

# BRETT JAMES: RX FOR SONGWRITING SUCCESS



Had fate dealt a slightly different hand, the world would have one more dedicated doctor—and a lot fewer country hits.

More than a decade ago, Brett James left medical school to pursue his dream of becoming a Nashville singer/songwriter. He had more success than most: his Arista Records debut album, *Brett James*, won praise for its hard-hitting, honky-tonk tunes. But several attempted follow-ups fizzled. In 1999 James, seeking financial security for his growing family, returned to his native Oklahoma and re-enrolled in med school.

Then the calls started coming. And coming. And coming.

"I thought I was quitting the business," says James. "But then Faith Hill recorded my song 'Love is a Sweet Thing.' Then I started placing a lot of songs. It was pretty bizarre. I was going to med school, and my publisher was calling every few days to tell me someone cool was going to cut another one of my songs. My wildest dream up till then would have been to get ten cuts in a year. But that year I had thirty-three."

James got the message. He returned to Nashville, where he's been cranking out songs ever since. Major label artists have recorded over 130 of his songs. His #1 hits include Jessica Andrews' "Who I Am," Martina McBride's "Blessed," and his biggest record yet, the Kenny Chesney/Uncle Kracker smash "When the Sun Goes Down."

As if James's story needed any more irony, "When the Sun Goes Down" was recorded almost as an afterthought. "I literally wrote it in my head on the way home from a session," recalls James. "By the time I got home, I had a little verse and chorus. I played it for my wife and asked if she thought I should bother recording it. She loved it, so I threw down a demo. Now that song is the most-played track on country radio this year."

James always had music in his blood. His mother is a classical pianist, and his physician father sings. "He's the best singer in the family," insists Brett. "He could have done it professionally, and I think he always wished he had. He was really in favor of me pursuing music. I think he's been able to live vicariously through me a little."

But Brett was no country kid. "Even though we were in a small town in Oklahoma, country just wasn't cool. I was more into rock-and-roll. It wasn't till I went to college in Texas that I got into George Strait and Dwight Yoakam. So the hardcore stuff was my first country music love, and that's what I cut my teeth on. But as I started to grow as a writer

and musician, I branched out into other areas, including more pop." In fact, James suggests, such branching out was possible precisely because he swapped performing for songwriting. "As an artist you have to focus on one style so you can make an album that fits together. But songwriters get to do whatever they want."

James recently acquired a Yamaha PSR9000 Pro. "I'd been writing with a dear friend, Tom Shapiro, who was chosen as Nashville's Songwriter of the Decade. Whenever I worked with him, he wouldn't shut up about how much he loved the PSR keyboards. So I got a PSR9000 Pro, and I've really grown to love it. It has great grooves and accompaniments you can pop up to create an instant track to work from. And the best thing is, it's really easy to get around. I don't have much patience, especially during the writing process. The last thing I want is to be slowed down trying to find the right sound or groove. But the PSR keyboards make it really easy to get what you want when you want it. You can get back to writing, as opposed to fiddling around looking for sounds."

And what conclusions does James draw from his unlikely career path? "After all these years," he replies, "my gut says, 'Keep learning. Keep writing. Keep working every day, and good things will happen eventually.' I was fortunate in that just as I thought I was giving up my music career, God laid it in my lap." He pauses, then adds: "But that year when I went back to school and got the 33 cuts? If it had only been ten cuts, I'd be a doctor right now."

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