

JOE FIRSTMAN: CARSON DALY'S *LAST CALL* ACCOMPLICE



"THE CP33 JUST FEELS RIGHT. IT'S LIKE WHEN YOU GET A BASEBALL GLOVE THAT'S JUST RIGHT, OR A PAIR OF SHOES THAT ARE REALLY COMFORTABLE."



TALK ABOUT A GREAT GIG: AS BANDLEADER AND MUSICAL DIRECTOR for NBC's *Last Call with Carson Daly*, singer/songwriter/keyboardist Joe Firstman jams nightly with a house band consisting of some of LA's finest musicians before an audience of millions.

"I'm just lucky," Firstman shrugs. "I get to play with these famous guys you see on TV all the time—and I'm not paying them, the network is! We do a lot of different stuff, and these guys can play anything. They blow my mind every day. It's not about, 'Can we do a jazz feel in C minor?' It's more like, 'How creative can we be with it? Let's take these arrangements as far as we can.'"

If that weren't good enough, Firstman gets to play his own material. "They let me play all original music," he says. "When I went in, I said, 'If you guys want a cover band, get a cover band. They'll play Zeppelin really good. But if you want me, I want to play my songs.' So it's a sweet deal. They give you royalties for the music played on the show, so they'd have to pay Zeppelin and me the same anyway!"

Joe's star has been rising steadily since he began performing as a teenager in his native North Carolina a decade ago. Following a successful stint with a popular regional band, he headed for Hollywood in 2001. Within two years, Firstman inked a deal with Atlantic Records, released an album, *The War of Women*, and began touring nationally, supporting artists such as Sheryl Crow, Willie Nelson, and Jason Mraz.



But something didn't feel right. "I thought it was a hoax," he recalls. "I knew I had the nerve, the youth, and the charisma, and I thought I had some good songs and could sing, but I thought I needed five or seven years. I didn't want the expectation of having to sell six million records right off the bat."

Though he continues to write and record his own songs, Joe parted ways with Atlantic in 2005. But he didn't have to wait long for the next big thing.

"We played *Last Call* on my first record cycle, and I heard Carson Daly really liked my record," Firstman says. "Later, I was playing around town, and the music booker from the show came to see me. I guess they were trying to get a more permanent house band. I knew all these horn guys, all these musicians, and they were playing with me that night. I had trumpets, violins, everybody—it was a big party. And she was like, 'This is exactly what we need!'"

These days, when he's not exchanging banter onstage with Carson Daly or leading his bandmates in an irresistible groove, Joe is usually developing new musical ideas on one of his many Yamaha keyboards. "I use a Clavinova on the show, because it's all shiny and looks like a miniature grand piano," he says. "And I use the CP33 for my own gigs. It's a working musician's rig. It's light—you can carry it yourself. It gets thrown around the back of the van, but it's sturdy, and it just feels right. It's like when you get a baseball glove that's just right, or a pair of shoes that are really comfortable. It's got simple buttons, for guys like me who don't know much about buttons. It's everything you need, right there."

Firstman also has a Yamaha upright piano at home. "I play it every day," he says. "That's where it all starts." The upright seems to fit the sound that many artists and producers gravitate toward these days, notes Joe: "I think they want to hear instruments the way they sounded in their grandparents' dining room, all crackly and slightly out of tune. A grand piano is so perfect that it dominates you. It's like a Cadillac sitting in the middle of the room. People seem to want a little more roughness these days, and not such a pristine, regal sound."

Being surrounded by fans, fame, and great gear might go to anyone's head, but Firstman remains aware of—and grateful for—his good musical fortune. "There are no bad parts to my job," he marvels. "My job is to go out there and help Carson out, make a joke, and otherwise just rock. I bring my music in to the guys and we play it—and I try to play it as good as I can, with as much love in my heart as I can. And then I come home and work on it some more, and put it into my records. It's all one big, flowing thing."