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Kings of the Road

MY MORNING JACKET

and the Summer of

LIVE

By John McAlley

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELODIE McDANIEL

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LONG HAILED BY MANY AS AMERICA'S FINEST LIVE BAND, **MY MORNING JACKET** HAVE WEATHERED ROAD CASUALTIES, FAILED ROMANCES, AND EVEN ELECTRICAL STORMS TO RELEASE THEIR EVIL URGES. HAVE JIM JAMES AND HIS 'BUNCH OF DUDES' FINALLY MADE THE ALBUM OF THEIR LIVES?

THE JAMES GANG

By **John McAlley**

Photography by **Melodie McDaniel**

Clockwise from left:
Bo Koster, James Hallahan,
Carl Broemel, Tom
Blankenship, and Jim
James, photographed
in Nunnally, Tennessee,
March 4, 2008





Jim James

JIM JAMES LOVES TO DO VOICES. He peppers his conversation with crisp impersonations of the jokers who populate his world. Like the suits who go platinum-gaga at the arrival of each new album by his band, My Morning Jacket. “It’s time to go to the next level, *ravity-ravity-ravity!*” James says, bending his faint Southern drawl into biz-speak yammer. “This album’s gonna crack things *wiiide* open, like an ice-cold can!” • Or the promoters—journalists, even—who can’t see past his group’s image as bearded yahoos from Kentucky. “It’s the longhair band!” James sputters like a huckster. “Come see these fuckin’ crazy hillbilly rockers, with their weed-smokin’, whiskey-drinkin’ jams!”

If hair down to your ass and facial kudzu were the only prerequisites for being a member of one of America’s most fiery if still unheralded rock bands, a quarter of the population of Louisville would qualify. So when the city’s hardest-hitting exports since Muhammad Ali gather for a late February dinner at a place called Bourbons Bistro, it’s surprising to find them looking like something closer to the metrosexuals in Maroon 5—excepting James’ semi-wild scruff and drummer Patrick Hallahan’s curtain of locks.

Although they’re being treated like local celebrities (when a round of drinks is sent to the table, Hallahan asks the waitress to “throw in a couple of tanks of gasoline, too”), the fact is, only two-fifths of My Morning Jacket’s lineup still live in the area, and if the hugs are any indication, tonight marks a reunion of sorts. Hallahan and bassist Tom Blankenship made the journey from their nearby homes, but guitarist Carl Broemel traveled from Nashville, and James—well, it’s unclear where he beamed in from, since, in his own words, he’s been “homeless for a couple of years.” As his bandmates divvy up an appetizer of fried green tomatoes, keyboardist Bo Koster is at home in L.A.—a no-show for this first sit-down to support *Evil Urges*, their fifth studio album.

Throw in a few more geographic twists: Unlike the first three albums of bourbon-and-reverb-soaked rock that made MMJ’s reputation and were recorded in dirty lo-fi on a farm 30 miles east of Louisville, the songs for *Evil Urges* were roughed out by James in a cabin in Virginia, rehearsed by the band to a high polish in the shadows of Colorado’s Pikes Peak, and recorded last November with spic-and-span clarity in a midtown Manhattan studio.

Veteran producer/engineer Joe Chiccarelli (the Whites Stripes’ *Icky Thump*, the Shins’ *Winning the Night Away*) cohelmed *Evil Urges* with James and has witnessed firsthand the band’s evolution from timid twang rockers to eclectic virtuosos. His introduction, he remembers with a laugh, came at Austin, Texas’ South by Southwest music festival “five or six years ago. And Jim sang the whole show into a [stuffed animal] bison head! He put it on a mic stand and hid behind it the entire show.”

There’s nothing shy about *Evil Urges*. It explodes the band’s musical DNA in the same way that *Z*, their critically acclaimed 2005 album, did. Predictably, Michael McDonald, cofounder of the band’s label, ATO, thinks MMJ have made their masterpiece. But he also has a hunch that rings true. “I think the world is finally ready for them,” McDonald says. “And I don’t know that it has been in the past.”

At Bourbons Bistro, the James gang find the “next level” talk alien—especially the notion that they may have consciously crafted *Evil Urges*’ vibrant, unapologetically accessible songs in order to raise the stakes in what James calls “da game.”

“Every time we put out a new record, people are like, ‘Expectations are high!’” says James, laughing. “But Carl said it best when we finished the album: It doesn’t matter what record we set out to make this is the record we made. We started with 22 songs, boiled that down to 18, boiled that down to 14. There were songs that I thought for sure would be the cornerstones of the album—you know, like, the fucking opening track—that didn’t make it on the record at all.”

