

RIDING A WAVE OF SUCCESS

Jason Mraz

TALKS SONGWRITING

BY CHERIE YURCO

The past 10 years have seen Jason Mraz transition from playing coffee shops to superstar status. Yet he remains grounded, sharing openly about some of the keys behind his success, explaining his creative process and how his latest album, *Yes*, has returned him to his acoustic roots.

Growing up in Mechanicsville, Virginia, Mraz says he joined every group that would have him, just so he could keep singing. “I never had any other plan in life, other than to entertain through music,” he says.

He headed west in his quest for a career in music, arriving in San Diego, California, in 1999. “I said, ‘If all fails, I can always go back home to Virginia, and at least I will have had this amazing adventure to write about. I’ll have new geography to feast my eyes on and new adventures for the spirit.’”

It turned out that Mraz’s pilgrimage to the West Coast was just the impetus his career needed. “It was in California, in the coffee shop scene, that I realized I could trade in my craft to pay my bills with the songs I was making up. That was the first time I was able to really sustain myself on music, and I decided to stay.”

By 2002 he had a deal with Elektra Records, releasing his debut album *Waiting for My Rocket to Come*, which resulted in his first hit, “The Remedy (I Won’t Worry).” His second album,



Photos: Jen Rosenstein

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Mr. A-Z (2005) reached number five on the Billboard 200 and sold more than 100,000 copies. That same year, he scored gigs opening for Alanis Morissette and The Rolling Stones, among others.

His 2008 album *We Sing. We Dance. We Steal Things.*, debuted at the third spot on Billboard 200 and its song “I’m Yours,” became his first top 10 single. Two other songs on that album earned him Grammy awards: “Lucky” (Best Pop Collaboration with Vocals) and “Make It Mine” (Best Male Pop Vocal Performance).

ON SELF-PRODUCING

On *Yes!*, released last July, he collaborated with longtime friends Mai Bloomfield, Becky Gebhardt, Chaska Potter, and Mona Tavakoli of the group Raining Jane. The album was a departure for Mraz in a couple of ways. First, it brought him back to acoustic music for the first time since his coffee shop days, and secondly, it was his first self-produced project.

He says that producing the album allowed more space to express himself. “Every other album was produced by somebody else, and so all of the production and everything else that went into them left very little space for me to sing,” he says.

Mraz had been occasionally jamming with Raining Jane for about eight years. “I knew what we could create, just the five of us. We weren’t going to need session players, or anything else, to help us fill out this album. The arrangements were strong enough to be left alone with simple instrumentation,” he says. “So this is closer to my heart sonically—where I had hoped to arrive a long time ago.”

“It’s the most succinct version of my songwriting. I feel like I’m speaking in a

way that can be easily understood. That has always been a goal or challenge: to write a song and to make it tickle the ear and make it thought provoking, but also understandable. I listen back to old albums sometimes ... I don’t know what I’m saying, I’m just so disconnected from who that guy was and what I was searching for,” says Mraz.

Growing as a songwriter and musician is a natural evolution he describes as peeling back layers to slowly uncover his deeper talents. Mraz views developing his craft as a skill, like any, that improves over time and with consistent practice. And so, he writes a lot of songs.

“I probably write 80 to 100 songs for every album. That includes all kinds of genres and experimentation. I try to go with whatever the strongest material is—the stuff that feels good to play or listen to twice, and what I feel is the most authentic, enjoyable,” he says.

RIDING THE SONGWRITING WAVE

Mraz explains that in writing songs, most of the time, he starts with an instrument to build the foundation: a couple chords, a beautiful progression. “That kind of wakes me up and gets me excited,” he says. “I try to think of my voice as surfing on a wave and I imagine how I can play with it and where the wave will want to take me.”

Other times his songs start with inspirations from daily life. “I keep a journal going always, so if I stumble onto a thought, a story, or a line that I love, I’ll start with that line or sing that story, improvising on the wave,” he explains. “Once I develop a melody that I like, that I feel like repeating, or that I feel creates a verse or a chorus, then I am able to put the guitar down.” He then goes back to penning the lyrics.

“Sometimes songs surprise me and I hear a melody in my head and I write a whole bunch of things down before I even get to an instrument, and other times I hum or skat a progression or a song idea for years before I finally know what I want to sing about,” says Mraz.

Looking back on his early days, Mraz wishes he'd been more confident to do his own thing from the start. "When I first got started I looked at others and saw what was working; which is okay, we all learn from our peers. But it took me a long time to feel at home and comfortable releasing material and not shy about if it was going to be accepted," he says.

