

Aboriginal singer, songwriter and photographer looks to the positives

An interview with James Henry - 14 October 2020



Connection Matters Radio (CMR): My next guest on Connection Matters Radio is well-known as a photographer and a musician; and he balances both careers seemingly with little to no effort. His love and care for culture and community are evidenced all too clearly in all that he does. His name is James Henry, and he's a proud Aboriginal man. James, thanks for joining me on the program today.

James Henry: Yeah, it's good to be here.

CMR: James, a great deal of your photography work was at events and you were seen around town any number of times. It just appears that whenever there was a cultural event going around, James Henry would be there.

Now, this must have taken quite a hit when COVID restrictions were introduced. How severe was it for you?

James: It's pretty full on. I guess I get my work as a photographer a lot of the time taking photos of events. And I guess these days you can't gather in enough numbers to warrant a photographer coming along to take photos. So, it can be a bit disappointing in that regard.

But I guess eventually people will need photos taken again and people will be able to gather. And it's just a matter of just trying to keep busy and hopefully learn some new

skills along the way until I can actually get some work and put them into practice.

CMR: And it must've been particularly difficult because a lot of your work was at events where the musicians, your fellow musicians, Uncle Kutcha, Coloured Stone, you've done Yung Warriors, any number of acts that you've done. And I assume that just disappeared almost overnight. Didn't it?

James: Yeah. It was a bit of a surprise. I remember I was working on a play and we got to do a bit of touring with that. So, we went up to Sydney, Perth, and we're actually in New Zealand in the first half of March.

And then it was, just a matter of each week, you hear something new about the coronavirus and what's going to happen and how we're going to deal with it. And then just slowly and surely it ended up getting to the point where I didn't have any work coming in. And then it was a matter of how long is it going to be like this?

CMR: A question that everyone is asking, no doubt.

James, photography is one side of your business and your life; and as I mentioned earlier, you are a multi-talented man and you have music as one of your other passions. How has coronavirus impacted you in that particular field?

James: It's an interesting one, because I've always been wanting to push myself in the direction of being a writer more than a performer. So, just having a bit of extra time to write some music and learn some new skills has been a blessing in disguise in a way.

Although it's a matter of keeping the motivation up, having to just find new things that make me want to get in front of a computer and a keyboard and make music for extended periods of time, because otherwise it's quite uncertain as to when these pieces will see the light of day.

But yeah, I guess I just have to have faith that any bit of extra effort I put in at the moment with creating content, or practicing, or learning new skills, those rewards will become apparent once things return to, I guess, as close to normal as they can be.

CMR: Now you mentioned it could well be a blessing in disguise. So, when it comes to your music, what new directions or experimentation even, have you been exploring since the lockdown's commenced?

James: I've been lucky enough to be a part of this ensemble, it's called the Ngarra-Burria program. And it's a bunch of different Aboriginal composers from around the country who ... A little bit beyond being, say a singer songwriter. It's like people who are writing for different ensembles.

So, I've spent so much time just making music on my own with my computer and not really having much of an opportunity to have my music performed by an ensemble.

So, just being able to put all the dots on the piece of paper and little markings to get my musical ideas across, to another human being rather than a computer, is a new challenge and it's quite exciting and rewarding.

So, we've been able to do that a little bit remotely and we've got our meet up tomorrow. So, one of my pieces is going to be performed by quite a renowned ensemble up in Sydney, a bit of a music ensemble. So yeah, just really excited about that.

I was also lucky enough to get a grant through Creative Victoria; and as soon as lockdown is over, I'll go into the studio and record a few of my pieces with a string quartet.

CMR: Well, I look forward to getting my hand on a recording that we can play here on Connection Matters Radio on 3KND. So please, please, James, keep me in mind when that happens.

James, what are some of the personal measures that you've undertaken to care for your wellbeing during Melbourne's social lockdowns?

James: Well, I became a first-time father during this whole period. My son was born in June. So, when he was born, the restrictions, I don't think were quite as strict. So, we still had certain things that we weren't allowed to do and such, but yeah, there was enough time for him to meet some of his extended family and friends.

Here now with these stricter conditions that ... Yeah, we just have a lot of time at home to spend with him. So, if I was working my normal hours, I would not have had near as much time spending with him and watching him grow up and just enjoying family life. So, once again, it's a bit of a blessing in disguise there. And again, just trying to see the positives to it all, but at the same time, we're ready to get on with things and maybe be able to take him a bit further beyond the five kilometre radius.

CMR: Well, I think it's more than a blessing in disguise. It sounds like an absolute lift-up for your spirit and soul on that first-time father. Congratulations.

James, thanks so much for joining me today on Connection Matters Radio. For our audience, I will be playing one of James's songs later on in the program in place of my normal Cat Stevens' Peace Train as my outro. James probably knows exactly what that song is. It's one of my favourites and I think he despairs at times when I tell him what it is, but given the onset of summer and the soon to be evidenced plague of mosquitoes, it's just a great fun song.

James, once again, thanks for coming onto the program and sharing your COVID-19 experiences.

James: My pleasure. all the best with it.

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