



## A M A N O F N O T E

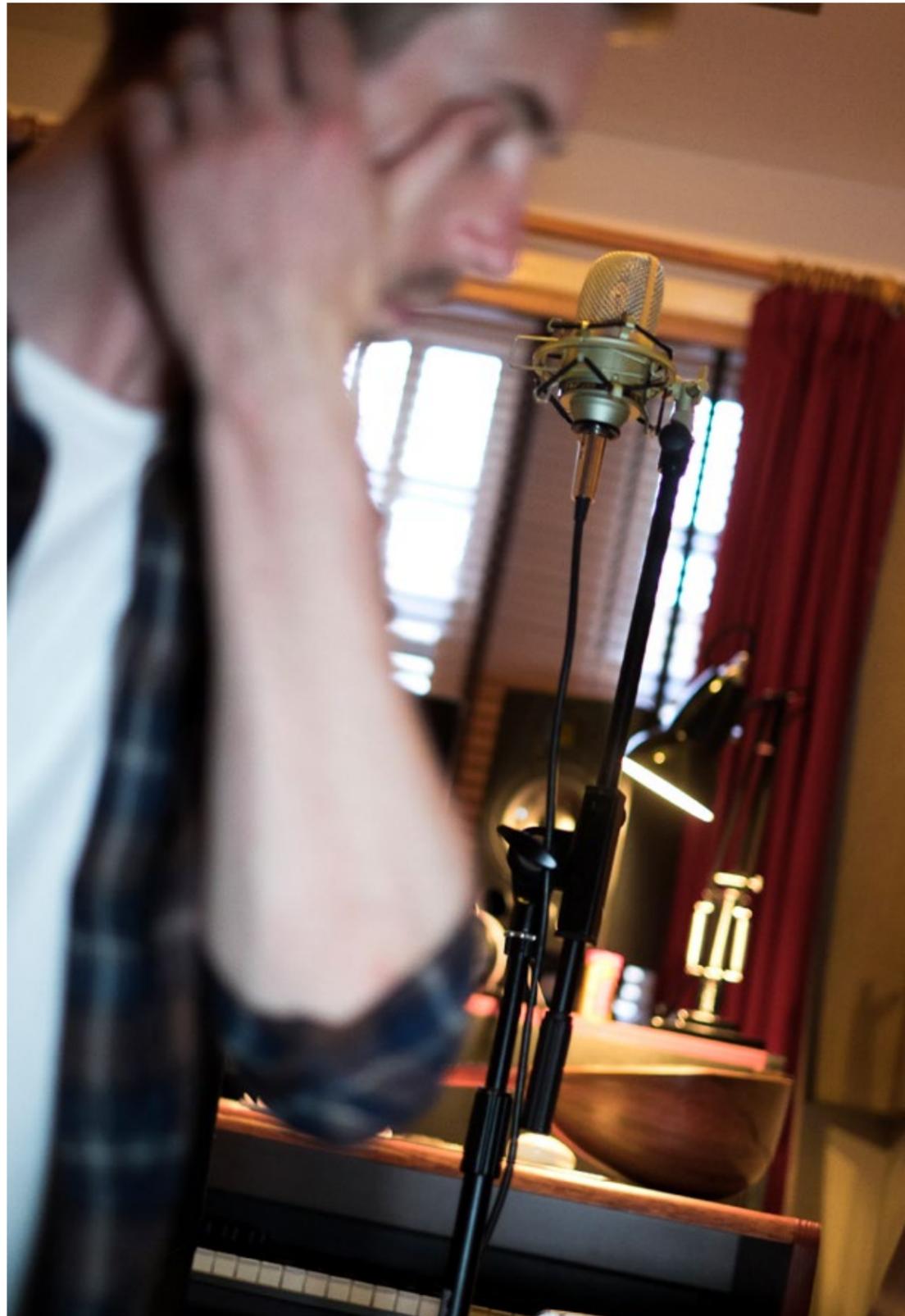
---

*Two years ago, singer songwriter James Ewers lost his inspiration and with it his purpose. As he prepares to end his silence, he discovers a new identity through the eyes of his infant daughter.*

