

# JB

JAMES BLUNT  
SPEAKING THROUGH SONG

*“Because I’m British, I’m emotionally stunted,” jokes singer-songwriter James Blunt. “So I couldn’t express myself or capture what was going on in my mind. But through music, I found I could say what I was feeling.”*





*"The MPU1 is my piano of choice; it sounds great, and it's very reliable—it's lasted through a world tour!"*

Blunt's path to pop music success was an unconventional one. Before charming the world with insightful, moody ballads like "You're Beautiful" and "Goodbye My Lover," he served in the British Army for four years, including several months as a 22-year-old peacekeeper in Kosovo. In 2002, James left the army to face another kind of adversary: the music industry. Armed only with some "dodgy demos" showcasing his formidable songwriting talents and arresting voice, Blunt quickly found management and publishing deals, and soon crossed paths with songwriter/producer Linda Perry (Pink, Christina Aguilera), who signed him to her Custard label.

With the help of producer Tom Rothrock (Beck, Elliot Smith, Badly Drawn Boy), Blunt recorded his wildly successful 2005 debut album, *Back to Bedlam*, and has since toured almost continuously. We caught up with him as he prepared for yet another North American tour.

***You've been touring incessantly since your album came out.***

Yes, and we're about to do another two and a half months—it's our third time in the States this year. I suppose that means I'm having too much fun there! I've been on the road for two years now. It's been kind of a long camping holiday. I'm always in a bus, and my bandmates are quite smelly, but I've enjoyed it—we have a really good band and crew, so it's been fun.

***Are you able to find time to work on new material while you're on the road?***

On the road I've been pretty busy, so I've had lots of musical ideas, but not enough time to cement them into songs. I just write the words down and try to remember the rest. But I've taken a bit of time off over the last couple of months, and I've been plodding through some song ideas I've had for a while. It's really nice to take stock and put these ideas down. And I'm really excited about going back on the road and trying some of these things out.

***Do you tend to write primarily on piano or guitar?***

What I might do is write a song on the piano, then change it to guitar just to see how it feels, or vice-versa. I'll see if that draws anything else from me. I'll take my time and experiment in different ways. I guess I'm lucky in that I can play both instruments. I'm not necessarily an expert on either, but I can get by on both.

***What initially prompted you to start writing music?***

It was during those teenage years that I started writing songs and song ideas. I'd always played musical instruments, but it was going through that teenage angst that I really felt a need to express myself. And music was my outlet.

***With songs like "No Bravery," you've also drawn on your time in the British Army to fuel your music.***

Yeah, I was in Kosovo for six months. And of course it was a pretty extreme time, so yes, it's of great influence. I think any life experience will affect a human, and as a songwriter I'll draw on any life experience to write about. But it wasn't the only time that I've experienced things, so I generally write about lots of other subjects.

**Has the meaning of any of your songs evolved for you since you wrote them? Or do you consider them more like snapshots of a certain time and place?**

When I sing these songs, I do still think about the specific moment in time when I wrote them, and the people I might have been writing about. But along the way other people have interpreted the songs in their own ways, and sometimes the songs have become part of other people's lives. And of course I know about those experiences—I've had lots of letters from people who tell me what the songs mean to them, and I've been really touched by many of those. I know people who have had great celebrations through some of the songs, and others have gone through times of great sadness and sorrow. So it doesn't change what I feel about the songs, but it definitely adds to it.



you're going to sound like." Instead he said, "What do you want to do? How do you want to record this? How do you hear it?" He has great patience, and I was very lucky that he was the man to take it on. He doesn't play instruments himself, but he guides you through these things. So as far as the instrumentation goes, he enabled me to pick and choose and use my own imagination. We really worked as a team.

**When you play live, do you try to replicate the sound of the album?**

On the album, I built up the music with Tom Rothrock, just the two of us. We used occasional session musicians from Los Angeles and benefited from their experience, but otherwise it was this building process from nothing.

Whereas with the live show, I have a regular band. There's a drummer, a bass player, electric guitar, keys, and I play acoustic guitar and piano myself. And they all sing, like little girls! [Laughs.] They're great musicians, so I just said, "Come on guys, what do you want to add to this?" I didn't dictate to them. They brought their own musicianship to it. And as such, the same songs are presented in different ways. But it's not set—I'm easy.

**You're playing a Yamaha MPU1 Silent Piano in your live shows.**

Oh, now you're asking technical questions! [Laughs.] Yes, it's a real acoustic piano, but it also has MIDI, so I can play with a band live without the sound getting lost. But I can also get rid of the band for some songs and just play acoustically, and that's when it's really nice to have the real, original piano sound. It's my piano of choice; it sounds great, and it's very reliable—it's lasted through a world tour! So I'm really happy, and wouldn't look elsewhere.

**And you've also recently done some writing and recording with a Yamaha C3 6' 1" Conservatory Collection Grand Piano.**

Yes—it's a great piano, really warm-sounding. The sound of the piano is quite important, I think. It influences how you feel things when you get into the music that you're writing. This piano has real warmth and depth to it, and as such I'm finding writing on it very easy.

**For example, a couple became engaged during "You're Beautiful" at one of your shows last spring.**

Exactly, yes.

**People seem to latch onto the universality of your music.**

Yeah, I think I'm writing very personal songs about personal experiences, but perhaps people relate to them because as humans we're very similar. We tend to have the same emotions, the same hopes and fears—we're just trying to get by, really. But the things I write about are things that I feel and experience myself. Things that directly relate to my life.

**What's your notion of the ideal listener? What qualities do you hope that your fans bring to the experience of hearing your music?**

I guess empathy is what I'm after. People with open minds and an interest in other people. I think it's nice that people are able to interpret the songs in their own ways. It's similar to the way that you'd write a book, and people have to use their own imaginations to put the pictures and images to the words.

**How did it feel to transform these songs from demos to finished recordings?**

I was really lucky, because I had Tom Rothrock at the helm. He's got great experience as a producer, but he's also a very gentle man and a great listener. He didn't try to say, "This is what



**What are your plans after the tour ends?**

I'm going to retire and become a mercenary in South America! [Laughs.] Alternatively, I'll have my arm twisted slightly and head back into the studio. I'm really looking forward to going back to Los Angeles and working in Tom's home studio. I haven't got the whole thing set, but I do have a healthy handful of songs written that I really enjoy.

**Based on your current experience, what's your advice for someone who's new to the music business?**

I would say get the right manager, without a shadow of a doubt. You can be a great musician, but the music industry is not really much about being a great musician. It's about having someone to guide you through the industry—and I'm very lucky, because I've definitely got the right manager.

**Would you do anything differently yourself if you were starting out again?**

Yeah. [Laughs.] I'd drink more!