

JAMESBLAKE

story / HEATHER SEIDLER (photo courtesy of Universal Republic)

REVEREND OF A NEW DRUM & BASS DOCTRINE

Listening to James Blake for the first time is like finding a great smoky mountain amid a flat suburban cul-de-sac somewhere deep in the Valley. You may be 100 miles outside the Sierra Madres, but in the rich pitch-blackness, you swear you've discovered high cliffs and jagged peaks.

To listen to Blake is not just to hear something new, in the sense that Blake knows how to command pacing and negative space, but also to *feel* something new, in the sense that even the lack of music ineluctably affects you with the spaces in between, revealing a subliminal peak at what hides at the heart of his music and its strategic silences.

To curious fans and critics alike, the British electronic wunderkind's debut full-length album, *James Blake*, is considered one of the best of 2011. Perhaps one of the greatest of the decade. Blake's fast-moving career has been distinguished not only by hefty amounts of hype, but also by the 23-year-old's astonishing ability to exceed all expectations. It's clear from the first track that it's not all hot air. The album is special. However confronted with far more media than we can process, do we know how to experience innovation as anything other than a product to be disseminated and mass consumed? Despite all the media frenzy surrounding Blake, there is still a way of relating to his music that allows for surprises and vulnerability.

"Do I feel vulnerable when I'm performing? Um, yeah I do. But then, I feel vulnerable when I'm playing anything really. In my life, I am vulnerable," Blake reveals.

One gets the feeling that Blake puts a really deep thing inside on display, but it's totally secret, while still completely showcasing and celebrating it as it is. In all its open spaces and sonic bigness, it's also the casual pride of his music that has brought him so much attention. "I'm really intent on being proud of everything I've done and when I finish something, I must feel like it has longevity," he says. "And when I look back on it, I want to

think that it's one of the best things I've done, really, in a long line of things that I could have made at that time."

The eponymous album isn't generic nor is it mainstream, it's a tightly configured, subtle work that gains traction through repetitious, circular builds and the stark power of fragmented language. It's also an album loosely steeped in nuanced gospel, clearly a departure from his previous three EPs, by virtue of rendering a whole different sonic playground for himself. His hypnotic, pitch-shifted vocals fold and unfold, beneath minimalistic beats and sparse but propulsive melodies. The ever-present sub-bass creeps up on you and straddles the divide of broad, sweeping crescendos.

"I think that the crescendo thing is something that probably comes from my love of gospel if anything," admits Blake. "The tension and release that I got from early Rev. James Cleveland. Without a room full of excitable people and an amazing guy leading and giving a sermon with a massive gospel choir, you can't really emulate that in dance music, or in any other kind of music for that matter. But, I think whatever that feeling is, is the same kind of feeling I got when I first did '*Never Learned to Share*.' That isn't to say that it's achieved anywhere near what those kind of people achieved, but at least I can have a feeling of this kind of sudden gut wrenching elation that you can't really get or I can't really find any other way."

In observing his amalgamated music, you get the impression that it's Blake's intention to let each lyric live by whatever interpretation it receives. "I wouldn't really think of them as lyrics straight away," Blake explains. "They'd be poems and then a month later I'd record and mess around with them—very often I wouldn't keep them in their original form, just by editing & manipulating a different part. So something like '*To Care (Like You)*' was kind of a weird structure. When it started it was much more of a flowing poem and I just deconstructed it and made it sound better phonetically. Even though the song makes much less sense, those

lyrics actually kind of follow on from each other in a strange phonetically rhyming way. By that process you come out with quite a strange sort of structure."

To Care (Like You) and *I Mind* are the two most traditionally crafted 'dance' songs, as they work with the downbeat, subtly composed template of his stuff from *Klavierwerke*. Though the whole album has been mostly typecast as dubstep, or hailed as hybrid post-dubstep, dubpop, electronic soul, Electro-R&B—and a plethora of other bundled sub-genre labels, it is not a dubstep album. It is clear Blake isn't an actual dubstep musician, but rather someone who was largely fascinated and shaped by dubstep. "I was deeply involved in it for two or three years. It's a genre that has kind of informed the way I produce and write."

His triffecta of jazzy finger work, deconstructed vocals and handcrafted rhythms has made fans insecure of the limited and ill-defined noun called dubstep. With ease Blake skirts around musical genres, kicking down the walls surrounding contemporary bass music. But who really cares which pot his music falls into. Blake's unorthodox sonic structures exist entirely beyond the purview of dance music.

Perhaps due in part to Blake's multi-faceted musical diet of folk, electro, soul, classical composers, jazz pianists and gospel singers. Blake has created a rich, eerie alternative spectral pop, which may not be pop-y or commodified-cool enough to be the 'Next Big Thing' on the *Billboards*, but which has the potential to be the greatest new British export of the past few years. As undeniably talented as he is, it's hard to imagine any one of the songs off Blake becoming a platinum hit single played on mainstream radio, yet it seems that's precisely the kind of the future he is being groomed for. Despite the concise, Pavlovian engineering of hit singles, popular music is a wholly unpredictable enterprise.

Before the album was made, Blake's natural territory was behind the decks, towering over the DJ booth. Blake had become a cornerstone of the dubstep DJ scene. "I find with DJing I can definitely show different parts of me than with the stuff I can do on a stage. Because I'm really setting up my source of what I can do as an artist, like singing and playing the piano... where all that stuff comes from. When I'm DJing, I feel like you can kind of [pace] up the party a little bit more. It's fun in a different way."