**I**t's a bright, blustery autumn morning in Hackney, East London. The wind tugs at the last remaining leaves, scattering them across the pavement and into the gutter. As I walk up the short path towards an unassuming townhouse, the front door opens and I'm greeted by a tall, fair-haired man. He holds a baby girl, no more than six months old, gently on his hip as a small, wire-haired dog writhes frantically around his ankles. As I follow musician James Ewers across the threshold and into his home, I catch a glimpse of a life in transition. A piano stands in the hallway, its top scattered with baby clothes.

WORDS: DYLAN PERRYMAN  
IMAGES: SAUL PERRYMAN

James is a musician of depth and versatility. He's a skilled, idiosyncratic guitarist and plays the piano with passion and dexterity. His voice is bittersweet, subtly powerful, breathing life into lyrics that are elegiac, hopeful and wise beyond his 34 years. Each song tells a story that we recognise but from a perspective that's fresh, unexpected. Today, I find him at the start of what he calls a "strange artistic journey" back to himself.



"It's a weird time to be having this interview," James says, handing me a steaming mug of tea and sitting down opposite. He smiles, awkwardly, "there are big questions about how much time I commit to certain things." We are in his home studio surrounded by instruments, amps and trailing wires. Sunlight streams through the window, illuminating a dusty guitar case covered in stickers and backstage passes.

With blue eyes and a scrub of blonde beard, James is irregularly handsome. Today, he's in tatty jeans and plaid shirt rolled to the elbows. He has that ruffled, bewildered look common to new fathers – dark circles, hair a mess. But then he's never really kept regular hours.

Music has always been his purpose. It's taken him across continents. But at the height of his creative output, inspiration suddenly ran dry. "I was just writing songs and they were the worst I've ever written." He shakes his head, sadly. "They were the last songs I wrote, actually. I've not written songs for about two years now." Since then, he's scored an acclaimed film, written dozens of commercial compositions and turned his hand to production. But he's always missed that creative expression of self. Now, at last, he's ready for a reinvention.

This could be his greatest opportunity. "I could do anything, and I'm desperate to start writing again," he says. The endless possibilities excite him. "What am I going to write? Where do I start? You know, what's it going to be?" It's time to find out.

After fifteen years in the business, James doesn't believe in fate. However, it's hard to deny that he has an innate musical ability.

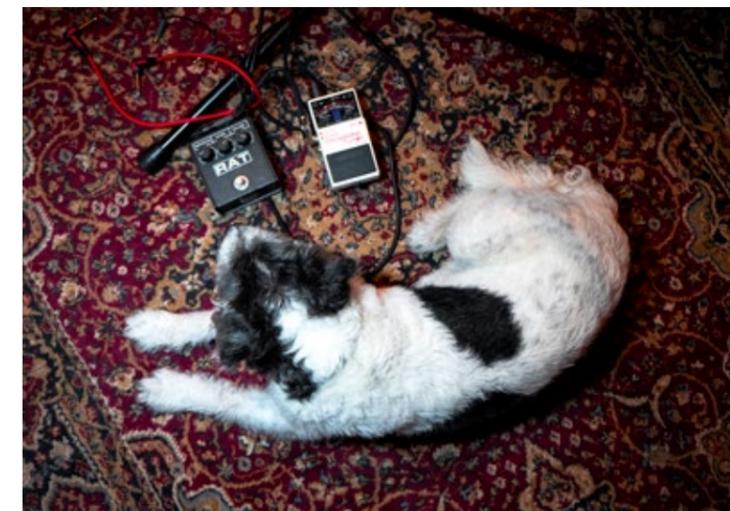
It's Sunday, early afternoon, some thirty years ago. James is in the kitchen, hanging on his mother's apron strings. Music drifts through from the dining room and, curious, he goes to investigate. Pushing the door open, he finds his grandmother at the piano. Smiling, she scoops him up, places him by her side on the piano stool and resumes. The music is passionate, unpolished, full of energy. Effortlessly, she



embellishes, changing key and adding countermelodies. Pressed up against her body, James is transfixed by the notes leaping from her fingertips. The music just makes sense to him. Barely five years old, it's a revelation that will shape the rest of his life.

