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THE GRASCAL'S

JAMIE JOHNSON

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The Grascals'



Jamie Johnson

The Left-Handed Tenor Singer from Milan, Indiana

By Casey Henry

Jamie Johnson opened his front door and I stepped into his living room as two Boston Terriers lunged toward me, barking their little heads off. "They don't bite," he assured me, smiling. Jamie bribed Sueme and Rosie Bouquet with treats to distract them, while he and I descended into the basement rec room for our interview.

Earlier in the day, Jamie, singer and guitar player with two-time IBMA Entertainers of the Year The Grascals, had just finished recording his vocals for the band's new CD, *Keep On Walkin'*, to be released this month on Rounder. They had been recording for a couple weeks and he was glad to be finished. We had originally planned our interview for the night before, but Jamie got held up in the studio, working on vocal tracks with the album's very special guest, Vince Gill.

Vince's appearance on the recording came about almost serendipitously. Back in December, the Grascals played the Grand Ole Opry on the same night as Vince. As it happened, they had recently been trying to figure out who to invite as a guest on the album. When Jamie found himself standing backstage next to the country star, he thought: *Wow, why not have Vince Gill on it? How cool is that?* "So I just asked him," Jamie recalls. "He said, 'Sure. Give me a call. You got my number.'"

Singing the Aubrey Holt tune "Sad Wind Sighs" with Vince was a real honor for Jamie. "I learned so much watching him," Jamie says. "He's very particular in the studio. He wants it right." Gill doesn't believe in tuning vocals (correcting the pitch on a less-than-perfect take with a computer program). "I think that's classy," comments Jamie. "I've talked to him on the phone the last three or four days in a row, becoming more friends than just being worried about the recording."

Initially, Jamie was the least well-known member of the Grascals. Hailing from Milan, IN, also the home of singer/songwriter Aubrey Holt, he came to bluegrass relatively late in life, when he was almost twenty. His older brother Brad was a huge Osborne Brothers fan. "He absolutely worshipped the ground Bobby and Sonny walked on," Jamie says.

Then, the unthinkable happened: Brad passed away in a tragic accident. To keep his spirit close, Jamie took all Brad's Osborne Brothers LPs and put them on tape, to listen to in his car as he commuted back and forth to college.

Bluegrass grew on Jamie. He started singing along with Bobby in the car. Eventually his roommate at the University of Louisville said to him, "Dang, you sound like them people!" Jamie asked, "Is that good?" The roommate replied, "If that's what you want to sound like."

And Jamie *did* want to sound like that. "I thought that was the coolest thing in the world," he remembers. "I loved Bobby Osborne's voice. I didn't know I had a tenor voice. I didn't know what tenor was. I just heard that note I liked, and I went to that."

Brad, Jamie's late brother, had also been a fan of the Boys

from Indiana. Living in the same town with Aubrey Holt and his brothers, who founded the Boys in 1973, the Johnson siblings had grown up with the Holt kids. Aubrey's son Tony roomed with Jamie's oldest brother Lee back in Milan. Tony taught Jamie to sing harmony. "I just kept asking questions," Jamie says. "When I first started singing, I'd just sing as high as I could for as long as I could and hold them notes. Tony was the one that said, 'Calm down. You don't have to be the highest guy. You gotta sing quality. Get the tone. Tone is key.' That's really where I honed whatever craft I have."

Though he graduated with an associate's degree in electronic engineering and got a job at a steel company, Jamie couldn't get bluegrass off his mind. "I bought a left-handed mandolin," he says. "Boy, was that a disaster! I played mandolin, not ever having a first lesson. I just chopped. They always told me I had a good chop! I thought I was doing something big when I took a break, you know, like winning the hundred-yard dash in every track meet! Even though they'd have that smile on their faces like, 'Aw, poor little feller.' It didn't bother me any."

In 1992, Jamie, Tony Holt, and Harlan Gabbard (son of Harley Gabbard, legendary Dobroist in the Boys From Indiana) formed the Wildwood Valley Boys, joined by Tim Roark and Lonnie Feller. They often practiced in Tony's basement. Aubrey must have overheard them and liked what he heard, because when his brothers Jerry (bass) and Tom (mandolin) retired from the Boys, he asked Jamie and Tony to take their places.

"My first show was Jekyll Island, GA, in 1994, playing mandolin," Jamie recalls. "We backed up Chubby Wise. He said, 'All right, mandolin man, take a break,' and I took a break. When it was my turn again, he never asked me to take another break. I taught him!" he laughs ruefully at the memory.

