

20 questions for ... singer-songwriter-pianist Brendan James

Singer-songwriter and pianist Brendan James has had the sweet experience of recording "Let the River Run," the Oscar-winning song with Carly Simon herself for the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. His first CD, 2008's "The Day is Brave," a stripped-down collection of songs showcasing his voice and piano-playing.

After a cross-country tour consisting of 40 states, 330 restaurants, 210 hotels and one boat (John Mayer's Mayercraft Cruise), James returns with his self-titled second album, which stays true to his artistic sensibilities while upping the ante with new musical textures, including synths, strings and even a few drum loops. Just before touring for his latest CD, "Brendan James," he settled down for a moment to answer 20 Questions.

1. The latest book or movie that made you cry?

On a whim the other day I rented "Tyson," a film about Mike Tyson's rise and fall. He tells his entire life story — how he grew up on the streets of Brooklyn, fell in and out of jail and had no real role models to speak of. Then he discusses how he met his mentor and coach, and how deeply it changed him from the inside out. He kept crying as he spoke. It's such a beautiful yet painful story of a kid with unparalleled raw talent, emotionally handicapped by his upbringing. I'd really recommend this one.

2. The fictional character most like you?

Ever since I was little I've loved climbing on things — trees, rocks, sides of buildings, anything I could find, really —

then jumping off of them and flying through the air. I broke my leg, my arm, then a wrist, an ankle and four fingers... not to mention stitches in my head on three occasions. So I'd have to say Spider Man. The problem, of course, being that he actually has super powers.

3. The greatest album, ever?

This is always a funny question. It's so subjective. I can tell you that I think Paul Simon's "Graceland" is truly a masterpiece, though, and rarely do I hear otherwise. This album makes me happy, it makes me think, and most importantly it brings the sounds of the world to my ears, reminding me how beautiful and hopeful people can be.

4. "Star Trek" or "Star Wars"?

Definitely "Star Wars." Chewbacca is one of the coolest and most loveable fictional characters ever invented. I used to imitate him pretty well. I can't anymore.

5. Your ideal brain food?

The news or a good movie. To a fault, I love the serious. I've been told that I think too much, plan too much, look at things too seriously, so maybe dense material distracts that tendency. I pretty much need to be bribed to watch a romantic comedy.

6. You're proud of this accomplishment, but why?

I'm proud of the friends I've made and kept. Relationships can be very challenging to uphold. At my funeral, I don't need much. No choirs singing requiems, no motorcades of black limousines, maybe just a few people to tell some funny stories that only close friends would remember.

7. You want to be remembered for ...?

For several albums worth of good songs, exploratory production. For performances that moved audiences big or small, and for consistency and persistence, and honesty. I also want to be remembered as a good person, a good husband and a good father, when the time comes.

8. Of those who've come before, the most inspirational are?

Bach, Jack Kerouack, Leonardo Da Vinci, Leo Tolstoy, Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan, Khalil Gibran, Daniel Quinn, Martin Luther King, Joni Mitchell, Eva Cassidy and my mother.

9. The creative masterpiece you wish bore your signature?

I think it would be Peter Gabriel's song, "Don't Give Up." From its time signature, to its bass line, to its haunting lyrics, this song really heals.

10. Your hidden talents ...?

I'm big on games of coordination like pool, ping pong and foosball. I love sports of all kinds, really. I'm also pretty good at frying an egg, and sleeping through the night.

11. The best piece of advice you actually followed?

Never was a piece of advice more pivotal to me than when a friend and local music teacher in New Hampshire suggested that I try to write a song. That advice defined my entire path in life. Someone knew I was a songwriter before I did.

12. The best thing you ever bought, stole or borrowed?

When I got my first record deal I went right to a piano store. It was a big moment for me. Up to that point I always had to play somebody else's piano. It was a good feeling to no longer have



to do that.

13. You feel best in Armani or Levis or ...?

Definitely Levis. I'm almost always wearing Levis. They make me feel tougher, somehow. Did I just write that?

14. Your dinner guest at the Ritz would be?

I'd definitely put Barack Obama on this list, to figure him out for myself, and see if I really want to keep pushing for him. I'd also want Johnny Depp there to tell some interesting stories, Natalie Portman because I know she's been there and back, Justin Timberlake to joke around with, Rick Bayless to tell us why the food is good or bad, Willie Nelson to learn about life and music, Jane Goodall and Greg Mortenson to make us all better people, and Bill Gates to maybe do the same and also to pick up the bill. Probably Jon Stewart and Conan O'Brien too, just to help keep it all interesting and hilarious.

15. Time travel: where, when and why?

This is an awesome question. I'm torn between seeing what it was really like in the past or what it's going to be like in the future. I'm going to have to say the past though, because if I went to the future I'd see what we'd become, what the earth looks like, how many billions of us

there are going to be, and upon returning home to 2010 I'd be so frustrated that I couldn't stop it from happening, that I'd go a little crazy.

So I'd go back to the beginning of the Renaissance, live as a courier in Paris or something, drink a lot of wine, hang out by the river and try to create something new.

16. Stress management: hit man, spa vacation or Prozac?

Watching movies always works for me. Relaxing at home, drinking a little, or hanging out down in my studio, or if I really can't shake the stress, I zone out to a healing meditation album by Choying Drolma. That's kind of my secret weapon.

17. Essential to life: coffee, vodka, cigarettes, chocolate, or ...?

I gotta say Coca-Cola. Yeah I know it's full of chemicals and sugar and there's a good chance it'll give me cancer by the age 40, but damn does it taste good. Coca cola, cheeseburgers, and Levis jeans — all American staples that I'll always love.

18. Environ of choice: city or country, and where on the map?

This career has given me the chance and the guts to move to the big cities, and I wouldn't trade my time in New York or L.A. for anything. Those cities have taught me more than I ever

learned in school. But I know that, deep down, I'm a country boy. There's still no better feeling for me than getting lost in woods, far away from honking horns and busy people.

19. What do you want to say to the leader of your country?

First I would tell him to hire some new financial advisers. I think some risky moves were made with this country's money that may not be panning out perfectly. Then I would tell him to stay cool, and that we've got his back. I guess I'm one of the 47 percent who still feel lucky to have an intelligent, motivated and open-minded president.

20. Last but certainly not least, what are you working on now?

Right now I'm really busy with the release of my new album. I worked hard to get it finished, and now I'm doing the footwork to get it in as many hands as possible. Times are crazy, but fun. I love touring and I'm about to leave for a few months.

I'm also busy writing new songs for another album that I hope to release in the spring. Life is good, though. I'm eager to see what's around the corner.

—From MCT

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