"I wish I could tell my former self 'just relax and be yourself,'" he adds. "It's in that foundation that you create great and honest work."

CREATING AN EVENT

Somewhat of a perfectionist when it comes to completing a song, Mraz says that he often goes back to rework them. "I have a sign hanging up in my studio that says, 'Is it an event?'" explains Mraz. "If the song isn't an event, if it doesn't move me, if I don't feel like I've truly accomplished something, then it's probably not finished."

Making *Yes!* was a different process altogether, allowing him to also exploit the creative energies of Raining Jane. "Because they've been a band for about 15 years, they have this awesome ability to create foundations of music—those waves that I was describing—almost instantaneously," he explains of the process.

"Everyone brings a different instrument to a circle and we start jamming. Maybe somebody has a progression in mind, or maybe we just collide until we find something we like. Once that bed is happening, the four of them start rocking out like a band, and oohing and aahing, putting backing vocals on sections to create a beautiful wave of music that I then begin to improvise on, surf all over, and start telling my stories," he says. "When we all agree that we like where something is going, we stop and everybody goes off and does free writing. They pass them all to me and I go through them and I decide what feels good to sing, what works with the story. It's a ton of fun."

"What I like about it is: the musicianship, the quality of the music," he says. "We all have shared beliefs and similar core values.

If I want to sing songs of positivity, love, hope, and equality, they are dialed into that messaging already. Lastly, it's great to collaborate because you have to show up. If I'm collaborating with only myself and my guitar, it's easy to put it off, and then I am tired and I don't give myself the best experience. But when I create a date with Raining Jane, we say we are going to start at one o'clock, we start at one o'clock, we jam it, and it gets things done."

THE SONGWRITING GAME

When Mraz is not specifically working on a new album, he keeps his songwriting muscle in shape by playing a game with friends. "Every week I have to turn a word or phrase that is sent to me into a song. It's as simple as that. There are no other rules: here's your word, use it somewhere in the song, and turn the song in by Sunday night," he says.

"The game is fun because it gives you a task and it gives you a deadline," he continues. "Nothing inspires like a deadline. You could go three or four weeks and write really absurd songs, then maybe that fifth week, something is happening in your life, and because you have a regular practice of songwriting, that personal experience finds its way into your songwriting and you write something that moves you and others."

As for writer's block, in Mraz's world, it doesn't exist. "You can always write about writer's block—your experience of being stuck, your experience of learning, your experience of growing," he says.

His biggest hit to date, "I'm Yours," is a prime example. "People think 'I'm Yours' is a love song, but I wrote it about songwriting and about giving myself away to the higher energy that moves through us all the time. It wasn't until I recorded it, and I was dating someone, that I sang it kind of cheeky. There's one line where I say something like 'scooch on over here so I can nibble your ear.' That was just for a girl; these days I sing it back in its original style. The song, at its core, is about what was happening to me: I want to write, I

want to give myself away, I'm yours, make me an instrument, our time is short—those types of feelings over a simple four chord progression. I never would have written it, had I not had a regular songwriting practice."

WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

"A great songwriter named Matt Morris told me he would trade in 'true' for 'clever' any day of the week. When he told me that, I immediately got rid of anything that I thought was 'cool' and wrote about what is going on in my life and it's made a world of difference," says Mraz. "New songwriters should write about their obvious surroundings, emotions, and the things that are happening to them and that they aspire to."

Another key to success for Mraz, has been maintaining a balance in his life between music and other pursuits. Aside from surfing, yoga, and photography, one passion for him has been farming. He owns a 5.5-acre avocado farm in California and teaches others about urban farming through his website.

"I never expected my career to become so huge. For me to keep creating music that I think relates to people, I need to do things that keep my head out of the clouds and keep my ego in check. I find that by gardening, by being of service, by volunteering. Those life experiences and those adventures that I have outside of music, ultimately fuel the music," he says. "I get inspired by people I meet in other fields and I realize how good I have it. So then I try to tribute them in music."

And on that note, Mraz says that he will continue to tour with Raining Jane through this spring and then take the summer off to explore other interests. "I'll pick up again in October or November, either with more shows or recording of whatever I write next summer. Then I'll start thinking about the next record," he says.



To see the video of Jason Mraz performing "I'm Yours," visit: www.MakingMusicMag.com/jason-mraz.