

BRETT JAMES

Comfort Zones In Uncomfortable Times

In times of crisis, I am like a lot of other songwriters who go to the place we always go when we need to make sense of the world — music. Having spent most of my life as a songwriter for other artists, I am accustomed to the job of trying to create hits for the radio.

It's the greatest job in the world, but that's not what I do when I feel down, confused or a little lost like many of us have been feeling lately. In those times, I look to my music as both a personal healer and a place to help me figure out things. For me, that simply looks like picking up an ignored guitar and reverting back to the kid I was when I first started making stuff up in my teens. The difference for me, I guess, is in the honesty.

Instead of trying to craft something that might sound good on the radio, I just start playing and singing until something comes out that feels right. Most would call it writing from the heart. I call it writing from the gut because it's more than the heart for me. It's not just about love or loss, it's about who I am and what I want to say at that moment ... the naked truth.

Most great art starts with raw emotion. When we, as songwriters, are at our most vulnerable, many times it takes us to the place where we do our best work. How do we capture the moment? How do we say what really needs to be said? That is the great mystery of our work. What I do know is that in times of crisis, our work is more important than ever. People need to know that they are not alone. They need to know that someone out there feels the same way that they do and shares in their struggles. We are so blessed to live in an age where we can make music in a bedroom and release it instantly, connecting with people in real-time. What an amazing opportunity in this period of quarantines, self-induced and otherwise, to actually be able to write and

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share our feelings with other souls going through the same crisis. Maybe this is an opportunity for us to speak through someone's iPhone speaker or EarPods and say something that they need to hear, whether it be to lift spirits or help make sense of all the craziness.

Last year, for the first time in more than 20 years, I sat down by myself and wrote an "album" of songs just for me. On my 50th birthday, I had a bit of a "what in the hell am I doing with my life?" moment. I decided that to stay sane, I needed at least part of my musical life to be making music that I love. I cleared my calendar, sat on my couch and wrote 11 songs over the next two weeks. No boundaries or genre limitations, I was just being a kid again in love with music. It was

the most fun I've ever had as a writer, and I've continued to add to the pile. The songs are finally coming out now, and I hope people love them. But I already do, and that's what matters to me.

Songs can be at their most powerful and poignant during times of crisis. I think of the songs that came out of the Vietnam era, the AIDS crisis and even 9/11. Many of them spoke to the masses and helped heal the world. That is the beauty of art. What I would encourage our vast and infinitely diverse community of writers to do in this time of pandemic is to write from the gut. We are not all going to write that one big song that helps heal the world, but if we are authentic, we just might help heal our family, our friends, our community or even ourselves. If we can do that as songwriters, maybe we will be giving back a little of the gift that we have been blessed with. We will become a small part of the good that I believe will come out of the madness. ★

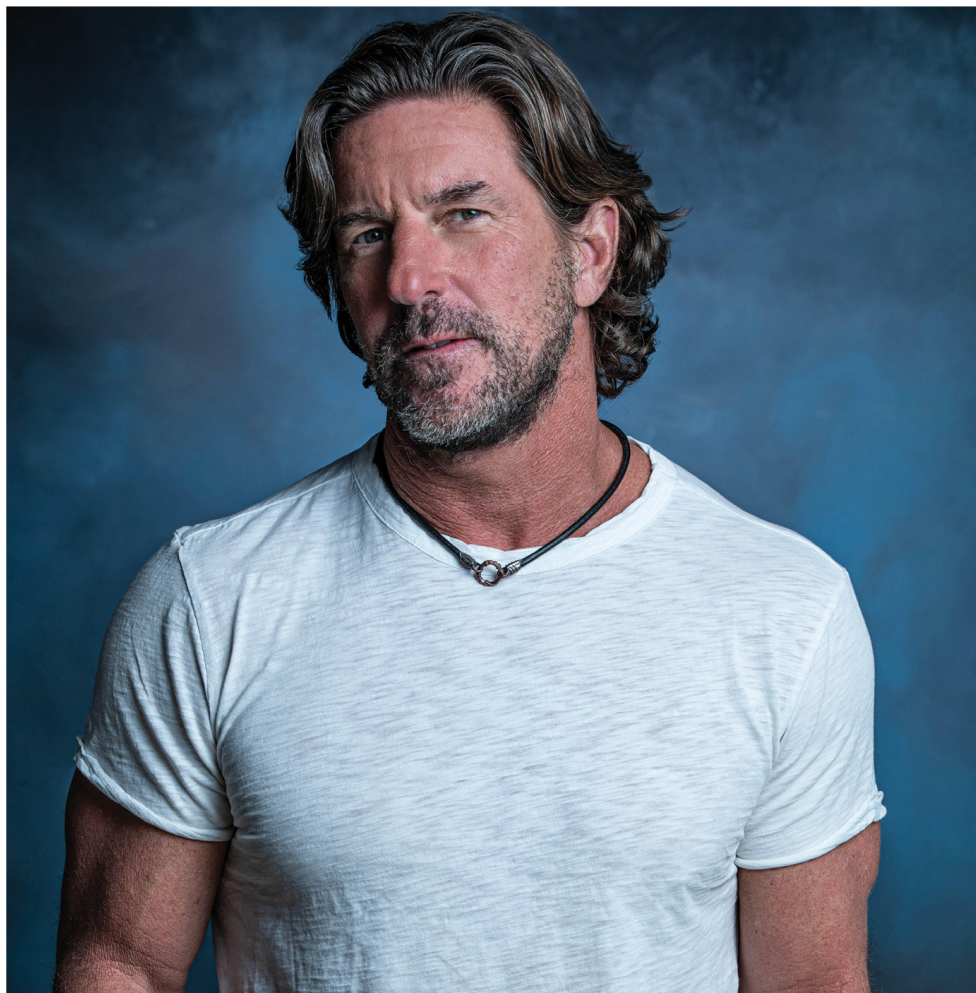


Photo by Jay Gilbert