By now, Jamie had made the acquaintance of his future best friend, Terry Eldredge. Before his death, Jamie's brother Brad had met Terry at a festival in Florida. "Man, that guy sounds like Bobby Osborne, too!" he'd reported back to Jamie. Terry's name stuck in Jamie's head, and a few months later, when he ran into Terry at an Indiana festival, he introduced himself.

"He remembered my brother 'cause it was just a few months after he'd met him," Jamie says. "I told him Brad had passed away. He got teared up. That's how cool Terry Eldredge is. He felt what I was feeling. I thought, 'I want to be like him!'"

Jamie met Terry again shortly thereafter during the International Bluegrass Music Association's annual convention, held that year in Owensboro, KY. Though he barely knew Jamie, Terry took him around to all the hospitality rooms and introduced him to folks. "He took me under his wing," Jamie says. "He said, 'Any time you wanna come down to Nashville, you can stay at my house. Just call me.'" And Jamie, being the kind of person who will always take you up on an offer, did just that.

The first night Jamie came to Nashville to visit, Terry was playing on the Grand Ole Opry with the Osborne Brothers. Though Jamie couldn't make it to the show, he listened to it on the radio in his car, as he waited to meet Terry in a Shoney's parking lot. "They sang 'Pathway of Teardrops,' and I sat there and bawled," he remembers. "[I thought,] 'Oh my God, I'm gonna meet him; I'm gonna hang out with him; this is great!'"

Jamie had so much fun and met so many people on that trip that he quickly realized, "This is where I need to be." As of this January, he's lived in Nashville for ten years.

When he first moved to town, Jamie got a job in the sales department of a steel company, and sang on demo recordings here



Jamie Johnson and his brother, Brad, who inspired him to start singing and playing bluegrass.

and there. Terry Eldredge was playing with The Sidemen (the house band at Nashville's famed Station Inn) at the time, and when Dobro player Gene Wooten got too ill to continue singing tenor, Terry asked Jamie to fill in. When Jamie joined the The Sidemen, it was the first step in the eventual formation of the Grascals, but in the intervening years, he also got to play with pioneering producer and songwriter Gail Davies. "She heard me at the Station Inn and liked the way I sang," Jamie says. "I played for the first time on the Grand Ole Opry with Gail. I'll never forget her for that." Gail also used Jamie on *Caught in the Webb: A Tribute to the Legendary Webb Pierce*, the critically acclaimed CD she produced.

Singing together at the Station Inn every Tuesday, Jamie and Terry polished their vocal blend. One night, fiddler Jimmy Mattingly, who was between gigs at the time, walked in and heard them. Though he had never met Jamie before, he asked, "Any of y'all ever thought of getting a band together?" Thus, Jimmy Mattingly served as catalyst for the Grascals. Founding members were Jamie, Terry, Jimmy, and David Talbot on banjo; Terry Smith on bass and Danny Roberts on mandolin joined in short order.

Rounder Records signed the Grascals on the strength of the demos they recorded, but their career was given a large boost when Dolly Parton hired them. Jimmy Mattingly had played with Dolly for years, and one day she happened to be in the same studio where the Grascals were recording. She was looking for a bluegrass band to back her up for a tour, and they turned out to be the perfect choice.

With Dolly, the Grascals found themselves playing in front of huge crowds every night, fans who may not have heard bluegrass before. "The experience, and what she did for the Grascals, was priceless," Jamie says. "We went from playing for 150 people at a club to ten or twenty thousand people a night. I learned so much. A guy named Joe that ran the stage told me, 'If you talk any faster on that stage you're going to become an auctioneer. You've gotta slow down!' I was so scared. He said, 'Always remember, talk like you're talking to one person and telling them the story. Then the rest of them will get it.' So that's what I do. I try to make it fun for them, to make it feel like we're not above the audience; we're just guys up here having fun and you're here with us." The band's big hit, on that tour, was "Viva Las Vegas," and Jamie got to dress up like Elvis every night on the show!

The Grascals are a democracy, there is no one "leader" of the band. It's been like that from the start. Part of the idea behind the band was that no one could ever fire them; no one would, as country stars are wont to do, take an island vacation for the winter, leaving their side musicians unemployed. For a while the Grascals had a manager, Karen Byrd, but she now works as their publicist, and they manage themselves. "Anything that comes up for management will come to me," Jamie says, "and I'll run it past the guys. We'll give them the answer straight up—just from us." It is all part of the philosophy of the band that they are just regular folks like everyone else.

Many jobs need to be done in order to make a band work, and the guys divide the tasks as evenly as they can. Terry Eldredge takes care of all the travel arrangements, including maps and directions, hotels and plane tickets if they need them. He also orders their CDs and merchandise. Terry Smith (Smitty) picks up the merchandise when it comes in, and brings it to the bus and loads it. Jimmy Mattingly does the technical advance work, including stage plots and sound information. Recently, engineer Kurt Story has accompanied them on the road to run sound at their shows. Jamie handles the books, makes the deposits, and make sure everyone gets paid (a *very* important job!).

