

Jason Mraz

THE ART OF NOT BEING BORING

JASON MRAZ IS ONE OF TODAY'S MOST CEASELESSLY CREATIVE singer/songwriters. Not only has he scored massive hits with each of his three albums—he's done so via songs fueled by witty, literate lyrics and inventive vocal melodies.

Jason grew up performing in vocal ensembles and musical theater in Mechanicsville, Virginia. He attended New York City's American Musical and Dramatic Academy, but dropped out to pursue a singing/songwriting career. He worked his way up through the San Diego, California, coffeehouse scene, built a local following, landed a deal, and won an international following with his major-label debut, *Waiting for My Rocket to Come*. Its follow-ups, *Mr. A-Z* and 2008's *We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things*, boast increasingly ambitious production and wild stylistic leaps. Yet the studio pyrotechnics never overwhelm Mraz's soaring tenor and scintillating songs. It never gets boring. We spoke to Jason during soundcheck for a recent Tampa, Florida, gig, just hours after he learned he'd received GRAMMY nominations for Song of the Year and Best Male Pop Vocal Performance.

DO YOU TEND TO WRITE ON GUITAR?

Yeah, I usually do. Sometimes I have a melody in my head, and then I try to find it on the guitar. But my favorite way to write is when the music and the lyrics come at the same time—that tells you the song was meant to happen.

DO YOU FIND YOURSELF WEAVING THE MELODIES AROUND THE CHORD PROGRESSIONS? OR CRAFTING THE CHORD PROGRESSIONS TO FIT THE TUNES?

Both, but usually I weave the melodies around the chords. Even after the song is written, I'll take it on the road, and a year later, the melodies are woven even further around those chord progressions.

IS THAT HOW YOU COME UP WITH SO MANY FRESH-SOUNDING MELODIES? YOUR VOCAL LINES ALWAYS HAVE SURPRISING TWISTS AND TURNS.

I discovered a love for that late in high school and early college, when I started listening to jazz horn players like Sonny Stitt and John Coltrane. Their horns felt like voices to me, and they would always surprise me. I loved that feeling, and wanted to apply it to my own writing. Oftentimes, before a song gets committed to lyrics, it's just a series of random sounds and syllables anyway, like scatting. That gives me a great opportunity to go on those little journeys in melody.

AND THERE'S A LOT OF MELODIC VARIATION FROM VERSE TO VERSE WITHIN EACH SONG.

I have a commitment to not be boring. When I was coming up in the coffee shops, I'd always hear a lot of singer/songwriters, and they just didn't entertain me. I decided that whenever I wrote a song, I'd write something that entertained me. I want to be surprised and uplifted. It's not about formula—it's about feeling.



“It's not about formula—it's about feeling.”



SO WHICH SONGS BY OTHER ARTISTS GIVE YOU THAT FEELING?

“A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall” by Bob Dylan. That's a classic singer/songwriter epic. Or his song “Hurricane,” which has a real message. Among more modern songs, I love “Number 41” by Dave Matthews. It's kind of abstract, with a beautiful arrangement, so open and free. Björk's “All Is Full of Love” is a very simple poem, almost like folk music, but she dresses it up in her own way. Ryan Adams' “I See Monsters” is fantastic. From my understanding, he wrote it sitting on the bedside of his sleeping girlfriend, and you can feel that in the song. I often get attached to one song by an artist, but I don't necessarily dive into everything the artist does. I'll say to myself, “I want to feel what it's like to do a song like that, what it's like to be in a moment like that.” I want to embody the song, whether it's a rap piece or a classical piece.

DOES THE WITTY WORDPLAY IN YOUR SONGS COME EASILY, OR DO YOU LABOR OVER IT?

Both. Some days it can appear very quickly, and other days I have to take a long walk and hope it comes. Again, it just goes back to my original commitment to not be boring. That doesn't mean I can't be simple—I still want to tell a simple tale. But most songs are stories that have been told again and again in different ways. It might be a breakup song or a song about not knowing how to tell a girl you like her. Well, those songs have been sung a million times. How can you tell it differently? That's where words become the most valuable part of the process.

