



Shaun Barrowes

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID LAYTON

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How did you get started in music?

I started with basic piano lessons and stuff when I was six. I started songwriting when I was fifteen, and that's really when I started in music. My piano teacher — I still remember his name, David Brookes — encouraged me to start songwriting. It was at a point where I was almost ready to give up on piano because I was just getting tired of playing note-for-note classical music, and I think he noticed this. I think he decided to try a different route and see if I would be more creatively expressive, so I started songwriting when I was fifteen. Cut my first album a year later. Cut the second one a couple years after that. Went on my mission, came back, and got right back into it. I decided that this could lead to a career when I was

about twenty-two, and I started to record more and more demos. I decided to move to LA and try out the industry out there. I joined a rock band, and I started to see some responses to my music and to my abilities. I think that's where I started to get some validation for what I wanted to do, and that probably pushed me.

What was your inspiration for “When I Take Your Hand”?

I actually haven't decided yet if I want to tell the story — most people think it's a very romantic song. It's a wedding song, your “first dance” song. But the story behind it is not really romantic. I wrote this song when I reached one of the lowest points of my life. Because I had reached so many brick walls and so many dead ends, I had basically given up on everything. After being in LA for so long, you get treated like a number. I was kind of done with it all, and ready to give up on everything. I was lying on my back in the middle of a parking lot, wondering what I was going to do with myself. In despair, I decided to try to write one more song. All the songs I had written before that time were frustrating, or angry, or something along those lines — they were rock songs. I decided to try a different approach this time, and write a song that actually had some hope and optimism to it.

So, I went to the piano, and I wrote this song to save my career. I thought, “If this song doesn't take off, then I'm throwing in the towel and moving on to something else.” As soon as I wrote that song, I started getting responses from all kinds of people — from celebrities and big names to fans and people who just liked the song. That changed things around for me completely. I based a tour around that song and created an album (*Big Bang Theory*) with “When I Take Your Hand” as one of thirteen original songs on it. That was the song that really began my music career.

What was it like creating *Big Bang Theory*?

It was really a fun experience, and that's probably where its title comes from — everything just came together like a big bang. That's my own “big bang theory.” I got all the right players, I happened to find all the right people, and it came together just perfectly. Every time I listen to the album, I think, “Yeah, I did it right. I actually did it right

this time.” With every other recording — and I’ve done at least twenty or thirty other recordings before this — there was always something missing; it wasn’t quite there. Those feelings were another step in the learning process. I hoped that with each of those demos, someone would hear, and they would fill in the blanks with their imagination. But, I was finally able to put together an album that doesn’t require any imagination; everything is there.

Where do your songs come from?

Most of my songs come from moments of reflection on previous years or specific experiences. There are other ones that will come from someone else’s experience. I can usually put myself in someone else’s shoes and write from their perspective. That’s actually why I’ve gotten into film theme songs. When I read a script or read a book, I can usually come up with a really good song for what I read.

How did you make the transition from popular music and concerts to composing for film and advertising?

Because of all the touring, I had a fan base that I built from the tours. Among those fans were some film directors, and they were the ones who approached me with the idea of writing a theme song for their movie. From there, I decided that would be a good idea. I started proactively contacting other directors, saying, “Send me your scripts, send me your films! Let me write a theme song for them.” I eventually started getting requests to do songs for films and to work as a music supervisor. I received requests to compose new orchestral scores as well. It just expanded from there.

Right now I’ve got ten films that I’m working on and two or three TV shows. For someone who is just getting into it, it’s piling on me pretty quick. I think part of it is the fact that my music is very different — it’s very unique, and there’s not really anybody who is doing what I am doing, musically. There’s good and bad to that. The good side is that it definitely makes me stand out a lot easier. At the

same time, it’s harder for me to get a lot of these gigs and a lot of these jobs, because people are always looking for a specific sound, one that sounds like someone who’s already out there. When people say, “We’re just looking for something new and original,” I get those jobs. It especially works with the comedies and romantic comedies, because my music is pretty romantic. It’s just blossomed from there.