As far as breakthroughs go, James finds what’s happened to his band dizzying enough as it is. “It’s already exceeded our expectations,” he says. “Not to say that we’re trying to push it back, but it’s been weird already.”

Like their tuxedoed appearance on the *Letterman* show, where they were accompanied by the Boston Pops? Their blistering performances at Bonnaroo four years running? The cameo in Cameron Crowe’s film *Elizabethtown*? Or the recent news that their first-ever headlining gig at New York’s Radio City Music Hall—set for June 20, ten days after *Evil Urges*’ release—sold out in 22 minutes?

“Awesome,” James effuses.

Otherworldly?

“Fuckin’ A, for sure.”

WHEN JAMES—MY MORNING JACKET’S LONE songwriter and unspoken leader—is in the conversational mix, his bandmates recede naturally. Not that they’re boozy gossips without him: Over drinks earlier in the day in the lobby bar of Louisville’s landmark Brown Hotel, Broemel, Hallahan, and Blankenship weigh in, but eye the tape recorder as if it were the contents of a stable hand’s shovel at nearby Churchill Downs.

We’re talking about Colorado Springs and the month MMJ spent there last summer working on *Evil Urges*. Without roadies, wives, or girlfriends to distract them, the band encamped at a Rocky Mountain spread called Hideaway Studio, where a rustic ranch served as a frat-style flophouse, a barn doubled as a perfect rehearsal space, a small studio made demo recording possible, and a basketball court got



“CARL SAID IT BEST WHEN WE FINISHED THE ALBUM: IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT RECORD WE SET OUT TO MAKE—THIS IS THE ONE WE MADE.” —JIM JAMES



“Crazy hillbilly rockers” invade Austin, Texas’ SXSW festival in 2002 (top) and 2008

out the good times that power chords and bourbon nightcaps couldn’t.

As if the voltage the band was generating through daylong practice sessions wasn’t enough, electrical storms rolled in every afternoon at five, bringing things to a crackling halt. “We were dealing with weather all the time up there,” says Broemel. “We had all this equipment set up, and with the high elevation and the lightning, we thought it was going to get fried.”

The band watched the fronts come through with their feet up on the ranch-house porch. “Oh, it was horrible—and magical,” says Hallahan, remembering the hour they spent tracking a tornado careening toward them over Pikes Peak.

“Yeah, every now and then, it looked like it was gonna come get us,” recalls Blankenship, a.k.a. “Two-Tone Tommy.”

A storm. It’s a perfect metaphor for how forceful MMJ’s live act has grown through ten years of touring. Eddie Vedder got his first hint of their stage ferocity the morning after friends caught them live. “I remember a tangible electricity was still pulsing through the people who had seen them the night before,” he says.

In 2006, Pearl Jam invited MMJ to open for them on nearly two dozen dates in Europe and the States. Vedder recalls being interviewed backstage during one of MMJ’s first soundchecks: “I was telling the guy how much they reminded me of the Band, whose music was a big influence on me. And as we were talking, through the wall—I thought I was dreaming, but they were playing the Band’s ‘It Makes No Difference.’ So I looked at the cat—‘Okay, interview over’—and ran

out and watched them play it, and it was so, so exciting.” Vedder performed the song with MMJ almost every night thereafter.

For such a famously taut band, only James and Blankenship are charter members. James formed the group in 1998, after he—then a 19-year-old college student who’d fronted but failed to cause a stir with several homegrown bands, including Month of Sundays—landed a deal with West Coast–based indie label Darla Records. James was your typical son of Louisville, a blue-collar kid weaned on Muppets music, metal, and indie rock. The songs he remembers first being transfixed by were “When You Wish Upon a Star” and, curiously, folkie Dan Fogelberg’s quasi-spiritual “The Leader of the Band.” But a record-store slipup at age 14 convulsed his musical life. James and his mother had watched Neil Young perform “Harvest Moon” on *Saturday Night Live*, and struck by the retiring, ethereal quality of late-period Neil, he asked her to buy him the *Harvest Moon* album. Mistakenly, she brought home *Harvest*, Young’s seminal, jagged take on American roots music.

