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CONCERT

Great American Road Trip

The last time B.J. Barham was in Oxford, he was recording an album with his band, American Aquarium. Now on a nationwide solo tour, he talks about his upcoming performance at Proud Larry's and what he misses most about the city.

BY AMELIA CAMURATI

Merging business with pleasure is an ideal way to travel if you can get it, which is exactly what B.J. Barham plans to do for his upcoming summer solo tour which will double as a two-month family road trip.

Barham, his wife Rachael and their dog will load into an R.V. this month and take off across the country, knocking out 54 shows in two months. That many shows in such a short amount of time is a stretch on its own, but since the couple wants to see everything along the way, he's making a tour stop in every continental state and Washington, D.C., for the aptly named "The Great 48 Tour."

"Before my wife and I start a family, we both wanted to see the entire country," Barham says. "Every bucket list thing we've wanted to do, we're doing this summer. We made a list of national parks to national monuments to ridiculously cheesy touristy things, and we mapped a tour around that."

Barham will visit plenty of new locations throughout his seventh summer tour, but Proud Larry's will be a familiar stop when Barham hits Oxford on May 17. His band American Aquarium recorded their fifth album, *Small Town Hymns*, in Oxford with Andrew Ratcliffe and Tweed Recording in 2010.

Barham and the band spent days in the studio and nights on the Square, befriending local bartenders, browsing the shelves of Square Books and performing for Thacker Mountain Radio Hour.

“It’s known as one of the great college towns in America, but I love it because the townies there are some of my favorite people,” Barham says. “They’re the ones who come to shows, and they’re the fun characters that I tell people about when I tell stories of Oxford. The whole town embraced the fact that we were this band living in town coming out every night and being debaucherous.”

Having spent time on previous tours in the South, the Barhams are looking forward to eating their way across the region. While Oxford is known having plenty of fantastic restaurants, there’s one spot in particular they refuse to pass up.

“Anytime we come through Oxford, it’s Ajax for us,” he says. “That place has my heart.”

Growing up in a Southern Baptist church in North Carolina, Barham’s earliest experiences with music center around singing with his deacon father’s congregation and the choir. Beyond that path, he stumbled into theatre, and by high school, he was writing his own songs about the feelings and emotions of puberty. Barham describes them as “godawful,” focusing on superficial feelings of love and observation.

The first to attend college in his family, Barham received a scholarship to North Carolina State University and planned to double-major in history and political science. Soon after his arrival to campus, however, he realized his destiny was his music, founding rock ‘n’ roll and country band American Aquarium in 2005.

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had a knack for,” Barham says. “It’s like any craft. Every day, it’s about perfecting what you’re doing.”

In the early years of American Aquarium, the band went through members like water, cycling through nearly two-dozen in the first few years. While Barham was serious about a life in music forever, many of his bandmates were looking for college social activities to enjoy for a few years before moving on to a new career and a new life stage. In 2008, the line-up stabilized, and the group began touring as much as they

could, maintaining an annual 300-show schedule for years.

“We all have the same common goal: to play music for the rest of our lives, to travel around the country, to see things, to meet people, to have experiences in our life,” Barham says. “Music and songwriting are the vessels for that.”

Barham released his first solo album, Rockingham, last July after nearly two decades of songwriting and 11 years with American Aquarium. He’ll play many of those songs on The Great 48 tour, along with a hodgepodge of older solo numbers



and American Aquarium songs.

“For me, the solo shows aren’t about energy; they’re about honesty,” Barham says. “With American Aquarium, it’s a full-blown rock ‘n’ roll band. It’s me jumping around the stage and screaming into a microphone. With these shows, it’s about maintaining the honesty; it’s about maintaining that personal connection I have with my fans, which is getting onstage and talking about what I did during the day and telling them stories about where these songs came from.

“I don’t think I’ll have a problem being honest every night.”

Two states along the trip have more than one show: his birthplace and permanent home, North Carolina, as well as the biggest state in the country and Barham’s second home, Texas. Having spent several months a year in Texas performing, the state has embraced him and his band. Still, there’s nothing like going home.

“The North Carolina shows are always special just because home is home,” Barham says. “A lot of bands start out, and then they move somewhere bigger, but I’ve been very fortunate

to where I got to stay at home and build a career. I didn’t go to Nashville or Austin or New York or L.A. I’m still from Raleigh, North Carolina, and I’m very fortunate in that. I don’t get to play North Carolina very often, but when I do, they’re usually extremely special shows.”

Mixed among the familiar stops are new frontiers for Barham, including the extreme northeast and Canadian border states like North Dakota. He expects warm welcomes from his stomping grounds in the South, Midwest and West Coast, but doesn’t know what kind of fanbase exists in those areas.

“The biggest excuse I get when I play shows is, ‘Oh, man, you’re not coming anywhere near me, I would love to come see you play,’” he says. “I completely eradicated that excuse. I’m coming within five hours of every person I know.”

General admission tickets for Barham’s May 17 show are available at proudlarrys.com. Doors open at 8 p.m. and Barham takes the stage at 9. 🍷

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