

# JAMIE CULLUM

## On *The Pursuit* of Jazz-Pop Perfection

by Jon Regen

**Jamie Cullum is a musical contradiction. One minute he's channeling** Art Tatum and Thelonious Monk; the next, he's singing pop covers over deep-pocketed R&B grooves while riffing on a road-worn Rhodes. The 30-year-old British piano phenom has carved out a remarkable niche, selling over 4,000,000 albums, and building a devoted fan base that's simply rabid for his singular brand of jazz-infused, hip-hop-ified pop fare.

On *The Pursuit* (out now on Verve Records), Cullum brazenly blends a seemingly discordant array of musical styles into uniquely a personal and unified album. The dynamic set includes his own infectious originals as well as covers of Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim – even “Don’t Stop the Music” by R&B sensation Rihanna. Once again, Cullum proves that for him, barriers were made to be broken. Minutes before his sold-out concert at New York City’s famed Town Hall, he talked with *Keyboard* about his decidedly different slant on making music.

## JAMIE CULLUM

Years ago, you said something to the effect of, "I respect the jazz tradition, but it's not *my* tradition." You like, and write, and cover songs that come from a myriad of musical styles, from jazz, to pop, to R&B and beyond.

You should be answering my questions for me! [Laughs.] Yeah, you really nailed it. I think my tradition comes from rock 'n' roll bands. It comes from going to parties, and bars, and discos, and from electronic music. It comes from playing in piano bars, and playing people's weddings. And it comes from discovering a little jazz as well. So, as much as I'm sitting up here at Town Hall in New York, with the Steinway and the double bass, tapping into that traditional jazz route, I'm drawing on all these other disciplines as well. I obviously am associated with and know a lot of people from very different traditions, one that involves being steeped in the jazz tradition — going to music school and studying bebop licks and so on. And I've done that. I've spent a lot of time picking apart Herbie Hancock's stuff.

**There's an interesting balance on the new album. You play a ton of jazz, but you also emote a pop sensibility that understands how to get a song or solo across in four minutes, not 40.**

Yeah, it's true. When I was playing in rock bands when I was younger, I loved so much of it. I got into the imprecision, and the presentation, of it. All the things you kind of celebrate when you're in a rock band. When I first got into jazz, I remember thinking to myself about the band, "Man, you guys didn't even think about what you're going to wear, did you?" Or the whole kind of gabbing with each other between songs, almost forgetting that there was an audience there. So I realized that there was no one sitting in between [rock and jazz], certainly in the group of people I was playing with. I guess I hadn't met anyone up until that point who was doing both. I'd seen Harry Connick Jr., who was like a rock star playing big band music. Ben Folds was a great piano player, but he was playing rock. So I saw all that happening, but among *my* peers, it was either introverted musicians playing ten-minute solos, or guys who wanted to be rock stars who could barely play. I guess I tried to meet them in the middle, really.

One of the things that I took away from *The Pursuit* is how much you seem to be guided by songwriting. "Wheels," for example, starts with a great piano lick, but doesn't become a prisoner of it.

Well, I think that's a great argument for having jazz in what you do. Part of the reason that I stepped away from just wanting to be a straightforward jazz musician was that I was a songwriter — and I didn't really connect with the way jazz guys wrote songs. You know, "Let's write a head." [Jazz musicians refer to the song's melody as the head. —Ed.] I never felt a desperate need to write a tricky head. My inspiration for writing songs always comes from an idea for a lyric, or just something I want to express. I never really connected with the jazz way of writing songs, not that there's anything wrong with it. And so, when I took that kind of singer/songwriter mentality to the table of jazz, it acted as this enormous springboard. In a world of being a singer/songwriter, jazz is a trampoline,

In a world of being a singer/songwriter, jazz is a trampoline, and it's a beautiful one.

and it's a beautiful one. It means you can start off with that piano riff that may sound a bit like Coldplay or the Fray, but if you have that jazz influence, it'll take you to all these different places.

**You sound like you're still be pushing yourself into new places, trying to redefine your sound. Do you like that kind of musical challenge?**



DEB ANDERSON

Well, that's partly the reason I took so much time to make this album. I knew it was a very obvious point where I had to make a statement of intent, really. In a way, that was embracing the idea that I kind of do covers pretty well. I don't mean to sound like I'm saying I'm great at it, but interpreting other people's songs *is* one of my strengths. It's embracing the idea that you can be a songwriter, but you can be an interpreter as well. In the singer/songwriter world, if you do too many covers, they think you can't write your own songs. They think you've run out of ideas. If you do too many originals in a jazz set, you miss the point that people want to hear you interpret songs they recognize.