The band has two booking agents, and that's a big load off of their shoulders. Buddy Lee Attractions handles their country gigs and theater shows. The Andrea Roberts Agency, run by mandolinist Danny Roberts's wife, handles the bluegrass bookings. Jamie explains: "When we go play country shows, we're in a whole different money category. We make three times the money and play a quarter of the time. But we want to play for a bluegrass crowd. That's who we love. We also love taking our music to other venues. So what are you gonna do? We mix it up, we do all of it, 'cause we love bluegrass. That's where we want to be. But we've got to make a living."

This conflict between the band's collective desire to play bluegrass shows, and needing to work higher-paying country shows, inspired them to look for a sponsor. A relationship with a sponsor can benefit a band by providing valuable publicity and—in the case of the Grascals—a nice bus to travel in, which is a great financial relief. The sponsor receives wholesome, fun mobile publicity and brand loyalty from bluegrass fans. Jamie went after a sponsor with absolute determination.

A few years back the Grascals appeared on a Vietti Chili can. Jamie found out, through persistence, that Diversity Brands, which owns Choice Foods and the Vietti brand, was going to launch a new brand: Mayberry's Finest. By this time, Jamie was friends with the secretary at the company—he'd called so much that she knew

him by his voice. The company's original plan was to use the Dillards for anything music-related, since they'd played the Darlings on the *Andy Griffith Show*. Jamie sent executives a package of publicity materials and also may have mentioned that Terry Eldredge and Terry Smith are two of the biggest Andy Griffith fans on the planet. He finally scored a meeting with Marcella Gomez, president of Diversity Brands.

Marcella related this story during a January appearance on WSM's "An Intimate Evening with Eddie Stubbs and the Grascals." "What was it about the Grascals that intrigued you?" asked Eddie. "*Their persistence!*" she jokingly responded. In talking to Jamie on the phone, Marcella explained, she thought he was female, yet his voice was a little deep. "Boy, this woman really smokes a lot," she had thought. When he walked into the posh Nashville restaurant where they'd arranged to meet, her first thought, when she saw him, was, "Huh! I thought you were a woman!" Their meeting



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was successful and they soon began working on the details of the sponsorship.

The first order of business was a jingle. The Grascals got to work and wrote an incredibly catchy little ditty. Hear it two times and you'll never forget it. Mayberry's Finest loved it. Andy Griffith, who has final approval on everything Mayberry's Finest does, loved it. Then the band hit the road, traveling in their company-provided bus. "It would cost them more for billboards just in Nashville throughout the year than what it costs for that bus," Jamie points out. "They minimized their boards there, and they got this moving billboard with a band that travels. We'll probably be doing 135 to 150 dates this year, so you're talking at least 200 to 250 days that bus is seen across the country and in Canada." People who see the Grascals play are quite likely to enjoy Southern cooking, and the band always has plenty of samples for folks who might like to take a little home and try it for themselves.

In addition to the bus, this partnership is about to pay off in some big ways. Mayberry's Finest sponsors a half-hour spot on WSM that will feature at least two Grascals songs every week. The band has recently finished filming an Internet commercial which will be on their website, on the Mayberry's Finest website, and other places online. They're about to start filming a television commercial for the brand that will air on the TV Land network, home of *The Andy Griffith Show*.

"The cool thing is," Jamie says, "that bluegrass music is gonna be on TV every single day, several times a day. That's priceless. Not only for our music, but for us. For instance, a booking agent could call and say, 'Who are the Grascals?' Well, have you seen that commercial? 'Oh, okay!' Well, can you use that? 'Yeah, sure!' Hopefully it'll put us on a whole different level."

The band is looking forward to the release of their new album. The Grascals' first two CDs were nominated for Grammys, so this one has a lot to live up to. It's the first to feature their newest band member, banjo player Aaron McDaris, who has been with the group for well over a year. Live appearances have refined the group's interaction to such a degree that this CD is the fastest one they've done. "We're gonna listen to it as much as we can before we mix it to make sure we didn't go *too* fast!" Jamie says. "We could have picked it apart and tried to put some perfect studio album together, or we could sound like the Grascals do. Because our live shows are how we sell, I think."

The Grascals have come a long way in a short period of time. They've already played for more people, and at more high-profile venues, than many bands do in their entire careers. However, though success has come fast for them as a band, it hasn't come quite as fast for the band members as individuals. When all the years the band's members have spent playing as side musicians are added together, the total is *over two hundred*. Even with all the awards and accolades they've earned, even with all the arenas and prestigious concert halls they've played, Jamie and the rest of the guys still have their feet firmly on the ground.