Blake hasn't played many shows stateside. In fact, at the time of my interview with him, it was his first round



performing in Los Angeles. We sat on the rooftop of the Masonic Lodge at the historical Hollywood Forever Cemetery. It was a ready-made beautiful summer day, masking all the secretly-working rot in the graves around us. In person, he is a polite and reluctant alterna-rockstar. I ask how he feels about his debut in LA. "Well it's a lot nicer here. There's palm trees and there's people to look at," he says with a chuckle. "But I mean, it's not this place that made me write my music. At the same time, I'm having a great time."

Raised in Enfield, London as an only child, Blake has been playing piano since he was six. The album, recorded in his bedroom, was released as-is, despite the plea of his label reps to have it produced in a studio. His smoothly chopped R&B backlines and new take on old R&B archetypes is just part of his genius. It's his goal to make dance music that actually connects with people in the way a soul record does. It's evident in his live performances that he has achieved that connection. In fact, I hadn't felt the full grip of the album until experiencing its dark electric gospel live. The shadowy aura of specific baselines ratcheted up to a trance-like wallop, at certain points, it was borderline overpowering. Until you realized that it was perfect—however it was played.

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Blake's use of vocoder does not automatically make him the electronic Bon Iver, as he's been touted to be, but lately his songwriting process has been evolving into a more intimate human style that aligns him with Justin Vernon. "There's a song I've been playing live which is unadulterated, in that when I first recorded it I had a certain sort of poem and I just improvised the whole thing really, including the piano part. I recorded the whole thing together at the same time. I just looked at the lyrics and thought, right, I'm not gonna think about it, I'm just gonna sing it & play it. I believe that's what most people do [laughs], but I just never worked like that. It all just came out at once. I kind of had to be in a mind-state where I really believed the lyric, where I really believed what I was doing. When I was in that mind-state I came out with a cool song. I haven't changed it at all, in fact, the original recording was done on a Dictaphone and it might be the one I release."

Having become a fixture of blogs and magazines, Blake has as well become the obscure object of desire to a large amount of young, lovelorn ladies. Is there someone or something he finds himself thinking of often, if not daily? "Well, everyone thinks about the same thing, really," he discloses. "They think about meeting people—they think about when they're gonna fall in love or if they're not going to. Or how pissed they are that they're not in love anymore. But I'm not. I don't know, weirdly, I anticipate emotion as a thing to use. I remember a time at University, when being fairly inexperienced—not that I'm hardened now—but being fairly inexperienced at the time, I kind of got blown off, you know, not treated very well by this girl and I took it to heart. But then I realized that, at the time it was actually an incredibly useful thing to have happened to me, because I came out and wrote an amazing thing that I felt was the best thing I'd done for months. So, even in the moment of extreme bitterness, I was kind of reveling in this sort of silver lining which was the fact that I was about to write something very good."

In closing, here's a fan-quote overheard at his show:
 Q: "How do I get James to be my boyfriend?"
 A: "Tell him you have a cool hall with a cool ghost in it. And then see if he wants to sing to it." ▀

we love rock and roll put a dime in my jukebox baby...



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collection on one person. Mix it up.

Coco: We're totally opposite. I'm really about basics. I love black. It's my favorite color. And I really like simple shapes and 50s beatnik kind of stuff. I'll wear my faded t-shirts and I really love coats. I'm super simple. I like taking super simple J.Crew pieces, and busting them up. I like the straight forward, simple beat poet look. Kind of freaked out and destroyed in a little way. That's my favorite jam.

Jem: Graveyard chic. That was the old look. I don't know what the new look is. Maybe a modern-take. Just little skinny long legs and tight pants. I used to wear ascots. But now just leather jacket and tight black pants. Just rock and roll. Yeah, I don't know. Plaid shirts?

How does it feel to have Sympathy for the Record Industry putting out your newest release Wicked Will?

Coco: We talked about it since Long Gone John released our first album, *Shake the Dust*, in 2006 and then he went kind of dormant for a couple of years. He was moving and reorganizing the catalog. He has over 780 releases. So it's really a substantial piece of recent musical history over the last 20 years. So it was a great thing to be a part of. So I kept pestering him about when he's coming back and it just turned out that we had an album at the same time he was ready so we did it together. We single-handedly resurrected Sympathy for the Record Industry. We're not done. We have our very own imprint now, our very own record label called Fond Object. So we get to keep bringing stuff back from Sympathy. And we get to keep putting out new stuff on our new label. It's a new era but we don't want Sympathy and that catalog and those artists forgotten. Without Sympathy there would be no White Stripes. There wouldn't be all this stuff that impacted the last 15 years of modern rock and roll, of which there have been some great artists. So when you tell the kids these days with their ipods and everything and you're like, "Do you know Sympathy?". They're all like, "No." And that's not acceptable. So we're gonna find a way to bring back at least the good parts. 780 plus releases, there's bound to be some garbage and there is. But the stuff that's great in there, it can't go. The digital generation can't go without it and I'll see to it. way. We're able to be more direct with each other and more direct with the people we work with cause it's like "boom".

Do you guys have any celebrity crushes?

Coco: I have a crush on Oscar Werner from *Jules et Jim*. I don't live in the modern days. I like his face. I think he's Austrian. He's dead.

Poni: Brian Jones. He's dead. He's murdered.

Jem: Monica Bellucci.

Poni: Jem likes the Italian ladies with the big boobies. ▀



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