

# FROM SCREEN TO STAGE WITH BYRON THAMES

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Talk about a double life!

In the 1980s, Byron Thames was a child star on television shows like *Father Murphy*, *21 Jump Street*, and *Chips*. By his mid-teens, Thames had also appeared in films alongside Michael Keaton and Jennifer Connelly.

Thames, now in his 30s, has assumed many other identities since then, including parts in *ER*, *Diagnosis Murder*, and *Don’s Plumb* (a film with Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire). But perhaps his biggest creative challenge to date is his current real-life role as a professional keyboardist and singer-songwriter.

“My hobby kind of took over,” Byron explains. “I always played piano as a kid, but I came up mostly acting in TV and film. I was fairly busy, and making an okay living, but acting is so up-and-

down, and sometimes you’re waiting forever. So I just started playing more music.”

Thames discovered that music offered some advantages over acting. “I had more control over it,” he says. “I could do it whenever I wanted to. I didn’t really start pursuing a solo career in music until about two years ago. But once I decided to let my music be whatever it wants to be, everything started to expand. I’d made a deal with myself that I’d never try to be a professional musician—I wanted it to be this sacred thing that I could do whatever I wanted with. But it turns out I can do whatever I want with it, and still make a living doing it!”

After touring the U.S. on keyboards with country-rock band Duke Daniels, the Mississippi native returned to Los Angeles to write, play, and begin work on a solo album. “It’s going to be

funky, piano-driven rock with vocals,” Thames says. “There are a lot of Southern influences. I’ve been a keyboard player and instrumental music composer for a long time, but now I’m seeing how the frontman thing goes.”

It appears to be going well. “When people come to my shows,” says Byron, “they tell me, ‘I’ve never really heard anything like this before—it’s a weird kind of Southern country funk mixed with a little alternative.’ It’s happy music. I never really considered myself commercially viable as a singer-songwriter, because the songs I write are never very ‘poppy.’ So I think it’s a testament to just being yourself and doing what you do—wind, rain, or shine.”

Byron plays a Yamaha S90ES keyboard, which combines high-end digital piano features with the sonic options of a synthesizer. “I love the S90ES because it’s the best of both worlds,” he says. “It’s cool to have an ax with great piano sounds and a great piano feel that also has this crazy synthesizer stuff. It’s the first time I’ve played a keyboard onstage that sounds like a real piano. The action is really good too. When I play a regular piano, I don’t feel like, ‘Oh man, I’ve been playing a keyboard all day, and now I get to play a real piano.’ The S90ES is pretty darn close.”

Byron says he finds the S90ES’s other sounds and features equally impressive. “I like a lot of the synth pads and leads, and the electric pianos are really awesome. The interface is easy, and I can split up the keyboard if I need to. It’s just a good all-around tool. Being able to sit down at a keyboard that has a good piano sound and cool Rhodes and Wurlie sounds lets me switch into those different modes at the touch of a button. It definitely brings out different moods and styles when I’m writing.”

While music is Byron’s main priority these days, he still takes acting gigs. “I do a film or two a year,” he says, “but it’s more on my own terms now. I do think that being an actor helps me as a musician, and being a musician helps me as an actor. With both acting and music, people can sense whether something’s real or not. You just have to be honest. Also, knowing one creative process makes it easier to approach the other. If I’m getting stuck with a scene, I ask myself ‘Well, how do I write a song? How do I play music?’ And when I’m stuck on a song, I think, ‘Okay, what do you do when you pick up a script?’ Each side serves the other.”

Byron hopes to finish his solo album by year’s end. Meanwhile, he aims to win more fans with his funky-country-Southern-alternative sound. “What’s great about music right now is that styles are melding,” he notes. “Everybody’s combining all these different influences. So maybe it’s a good time for me!”