"I still work at a company called Loftis Steel and Aluminum," Jamie says. "I get up at 4:40 AM and go to the gym. Try and not be fat! Go to my office and work from 7 to 11 AM, maybe three days a week. It's only four hours but it keeps my chops up, selling steel. If something ever happened and I couldn't sing any more, I could always go back to when I was in the business."

"I hope nobody looks at us when we walk around a festival or down the street and thinks we're stuck up, or too good for somebody. We don't think that. Because the people you

see going up, you're going to see coming back down. We realize this is not going to last forever. That's how it works. A band goes up to the top, they stay there for a while, and even though they stay at the top of their game, new things come up and different things happen."

Yet another facet of Jamie's career is his songwriting. He started writing songs not too long after he started playing bluegrass. "It was just a cool way to release some of my thoughts," he explains. Aubrey Holt, his old friend from Indiana, was an important inspiration. "The guy is just a genius. He wrote so many great songs," Jamie says. "I asked him questions in the front of the bus, riding shotgun with him, getting his advice. Probably wore him out some nights."

When he first arrived in Nashville, Jamie found that he could write better songs by teaming up with better writers. "My mentor, start to finish, has been Charlie Steff. Charlie wrote 'Mourning Dove' with me and my wife Susanne for the Grascals' first album." Their co-written "Keep On Walkin'" appears on the new release. With a nod towards home, Jamie and top Nashville songwriter Harley Allen co-wrote "Indiana" for the new album.

Continuing on the subject of co-writing Jamie says: "Charlie always helps me hone it, make it sellable. I've got good ideas. I've got pretty decent melodies, and I've got confidence. But I hardly ever write a song by myself. I want to share it. I want somebody else, especially to take the blame if somebody doesn't like it!" he laughs. "But really, to get their perspective. They can take it somewhere I never would have gone with it."



one of Jamie's proudest songwriting accomplishments is "Where I Come From," another Charlie Steff co-write, and the title cut of a Bobby Osborne CD. "If anybody buys that album and looks inside the cover," Jamie says, "it talks about where he grew up, and it's got a picture of the cabin where he was born and raised. And

he says 'Jamie Johnson brought this song to me.' He mentions my name. That's the stuff that I treasure. It's not all about the money for me... though it is nice to be paid for what you do!"

By far, the most important partner in Jamie's life is his wife, Susanne. They met at a songwriter night at Douglas Corner, a Nashville night spot. Jamie, who was sporting a broken ankle at the time, had ridden with friend and fellow songwriter Kim Fox. When they pulled into the parking lot, Susanne pulled in beside them.

"We were walking in," Jamie remembers, "and I told Kimmy, 'Slow down, slow down, this girl's walking up behind us.' She opened the door for us, with that country accent. I was sold. I was in love." She gave him a piece of paper with her phone number that night, and he carries it in his wallet to this day. "When Kimmy dropped me off at the Station Inn after I met Susanne, I told her, 'I'm gonna marry that girl,' as a joke. As it turned out, I wasn't kidding, was I?" Jamie and Susanne await the arrival of their first child this summer.

His accomplishments in the music business have also earned Jamie some recognition outside the bluegrass community. This June he'll be speaking at the Milan High School graduation ceremony. It's the first time his alma mater has ever had a guest speaker. "I'm



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gonna have our bus driver, Stu-bob, drive me up to Indiana," Jamie laughs. "I'll feel like I'm a king for a day!"

Hopefully, the Grascals will be kings for a lot of days. They love what they're doing, and they have high hopes for the future. When they appeared on Nashville radio station WSM with host Eddie Stubbs, he asked them, "What is your goal as a group?" They answered in unison, without a second of hesitation: "To be members of the Grand Ole Opry!"

With so much personal and professional success, Jamie couldn't be happier, but that doesn't mean he will stop striving for greatness. As he reflects on The Grascals' Entertainer of the Year awards, he says, "I want it again! I want to earn it; we all want to earn it. We want it as many times as we can get it. I think when you're the Entertainer of the Year, it means you're doing your job. We work hard at being a good vocal group and instrumental group, but our biggest passion is the live show and entertainment part for the crowd! That's what they come to see.

"We play bluegrass music to the best of our ability for as many people as we can. That is the key: you get on that stage and play your heart out. Give them everything you got and make them want another song when you get done. When they come up and say, 'I loved your set,' that makes it all worthwhile." **bn**

You can find Jamie online at grascals.com and mayberrysfinest.com.