“I was in my bedroom,” James remembers, “and I put it on and thought, ‘Holy shit, what is this?’ ”

My Morning Jacket’s first two albums—1999’s *The Tennessee Fire* and 2001’s *At Dawn*—echoed loudly with the Young influence but were flecked with other colors, too: space twang, R&B, a straight shot of Skynyrd. It was the kind of neo-roots rock that got them mentioned in the same breath with Drive-By Truckers and Kings of Leon, but didn’t reveal the full range of James’ imagination. Personnel shuffles (James’ childhood friend Hallahan signed on in 2002) and endless touring sharpened MMJ into a protean live act. The shows grew woozy and long,

and so did the itinerary: a grinding 143 dates in ’02, 110 in ’03. The warped road life yielded the protracted jams on their critically lauded 2003 major-label debut, *It Still Moves*. (“We look back on that album with good feelings,” says Hallahan. “But we listen to those songs now and are like, ‘Do we really need to play that for 18 minutes straight?’ ”) It also nearly destroyed the band.

“Early on, when you’re given opportunities, you’ve got to take them,” James explains at Bourbons Bistro, about the decision to say yes to gig after gig. “A lot of bands feel that, because there’s the fear that if you don’t, you’ll fall off the face of the earth.”

“You’re going and going and going,” Blankenship adds, “and finally it’s like, ‘What the fuck am I doing?’ ”

“I got so sick at one point,” says James, “I thought I was losing my mind.”

Only three months after the release of *It Still Moves*, the brutal realities of the road had left two casualties, keyboardist Danny Cash and James’ cousin, guitarist Johnny Quaid, whose family farm in Shelbyville, Kentucky, was where the band had recorded their atmospheric epics. (Famously, James’ ghostly vocals were tracked

“WE HAD THIS EQUIPMENT SET UP, AND WITH THE HIGH ELEVATION AND THE LIGHTNING, WE THOUGHT IT WAS GOING TO GET FRIED.” —CARL BROEMEL



Tom Blankenship



Bo Koster

MY MORNING PLAYLIST

Before auditioning for My Morning Jacket, keyboardist Bo Koster crammed for three days. A week or so later, he got a call. “Jim pulled one of those ‘Man, we really liked you, thought you were a good player and all, buuuut...we’d like you to come on tour with us.’ And nothing has changed since,” Koster says, laughing. “Jim is still fucking with me.” Here are Koster’s 12 essential (pre-*Evil Urges*) MMJ tracks.

FROM 1999’s
THE TENNESSEE FIRE
“The Bear”
“I Will Be There When You Die”
“I Think I’m Going to Hell”

FROM 2001’s
AT DAWN
“At Dawn”
“Bermuda Highway”
“Strangulation!”

FROM 2003’s
IT STILL MOVES
“Golden”
“One Big Holiday”
“Steam Engine”

FROM 2005’s
Z
“Wordless Chorus”
“Gideon”
“Dondante”



James Hallahan



Carl Broemel



Mud, sweat, and beers: MMJ save the day.

in a grain silo.) Man, James thought, *is it time for this to just be done? Is it over?*

Goaded by management, the band reluctantly set up open auditions in an L.A. rehearsal space. The first two players to walk in were Broemel and Koster. They knew every song.

“When they came in, we were so fucking burnt,” remembers James, “but they were like kids in a candy store, and their excitement just lifted us.”

Within weeks of that January ’04 audition, the reconstituted My Morning Jacket were back on the road—with a difference. A band known for its endurance and ecstatic energy lost none of either but, with the addition of Broemel (classically trained and a veteran of alternapoppers Silvercrush) and Koster (a Berklee brat whose tastes run from *Kind of Blue* to *Physical Graffiti*), became startlingly tight and versatile, too.

It’s no coincidence that the next set of songs penned by James, for 2005’s *Z*, fearlessly crossed into new stylistic territory. Produced by Radiohead and XTC mentor John Leckie and recorded in woodsy isolation in upstate New York, the album crackled with invention and joyfully leapfrogged from Who-inflected rave-ups and bleating synth pop to dub reggae and churning rock’n’roll.

What had looked to be a breakthrough story with an old-school twist—band pays dues and reaches mass audience with bold fourth album—met a very modern end. Against the band’s wishes, Sony BMG, the conglomerate that distributed *Z*, encoded the album with copy-protection spyware that made consumers who slipped it into their computers vulnerable to hackers. Although the same technology corroded other Sony BMG releases, the corporate callousness was particularly appalling to MMJ’s rootsy fan base. Out of their own pockets, the band financed a disc-replacement program for angry buyers. But the damage was done: MMJ’s best-selling album to date, *Z* has barely passed the 200,000 mark.