ARE THERE PARTICULAR SONGWRITING CLICHÉS YOU STRIVE TO AVOID?

Not necessarily. Songs usually begin with a cliché, but then you have to come up with a new way to say it. Sometimes it's fun to simply reverse a cliché. Take “I can see stars in your eyes,” which you've heard a million times. But if you say, “I can see your eyes in the stars,” it suddenly takes on a totally different meaning. Then you might go deeper and ask, “What else about that sky reminds you of someone?” It can be very analytical, but it's a fun way to explore your subject. In the process, you rewire your mind and nurture your soul. It's a brilliant exercise.

IS IT TRUE YOU PARTICIPATE IN AN ONGOING LYRIC-WRITING GAME WITH A COUPLE OF FELLOW SONGWRITERS?

Absolutely. I play it with Bob Schneider and Billy Harvey, two brilliant guys from Austin, Texas. The idea is, you get a word or a phrase and a challenge to turn it into a song by a certain time. Right now, our phrase is “like peaches.” You know, sometimes we get a little too precious about where our song is going and why we're writing it. The game is just a way to say, “Forget about why you're writing it—just write it! Have fun with it!” Sometimes I play the game and just try to make the other guys laugh, and sometimes I do it because I really want to add something to my show.

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YOU SEEM TO BE ONE OF THOSE GUYS WHO MANAGES TO WRITE ON THE ROAD.

I have to be—I live on the road! I write anywhere I can. I've written a lot of songs about travel and movement. Luckily I was able to write most of *We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things* at home, so the album was more about community and gratitude than about room service and airplanes. But I'm definitely writing my next album here on the road. I just can't help it.

YOU'VE BEEN JAMMING ON THE BUS USING A YAMAHA SLG100S SILENT GUITAR.

Right. It's a really interesting gadget. You can plug headphones directly into it, and no one else can hear what you're playing. It's great on the bus, because the bus makes so much noise. I love the reverb settings—it sounds like you're running through a P.A. It's a great way to keep writing and coming up with ideas. It's super-compact as well, so it fits in the tiny tour bus closets.

YOU'VE ALSO BEEN PLAYING A YAMAHA MIKE STERN SIGNATURE MODEL PACIFICA.

Yeah. I'm a newcomer to electric guitar, but every now and then I do some funky stuff. I fell in love with the Mike Stern because it's really tight. If I hook up a wah-wah pedal I can play that tight waka-chica-waka-chica stuff. I haven't really ventured into the melodic world of solo playing just yet, but I can definitely hold my own in the rhythm department with that guitar. I love it.

YOUR LATEST ALBUMS FEATURE CLEVER, ELABORATE ARRANGEMENTS. HOW CAN PRODUCTION MAKE A SONG MORE EFFECTIVE, AS OPPOSED TO DETRACTING FROM ITS ESSENCE WITH TOO MUCH FLASH?

That stuff is just a matter of preference. Some listeners get off on rhythms and arrangements, whether it's strings or horns or groovy bass lines. Some people only want to connect with lyrics and melody. I try to release enough material to please both types of listeners. I definitely love doing both.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT COMMUNICATING YOUR IDEAS TO PRODUCERS, ENGINEERS, AND MUSICIANS IN THE STUDIO SO THAT THE ORIGINAL INSPIRATION ISN'T LOST?

It's a unique language that I'm still learning. Even with my longtime band, we try to talk about the music. I might explain the feeling I'm trying to create, or tell the guys, "Okay, this is meant to be a punch line, so give me some space here." I do my best to convey the story to them, the overall mood. It's almost like saying, "This is the color—now let's all paint in that color."

CAN YOU GIVE US A HINT ABOUT WHAT COLORS WE MIGHT HEAR ON YOUR NEXT ALBUM?

Well, I can only write as I grow and discover things. Everything is based on my own life development. I'm a young man in my thirties, and a lot of my time is spent working on my fitness, my focus, and a family. I wouldn't be surprised if the next album is driven by those things. How we can choose happiness. How we can feel healthy. How we can embrace our loved ones. How we can participate in the world and be part of a positive community. Those are the things I'm thinking about and feeling right now. So I wonder what's next!



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We Sing, We Dance, We Steal Things
in stores now