect to a blues/rock genre but not in an awful way. So rather than deliberately go and write hooks I just concentrated on the riffs and if I got a good one, I'd just make that the focus of the song so that in a way the riff was the hook. In the same way the songs are certainly more to the point compared to previous work I've done. For this album it was simple verses and bridges and instead of choruses I basically made the hook the chorus which still gives you a repeating musical part but you don't have to dwell on it for too long before you get to the next part of the song.

**Kelly.** Where did the recording take place?

**JMT.** We did all the tracking at a studio in Leederville, I'm not sure of the name of the studio but it was just two isolated rooms, a control room and a kitchen. It worked great for us though. Drums, Guitar and vocals were laid down to analogue tape in one take then any overdubs were added later.

**Kelly.** Who did you record the album with?

**JMT.** James Newhouse was the chief Producer and Engineer for this album – was also the Producer and Engineer for my first album as well. In fact the first recording I ever did was with James when he was near the end of his studies at SAE in Perth and I've also done work with him while playing with Marcus Bancroft and Georgia Juliette which were good fun. He is a keen music lover and for this album his experience really shone through which some great ideas which worked well. For the latter half Gav Kerr co-produced as well. Gav is a great drummer but also a world class arranger and producer and between him and James, the pressure was completely off me which was fantastic. On bass was Gary Benesse who put some great stuff down. Thom Bull played some Hammond organ and piano on a few tunes which was great and just bumped the songs he was one to the next level. Thom also did some vocals on 'Man of Sorrows' which came out very special. Phil Cilli came in and did all the blues harp but also did some keys and piano as well. He was really professional and totally directable, if any of us had an idea he'd just nail, come to think of it all the musicians were one take wonders which left me a bit embarrassed. Gav played some drums as did Wade Saunders. Wade and I have played live for ages but he had to leave for Europe half way through recording which was a shame but Gav offered his own style as well. Jonathan Brain played guitar and sang with me on 'Long Hard Road' which completely energised the song and gave it a real kick. Jonathan is a fantastic guitar player and happens to be my brother in law also so he came cheap. He was just visiting the studio and Gav and I went for lunch so I asked him if he wanted to lay down a track and he completely nailed it. In 'No one gets out alive' we also got the all star vocal team in of Gav, Phil, James, Thom, MJ and Del (McGuinness, Rella Music) and a few others in for some big chain gang vocals which came out great.

**Kelly.** What sort of technique do you use for song writing?

**JMT.** I like the way my music has progressed in the last 4 or 5 years. It's changed for sure but I feel the songs I'm writing these days are a bit more mature and certainly more focused than anything I've previously done. Songs can come from specific thematic ideas

which I want to write about or from a riff or collection of riffs. It is always a combination of these two things. Previously I'd write music and then struggle lyrically but these days the song will come together musically and lyrically pretty much together. There will be a part of a guitar line that is begging for a particular vocal part so that makes it easy...The song 'Iniquitous' has a guitar line which the vocal line then mirrors and so on.

**Kelly.** What's the next step in your music career?

**JMT.** The next step is to get this album out to as many people as possible. I'm so confident in the songs and the project as a whole that I think if we can get it out far and wide it will get a positive response. In fact everyone who has heard it in its early stages thinks we have got something special. This hopefully also will lead to some big shows locally and nationally to promote it.

**Kelly.** What is your ultimate goal with your music career, where do you hope to be in the near future?

**JMT.** Ultimately if the album does well there will be enough interest to be able to put on some big shows to promote. That would certainly be seen as a short term success. Obviously the job isn't over then! By expanding live shows we can push it out even further and hopefully introduce people to more of the back catalogue which would be great also. In the long term it would be fantastic to be able to basically bring in a good full time salary from music alone which is a mixed blessing of course. Sometimes it's easier to have a day job and take that pressure of the creative side of things but I think the ultimate goal of any musician is to create music that we can be proud of but also to be able to support our families on the strength of that music.