James knows he owes his gran a debt of gratitude. "She was amazing," he says. "She'd just play anything by ear – any popular song or kind of old-fashioned war time song. I think that's where it first

came from in terms of playing music." Having such a huge source of inspiration was invaluable in a family that he describes as anything but creative. However, he admits that having such focus has been difficult at times. Like many musicians, he's known what it's like to scrape by. So has a more traditional career path ever tempted him? "I just don't think it's conceivable because I always had to do music," he says. "It just never interested me at all, so it's not a rebellion thing."



*“Be careful who you trust.*

*Be careful who you piss off.”*



A decade ago, James was tipped for success as the singer and guitarist of indie outfit, My Luminaries. The songs were raw, melodic, naïve: all late nights and heartbreaks. They opened Glastonbury, toured Europe and were offered deals by numerous record labels. Everyone expected greatness. But somewhere along the line, things began to fall apart. After countless shows, two line-up changes and one accomplished but flawed album, the band disintegrated.

James admits it was with both sadness and relief that he finally called time on what had been such a defining element of his identity. Part of the problem had been his drive to succeed. “I had so much vision when I was in a band, I was so domineering,” he explains. “I let it go to my head.” Faced with an overwhelming amount of personal scrutiny, he’d hidden behind an identity he never truly believed in. “Early on I tried to embrace that and be someone who I felt I should be. Now I see some of those videos on YouTube and I think “You fucking idiot.” And although he doesn’t have much interest in regret, there are certain choices he’d avoid making again. I ask him if the experience taught him anything. “Loyalty is a big one. I learnt a lot about that. Music isn’t everything.”

A year on from the collapse of the band, James re-emerged with a collection of the finest songs he’d ever written. They were honest, focused and beautifully simple. Under the name Lonesound, he struck out on his own. The following 18 months were spent playing intimate shows and recording the three EPs that were to become his first solo album, “The Great Outdoors”. It’s an enchanting, ambitious body of work that seeks to make sense of the world and the writer’s role in it. Themes of love, loss and the need for belonging are illuminated with delicacy and intelligence. James is proud of the achievement. “I followed my nose and did what I wanted to do,” he explains. “I think the third EP is the most beautifully recorded and arranged.”

But, for now, that’s where his personal song-writing story ends. Despite critical acclaim, the album slipped quietly under the radar and he simply stopped writing. Has this songwriter who promised so much missed his moment?

Sell out. Two dirty little words that every artist dreads. But the world is a tough place for the working musician. In reality, making a living means a compromise between creative integrity and commercial appeal.

Today, James has found renewed purpose in writing for other people. Creating music to order has been a challenge. Tight deadlines, strict briefs and demanding clients have all forced him to embrace new skills and ways of working. But writing an array of music for adverts, stock music and film scores has also given him a huge sense of freedom. Structure has been the key. "It's very liberating," he says. "But it's just a starting point." The whole process has been an unshackling from the pressure to express part of himself in his music. He finds the anonymity profoundly appealing. "That's the thing about the work that I have amassed over the last few years - it's kind of invisible," he explains. "Although it is being heard all over the world." However, he still sees

individuality as an important ingredient for each piece. "Undoubtedly, it will have my stamp on it. There's so much out there, it has to have something of you in there." And it's true. You can hear his personality in the melodies and phrasing; his presence in the gaps between the notes.