“Just another example of major-label stupidity,” says James now. “They shot themselves in the foot; they shot us in the foot.”

THAT ALMOST-FAMOUS AURA DOGS James in Louisville—and, it seems, everywhere else. Over a noontime breakfast the following day, a waitress—blonde, lithe, a few eggs short of a dozen—can’t seem to leave him alone. “Hey, do I know you? How old are you?” she asks on her first unsolicited visit to our table for two.

“THIS RECORD IS WEIRD. SOME SONGS THAT STARTED OUT IN A REALLY POSITIVE SPACE NOW SEEM DESPERATE TO ME.” —JIM JAMES

“Twenty-nine,” he tells her softly. James had a tiny role in the recent Bob Dylan biopic *I’m Not There* (his gorgeous version of “Goin’ to Acapulco” is on the soundtrack), and in his quieter moments, he bears a subtle resemblance—both physical and temperamental—to the film’s late star Heath Ledger.

Ten minutes pass. It’s her again. “Um, can I see your tattoo?”

James warmly obliges. “It’s my guardian angel,” he says, pulling up his sleeve to fully expose the crude line drawing of what he calls a “stick angel” on the inside of his left forearm.

Five minutes later. “Uh,” she says, leaning over James’ Mediterranean omelet, “why are you guys recording your conversation?”

James resists the urge to be evil and instead talks to me about the new album, whose title hints at the risk-taking on the record. For starters, it’s the most emotionally and sonically direct record MMJ have ever made. Then there are the strings—arranged by Beck’s father, David Campbell. And the falsetto synth-funk romps à la *Midnite Vultures*. James’ publisher thinks the songwriter has finally come up with his “wedding song,” and there it is: a tender thing called “Thank You Too.”

It’s a deeply personal collection that alternately broods on and leavens James’ world-weariness with blasts of power and sonorous, philosophic beauty, and will likely disorient the MMJ faithful right out of the gate.

“This record is weird,” James says. “I wrote a lot of the songs when I’d just met someone and was falling in love.... But then the relationship disintegrated, and by the time that happened, it was time to make the record. So some songs that started out in a really positive space now seem desperate to me.”

Producer Chiccarelli was himself taken aback by the record’s adventurousness. “To be honest, I was nervous,” he says. “I thought your basic MMJ fan, who really wants them to be an American rock band, would be put off by the first ten or 12 minutes of the record. Like, ‘What are these guys doing?’”

As idiosyncratic and openhearted as the album is—and as mature as James' writing has grown—it can be hard to locate the singer inside the song. James' keening vocals have, through the years, paid homage to an array of heroes: Neil Young, of course, but also Brian Wilson, Levon Helm, Roger Daltrey, Kermit the Frog (James performed "The Rainbow Connection" at 2007's Lollapalooza). On *Evil Urges*, he channels Prince, George Harrison, and Dylan, too. It makes for thrilling listening, but it's curious that a writer of such distinction remains so elusive as a voice.

Chiccarelli doesn't see it as mimicry, or even homage. "To Jim, everything is color, an emotion, a feeling," he says. "And just as a guitar player would ask, 'I want it to be silky here, so do I go with a Strat with not a lot of distortion or a Les Paul with not much top end?' Jim makes his [vocal] choices based on color or a brushstroke."

Because James, early in his career, notoriously drenched his voice in reverb and stumped even his most literate fans with bluntly cryptic lyrics, it's tempting to assume that, in some ways, he's still in hiding. The whole line of thinking vexes him. "Obviously, there are some lyrics that are interpretive or strange," he says, laughing, "but it was never a conscious decision on my part. Like, 'I'm gonna fuck you up and make you work for it!'"

He's more reflective about the vocals and the range of styles he now writes in: "I don't know. I have friends who've been listening to nothing but Zeppelin since eighth grade. And a lot of musicians are like that, too. 'I'm a rock musician, dude.' That's cool. But at the end of the day, my tastes are very all over the map. I don't see the boundaries in music, so if I'm excited by an OutKast song or some Sam Cooke gospel record, I want to bring that into *my* world."

To the point of singing like them? It's not a choice that, say, Neil Young or Jeff Tweedy would make.

"Totally!" he says. "Most of the time I feel like a very confused person anyway. And I feel like maybe those people have a more concrete identity of who they are. I don't know where I'm living, I don't know what I'm doing, I don't have a relationship. I'm not crying or bitching about it, but I'm saying, most of the time it's not like I have a solid, core sense of who I am."