As an artist, who do you look up to?

I’ve had some mentors on the business side of things. There have been a few entrepreneurs who have helped me put together some ideas, business plans, and things like that. It’s pretty easy in Utah to find people to help you, but it’s pretty hard to find musicians who are professional here. For the most part, I’d say my mentors have been successful businessmen rather than actual musicians. Being a musician is a lot like being an entrepreneur; our product is the album. There are a lot of similarities. The musicians that I look up to I haven’t actually met in person. Two of them are film score composers: Danny Elfman and Hans Zimmer.



There are definitely influences like Billy Joel, Sting, and a few others. These are all guys that I plan on meeting at some point, but I just haven’t had a chance to, yet.



What brings you the greatest amount of satisfaction as a musician?

There are a few different things. It's usually the reaction I get from the audience or from an individual who is really touched by a song. I get a lot of e-mails from people saying something like "It changed my day," or "It put me in a good mood," or "It completely pulled me out of this depression that I was in for like the last few weeks" — I've gotten that quite a few times. Obviously, the joy for me is boosting my fans: bringing them out of depression, just picking up their spirits, putting them in a good mood — that sort of thing.

Working in the music industry, have you ever had a time when your beliefs were challenged?

Oh, yeah, very often — with the very first offer I got, actually. I was a twenty-two year old

ambitious musician, and I got an offer to be in the top ten — right then and there. The thing is, people can put you in the top ten — it's just a matter of money. Without going into specifics, I got an offer to be in the top ten if I would do something very immoral. So, I turned them down and walked away. I think I got blacklisted for that. That experience was my introduction to the industry. I turned that down, obviously, and I left. I never heard back from them again — and they are very powerful people. That was probably the most extreme case.

When I was in the rock band, I had groupies who weren't used to my standards. The pressure of that was the fact that they were really pretty. They wanted to do things that I wasn't ready to do; things that would go against my standards. The long and the short of it is, there were definitely plenty of times when I was tempted and offered something really great in return, as far as the world is concerned. But it didn't matter enough to me,

because in the end the whole reason why I'm doing this is for the spiritual aspects of it. It's not for the money. I'm not doing this for the fame. I'm doing this because I want to improve the world through inspiring music. It would defeat the whole purpose of that if I were to give in to one of these temptations.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

That's kind of my goal — to build the kingdom. Music is therapy. It's like medicine for the mind, or for the heart, I guess you could say. The Greeks understood that. They would always say it was the way that internal objects correlate. You might face some traumatic experience, but you can't really quite come to grips with it until you hear the right kind of music that explains what just happened. Music can sway people emotionally, and right now it does — but a lot of times it sways them in the wrong direction.

So one thing I like to do with music is to sway them in the right direction. If people listen to inspiring music, they will be much more receptive when missionaries come around, or they'll just be more motivated to do what they know is right. Whenever you can uplift someone somehow, or convince someone to feel an inspiring emotion, that person will generally choose the right choice. With whatever decision they happen to be faced with, music can help sway them to make the right choice. That's probably where I'd say my music really helps build the kingdom; it sways people to make those right decisions.

How does your knowledge of the gospel influence your work as an artist?

It definitely influences it. I guess there are two answers to that. One is on the creative side — obviously I look for inspiration when I write music. But the main influence has to do with endurance. When you know that Heavenly Father is behind you in your career, you have much more drive. All the times you get knocked down, you get right back up, because you know that what you are doing is what you are supposed to be doing.

I think that the principles of faith, endurance, patience, and trust are certainly things that you learn to a greater degree. You also receive protection and guidance. There have been many times when my life has been threatened, but I've been kept safe because of the protection we receive when we keep all the covenants we make in the temple. I was going to the temple regularly, every three weeks or so, to keep myself up on it, because I was walking through some pretty ghetto streets and hairy situations. In addition, the Holy Ghost has definitely inspired me creatively — just with some good common sense at certain times, as well as comforting me when the constant rejections beat me down. There are so many applications, and I really wouldn't be here without the gospel. ■