With a young family to support, James has also taken up steadier employment lecturing in popular music at the renowned Goldsmiths University. From day one, the experience has been an eye-opener. "When I started, it kind of exploded what I thought about creativity and popular music in general." He puts it down to the raw passion and skill of the next generation of musicians. "Working with loads of really fucking talented students makes me realize that I'm not this, you know, messiah of music that might be unrealized." This newfound perspective has given him a modicum of balance. "It's been really hard at times but it's been really liberating as well," he says. "I'm the happiest I've ever been."



Sacrifice becomes a way of life for many artists. Ambition destroys friendships, splits families and abandons lovers. And all too often, one vital question remains unasked: is the opportunity worth what you stand to lose?



In late 2015, James got a call from Emmy award-winning directors Pete Middleton and James Spinney. Already good friends, they had previously collaborated with James on a short film and were now keen for him, and writing partner Mike Murray, to compose the score for their new documentary, *Notes on Blindness*. Using audio diary extracts, the film charts the experiences of Australian theologian John Hull as he deals with the loss of his sight. With the soundscape such a pivotal part of the narrative, James always knew it would be challenging. But the following months would test the limits of their friendship and bring him close to breaking point.

When I ask about writing for the film, the mood changes instantly. James shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “It wasn’t a pleasurable experience,” he says, choosing his words carefully. “But then I get the impression that many film soundtracks aren’t.” The problem stemmed from Spinney’s desire to retain creative control. “There’s the politics of it – working with a director who in this case has a very keen specific vision.” As time grew short and the brief continued to change, Murray left the project, putting further pressure on James. Finally, after several months of sleepless nights, the last notes were captured and the music approved.

The finished score is a balance between James' ambient electronic textures and traditional orchestral sections written by Spinney. It's a compromise that James did not expect, but on reflection he understands the mistake was his. "I think the thing is I went about it with my ego," he shrugs. "I thought, I've got this opportunity to show myself as a film composer here. And I'm not." Despite James' misgivings, it's a beautiful, subtle and measured score to a film that relies heavily on the interplay between what we see and hear. Thankfully, his friendships remain intact and the film has gone on to universal acclaim. With the luxury of distance, he can, at last, understand the value of the experience. "When I saw it on the BFI Screen, everything just..." he pauses, smiling proudly. "Everything was irrelevant then."





The frost is finally melting and James is ready to write again. Despite all he has seen and done, music still retains that elemental magic. “Music is everywhere. It’s something we’ve evolved with,” he reflects. “It’s something that should never be denied and I think that when you strip away any other expectations or cultural associations, it is what it is. It’s something we bond with and can communicate with.”

Authenticity has always been a struggle for him. “I don’t think I was ever that honest, I think I was always writing from the perspective of who I should be rather than who I am.” He’s never had that unrelenting self-belief you find in so many performers. I tell him how much I admire his lyrical style and he laughs in surprise. “There’s too much fucking rhyme! I’m not a poet. I’ve never had a real interest in words. It’s music that leads me.”

When I ask him about the future, he pauses, deep in thought, and I appreciate the weirdness of the occasion. James has truly arrived

at a turning point. “In terms of identity, I think it is changing, it changes all the time.” He shrugs, “I suppose you are who you say you are really?!”

Fatherhood has given him a new sense of self; an identity he’s proud to show the world. “I think that’s where it has to go from now on. It has to be simple and distilled and honest.” The next challenge is to rediscover his voice. “I’m still finding it,” he says. “Now whether I can really put faith in that voice is the question.”

And he has a new muse – she’s sleeping soundly in the kitchen. His daughter, Emeline, has helped him understand the vital role music has to play in the world. So, what part does music play in their relationship? “I just sing instead of talk to her,” he says, smiling warmly. Together with his wife Jo, he will raise her with structure, encouragement and unbounded love. “I think it’s okay to just be a good father and be proud of that,” he says. At last, he understands that there’s more to life than music.

*“I think that was the problem,  
not having any faith.”*

JAMES EWERS



WORDS: DYLAN PERRYMAN  
IMAGES: SAUL PERRYMAN