**Who are some key piano players that influenced you? On this album, I hear a lot of Leon Russell and early Elton John.**

Yeah. It's early Elton. It's Ben Folds. It's Paul McCartney. They're the kind of touch points, really.

**What about jazz musicians?**

In terms of jazz guys, it would be [jazz vocalist] Joe Williams, and those kinds of big, bluesy shuffles he did with the Count Basie band.

**Your song "You and Me Are Gone" is a great example of how you mix many different styles. It's an effortless combination of New Orleans grooves, bluesy piano riffs, and an almost rockabilly sense. How did that song come about?**

It's interesting for me to tell you the background story to that song, because initially it was a real kind of Blue Note Records, blues-and-groove kind of thing. I was thinking of it as kind of [trumpeter] Blue Mitchell, [jazz pianist] Duke Pearson kind of groove. [Cullum sings a walking bass line.] I ended up trying it out with two musicians who aren't really jazz guys. One was a drummer called Matt Chamberlain, who's played with everybody from Pearl Jam to Brad Mehldau. The other was a bassist who plays in the hip-hop soul band Soul Coughing, whose name is Sebastian Steinberg. And they brought this kind of raucous rock thing to it, but still had my original groove in their minds. We also recorded it in the studio where the soundtrack to *The Jungle Book* had been recorded. So, I like to

give things a story and set the scene. I think if you've got a story to tell, you work out how you'll communicate it.

**That song has a lot of gutbucket, bluesy piano playing and soloing. Who are some players that influenced your playing in that direction?**

It's that kind of raucous stuff. I probably got that more from Ben Folds than anyone else. That just started to happen one day. I started to assimilate the way I played guitar with the way I played piano.

**In the song "If I Ruled the World," in the middle of what sounds like a very modern, emotive pop song, you take a piano solo that comes straight out of [late Swedish jazz pianist] Esbjörn Svensson's playbook. It's like a synthesis of pop, hip-hop, and Nordic Jazz!**

It's great that you're saying that, because you obviously hear it in



#### CULLUM'S KEYBOARDS

Jamie Cullum is using a decidedly vintage rig on his latest tour to support *The Pursuit*, including his favorite acoustic piano. "I like the Yamaha S6," Cullum tells me. "It's a great grand piano, and it holds its tuning for the whole show. The action on it is crazy. When I have a piano that isn't an S6, I feel a little bit different." Other keyboards in Cullum's stage rig include a rare 54-key Fender Rhodes electric piano, a Hammond 44 Melodion, a Moog Music Analog Delay, a Nord Stage, and a Line 6 TonePort KB37 MIDI controller, connected to a MacBook Pro.

# JAMIE CULLUM

musician terms. That's it exactly. That one wasn't recorded in a live setting – it's very much a layered song. There was this space for a piano solo, and I was thinking of getting [famed jazz saxophonist] Wayne Shorter to do it first. But in the end, I wanted to play it. I was very much thinking about Esbjörn Svensson, and that whole Scandinavian jazz sound. Also, I think I was channeling a bit of the score to *Eyes Wide Shut*.

**The song "Mixtape" marries memorable piano riffs with R&B grooves, over an almost visually descriptive story. . . .**

That song, in a way, was designed to cover a lot of different bases. I wanted it to feel like the different segments of a mix tape throughout the song. It goes back to the fact that when you know what story you want to tell, you can do very eclectic things in a song, if the intention is clear. You know that whole "telling a story within the song" type of song? That comes 100% from my having done a film degree. I never get the chance to talk about it, but in film school, they'd make you write two essays before you could touch a camera – your statement of intent. That really made a huge impact on how I approached my music. It became about setting the scene and deciding what I wanted to say. There was also a definite intention on the new record to make each song tell a different story. On my previous records, we set up the instruments, set up the microphones, and just recorded and mixed them to the best of our ability. And it yielded results I was happy with. This time, we set the scene differently with every song. We used different mics and different pianos. We did *everything* differently.

**All the above songs are just a few examples of how *The Pursuit* is a quantum leap forward for your piano playing, as opposed to just accompanying yourself. Was that intentional?**

Absolutely. The worrying thing is that some people listen to it and say, "Oh, this is your *pop* record, isn't it?" And I'm like, "Uh . . . *no!*" ☒

Keep up with Jamie Cullum news at [jamiecullum.com](http://jamiecullum.com), and don't miss our exclusive video interview, only at [keyboardmag.com/artists](http://keyboardmag.com/artists).



DEB ANDERSON