

James Otto

Sunset Man

The easy approach in a sound bite culture is to succinctly label the persona and the project, but which to choose: The kid from the Pacific Northwest who bleeds classic rock? The backwoods Alabama teen whose voice channels Southern Rock and high volume country? The romantic balladeer whose passion for soul draws on Otis and Conway? The successful and contemplative songwriter?

Truth is, James Otto is all of these, and probably a few more. Standing an easy 6'5" tall with a frame more akin to an NFL lineman than an entertainer, his mere presence is enough to garner your attention. And his voice? Maybe bigger. John Rich of the country duo Big & Rich often introduces Otto as "The Biggest Voice in Country Music," a claim few refute upon hearing him sing.

The journey leading to his Warner Bros./Raybaw Records debut album—selling his '72 Chevelle to move to Nashville, a seven-year immersion in the craft of songwriting, an earlier ill-fated major label deal, touring with superstars like Lynyrd Skynyrd, Shania Twain, Big & Rich, Gretchen Wilson, and Hank Jr.—has enabled him to incorporate and distinctly express all the hues of his musical talent. And thus, *Sunset Man*.

"As long as I can possibly remember I have been obsessed with music," Otto says. "Listening to it on the radio, getting into my mom's record collection—my tastes have changed, but music has been there my whole life."

Born into a military family, Otto was raised all over the country, from Washington State, to his grandparents' farm in North Dakota, and in rural Alabama. Otto didn't just listen to music, he made it. "I got a record player with a mic on it when I was three or four, and I've been singing ever since," he recalls.

Truly, music was in his blood. Otto's grandfather was a self-taught country musician who played in local clubs, and his father also had natural talent and played in local rock and blues bands. "Hearing Van Halen's *1984*, and seeing Prince—I knew I wanted to be a guitar player. A guitar found in the neighbor's trash was an early tool. My father taught me three chords: C, G, and D, and from there I was addicted to learning how to play everything I heard on the radio. Led Zeppelin, Bob Seger, ZZ Top, John Mellencamp, just about anything I heard became a new challenge." He adds, "At the time, country was something my grandparents listened to—old timey, gospel sounding stuff."

Junior high was a turning point. "I moved to Alabama with my mom, a place called Sand Mountain," he explains. "It was really backwoods country, and all the kids were listening to Lynyrd Skynyrd, Hank Jr., Alabama and Charlie Daniels. That stuff hit me really hard—it changed my life and my whole perception of music. It took me out of a pop-rock world and moved me into absorbing everything from Johnny Cash and Buck Owens to Dwight Yoakum and Randy Travis, and Willie Nelson to John Anderson."

Music remained his focus, even through a post-high school stint in the military. With an Army Ranger Drill Sergeant for a father, Otto joined the U.S. Navy and was based in Guam for two years while serving on the U.S.S. Hailiakala and the U.S.S. White Plains. This experience gave him the chance to really see the world, docking in over 20 countries. “Really, I signed up to pay off debts so I could move to Nashville,” Otto says. “I’ve been moving around most of my life, just living to make music.”

Nashville offered up a songwriting contract and, eventually, a recording deal with Mercury Records. “I had three different A&R chiefs during the making of my first album,” Otto recalls, “and the original vision became diluted.” The marketing process was almost as frustrating. In the end, the critically acclaimed debut album *Days Of Our Lives* was released with little advertising or fanfare. Interestingly, several of the songs have since been recorded by other artists and a couple of them have become hits.

The saving grace during this difficult period became Otto’s association with MuzikMafia, the loose, music-first alliance of friends and creators that built a local and eventually national following. Otto became one of the group’s most respected musicians and performers, leading to a musical revival for him. Touring and writing with his friends, Otto began to really evolve, immerse himself in songwriting, perfect his live performance skills, and hone in on the kind of music that reflected the musician he had become.

“It was one of the most fun, creative points in my life. I was living my dream—touring, writing, and playing live, high-energy shows every night with my best friends. Does it get any better than that?!”

During one of the major tours, CMT began filming the reality TV hit series, *MuzikMafia TV*, starring the main members of MuzikMafia—Otto and his musically diverse band of brothers and sisters. The result? An all-out Music Row war for Otto’s next album. His Mafia ties resulted in several co-writes for the album and John Rich producing several sides.

Meanwhile, Otto’s songwriting success has taken hold. He’s had recent cuts by his long-time idols Randy Travis with “Song Of The Violin,” and the title-cut for John Anderson’s latest album, *Easy Money*. He also penned a radio single for newcomer Gary Nichols called “I Can’t Love You Anymore.” Otto also found his songs making their way into other media like video games and movies. He has a song on EA Games’ new *NASCAR ‘07* release, and Otto performed Skynyrd’s “Call Me The Breeze” for the soundtrack and opening scene of Larry The Cable Guy’s film debut, *Larry The Cable Guy: Health Inspector*.

In a sequel to the popular eighties hit movie, *Road House*, Otto made his acting debut on the big screen. His music led to a speaking and performing role as the House Band in *Road House 2: Last Call*. “I thought it was an incredible opportunity and I had a blast during the filming. I learned a lot, and it was surreal to think I was following in Jeff Healy’s footsteps.” He laughs, “I only regret not getting to bust up at least one bar room brawl. At one point I actually worked as a bouncer, so I definitely could have called on some personal experiences for that!”

Signed to the Raybaw label, an imprint of Warner Bros., Otto began a two-year creative journey that also enlisted his brother-in-law Jay DeMarcus of Rascal Flatts as a producer and co-writer. The recording process was aided by Otto's experiences on tour with some of country's biggest stars. "Making an album is lot like putting together a good live show, pacing the set and navigating all the ups and downs on that rollercoaster of emotion."

Those lessons quickly find application on *Sunset Man*. Otto wrote nine of the eleven songs on the album, revealing his depth not only as a stand out vocalist, but also a seasoned writer. The muscular riff of "Ain't Gonna Stop" opens the album, carrying a chorus that could be a mantra not just for the rest of the record, but perhaps for the rest of Otto's career. "Just Got Started Loving You" reveals Otto's fondness for soul, and its passionate plea carries over to the album closer, "Man That I Am."

The other side of that pure intimacy is the clouded pain expressed in the wrenching "For You," the searing vocals of "Damn Right" and plain-spoken country truth of the title track. Between those extremes are the relationship struggles of "You Don't Act Like My Woman" and "When A Woman's Not Watching." The good times of "Good Ol' Days" get a little too good with "Drink And Dial." Finally, "Where Angels Hang Around" finds Otto visiting the emotions a parent prays never to experience in a heart-in-the-throat tribute to St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis. "I really just want it to be a round body of work that's representative of me as a person and an artist—all sides of who I am." He continues, "Now that it's done, I feel really good about it. I never wanted to make a record that's one dimensional, and I don't think this album could ever be accused of that."

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