

A photograph of Jason Mraz playing an acoustic guitar. He is wearing a dark pinstriped suit jacket over a light-colored shirt with a small dark pattern. He has dark, wavy hair and is looking down at his hands on the guitar. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green and yellow, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text 'COVER STORY' is in a red box at the top left. The name 'JASON MRAZ' is in large yellow letters on the right. A quote is in white text on the right. The author's name 'BY JANE BIANCHI' is at the bottom right.

COVER STORY

JASON MRAZ

Everyone's favorite mellow fellow returns with a new album that doesn't disappoint.

BY JANE BIANCHI

It's tough not to crack a smile at a lyric like, "We can keep chillin' like ice cream fillin'." If Jason Mraz hasn't already won you over with his humorous wordplay, sunny vocals, and everything's-gonna-be-all-right attitude, prepare to be charmed. Read on to find out how this Broadway wannabe ended up cranking out guitar pop.

DELIGHTFUL DETOUR

Jason Thomas Mraz was born on June 23, 1977, in Mechanicsville, Virginia. A self-described "drama geek" and "singing fool," Mraz first dreamed of being a theater star in high school, and even studied at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York. "I thought maybe I'd do musicals, or perform on cruise ships," he said. But the theater world, which involves tons of auditioning, was too competitive for Mraz's taste, and while he was praised for his clean-toned falsetto, his acting and dancing skills were not the best. "So I took up the guitar, thinking, by the time I'm forty, I'll rock," he said.

Unsure of what to do next, Mraz did some soul-searching. "I heard this voice that said, 'Go to California.' So I got in my truck, turned on Willie Nelson's 'On the Road Again,' and drove to the West Coast." He landed in San Diego in 1999, where he began putting together his own songs and playing at local coffee shops. By getting a weekly gig at a hot-spot called Java Joe's, Mraz met drummer Toca Rivera, who still plays percussion for him today, and they began performing as a duo. Mraz's popularity spread north from San Diego to the Los Angeles area, where he earned attention from record labels.

TAKING OFF

In 2002 Mraz signed with Elektra Records. Through the label he was introduced to producer John Alagia, who was known for his work with the Dave Matthews Band and John Mayer. That same year Alagia helped Mraz craft his smash debut, *Waiting for My Rocket to Come*. Recorded in three two-week periods, the album blends rock, country, folk, jazz, and even hip-hop (Mraz scat-raps on a few tracks). "The outcome was brighter than I could have imagined," said Mraz. With the energy of a jam band and the sensitivity of a poet, Mraz created his own signature sound of breezy, conversational, acoustic pop. The record went platinum, with the help of his catchy first single, "The Remedy (I Won't Worry)," an upbeat song about his friend's triumph over cancer. Two other successful singles,

"You and I Both" and "Curbside Prophet," followed, and the album's positive vibe and sing-along choruses propelled him into the national spotlight.

Mraz then spent a lot of time touring with acts like Alanis Morissette and even the legendary Rolling Stones to promote the album. "I didn't write another song for almost a year," said Mraz. "I started thinking, *What if I've lost it?*" But in 2004, while playing guitar and goofing around in a room with some old friends, he found his inspiration again. The result was his sophomore album, *Mr. A-Z* (a play on his last name), released in 2005. The record features two popular singles, "Wordplay" and "Geek in the Pink," along with Mraz's first duet, the funny "Did You Get My Message?" sung with Rachael Yamagata. While the style of the music didn't change much from the first record, the sound did. Mraz teamed up with U2-producer Steve Lillywhite, who recorded all the tracks live. "He captured a real flow," said Mraz.

ACT III

Following this whirlwind of success, Mraz took some time off. "My second album was written mostly in hotel rooms and on planes, and it was very much about Jason Mraz," he explained. "I wanted to feel like a grown-up for a few minutes. So I went backpacking and to Europe and India, and through that experience new songs started to come out—and this time, they weren't about me. They were about the world."

The results became his 2008 album, *We Sing. We Dance. We Steal Things*, which was originally released as a trio of EPs, each individually packaged with bonus alternate versions of songs. While the first chart-climbing single, "I'm Yours," is as spare and acoustic as a Jack Johnson beach tune, most of the album is punched up with funky horns, drum loops, and even choirs. And this time there's not one but two duets: James Morrison, an English singer-songwriter, contributes some vocals and Colbie Caillat, the California performer known for her radio-friendly single "Bubbly," also joins Mraz on a track.

Whether he's rocking out with others or singing solo, Mraz is a perfectionist about the finished product. "When I record demos, I put them on in my car and drive so I can analyze them. I try to hear what's missing and figure out how I can make them better," said Mraz. His perfectionism has certainly paid off, but when he hits the stage he leaves his hard work behind and simply has fun. "I love taking a nap right before I perform, because then I wake up and don't know where I am," he said. "It makes me goofy, and I like that." **MA!**