"To me, music is like theater," he continues. "There's always a bit of performance and craft to it. [With each song] it's like I'm creating a little world at a time."

He's even got a stage name born out of exasperation at open mics in Louisville, when MCs routinely turned his given name—Jim Olliges—into a guttural mess. "It's weird, man," he says. "When people call me Jim James, I don't even *think* of myself as that. But I like it, 'cause I feel like I can be this fictional character sometimes."

Jim Olliges, on the other hand, is longing for nonfiction.

We jump into his black Honda SUV and head toward the Ohio River. Despite its reputation as a sour-mashed mecca of the South, Louisville is as centrally located a city as there is in America, tucked into the nexus of three states. Parked facing the big bend of the Ohio that caps Louisville's north end, we are just a rowboat away from Indiana, visible today through a dusting of snowfall.

It's a beautiful picture—but one that may no longer have a hold on the heart and soul of My Morning Jacket. James' bandmates—all in their late 20s and early 30s—are settled, for the most part. Hallahan, Blankenship, and Broemel are married; Koster has a girlfriend in Austin. But that kind of steady relationship has eluded the guy whose yearning and self-searching is so obvious in, to quote one of his song titles, the way that he sings.

"I don't necessarily feel like I've outgrown Louisville," James says, looking out across the river. "We're all about family, so when I'm [on the road], I do miss the community, and I really miss my parents and friends. But right now it's tough to meet new people and be free of baggage. Part of it is the whole *Jim James* thing. I want to have a wall between it and my personal life, because I don't want someone to just like me because I'm that rock'n'roll dude. But, inevitably, you get that."

Touring continues to be an exhilarating escape—and a life upender. Shortly after the band recorded two November '05 shows at the Fillmore in San Francisco for their *Okonokos* concert CD, James was hospitalized with a devastating case of pneumonia. He spent months recovering.

But playing rock'n'roll is what they do. "None of us have gotten to the point where we're set, where we're, like, loaded financially," James says. "To support ourselves, we have to keep going on the road."

Since he gave up his \$600-a-month Louisville apartment a few years ago, he has largely been living in hotels. New York tops his list of the cities he'd like to explore as a place to settle. But with so much of his life spent grinding it out with My Morning Jacket, he can't—for the time being, at least—rationalize laying out the inevitable two- or three-grand-a-month rent. So limbo remains the state in which he'll live.



A ruff afternoon for the boys in the band.

"RIGHT NOW IT'S TOUGH TO MEET NEW PEOPLE. PART OF IT IS THE WHOLE JIM JAMES THING. I DON'T WANT SOMEONE TO JUST LIKE ME BECAUSE I'M THAT ROCK 'N' ROLL DUDE." —JIM JAMES

HE COULDN'T DO BETTER FOR COMPANIONS, though. It's clear that the members of My Morning Jacket are, in Hallahan's slightly cornball parlance, "brothers." "Just a bunch of dudes" is how James puts it.

If so, the dudes abide. Regardless of record sales, they've earned their rep as America's Radiohead—or, at least, as contemporaries of their compatriots in artistic independence, Wilco and the Flaming Lips. Through years of balls-out performances, they've ascended to star status at Coachella, Lollapalooza, and particularly, Bonnaroo, where their three-hour-plus midnight sets have staggered hordes of 40,000. They'll be back at Bonnaroo in June, the centerpiece of a modest spring and summer itinerary that will pick up momentum in the fall.

For most bands, the road promises infighting and drama. It's different, Bo Koster insists, with My Morning Jacket.

"Being in a band can be weird," he says by phone from L.A. a few days after missing out on the Bourbons Bistro gathering. "People have trouble getting along. It's probably the nature of who goes into bands. They're not necessarily grounded, egoless people... But the closest we've come to an argument in four-plus years is, like [affects a timid, squeaking voice], 'Really? Okay.' That's it. Those are our complications."

That, and the check. They may be big in Belgium (true), but My Morning Jacket still go dutch. Hallahan and James stare at the tab, drowning in numbers.

"I had the skate," says James, reaching for his cash.

"The steak was mine," adds Hallahan, "so I owe more." Blankenship had the "chunky new potato and asparagus tart."

Broemel? He's in a postmeal stupor.

It's the same one cramping Jim James' brain. "Fuck it," he says, pulling the band's corporate card from his wallet. "Charge it to da game." ♡