

SEPTEMBER
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showcase



DOING IT THE
HARD WAY WITH
AMERICAN AQUARIUM'S
BJ BARHAM
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The Mix
Tape Issue

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Showcase Magazine
SEPTEMBER 2017

S THE MIX TAPE ISSUE

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The Mix Tape Issue


mix tape: a compilation of favorite songs by a variety of artists, recorded on cassette tapes or CDs. Made popular in the eighties.

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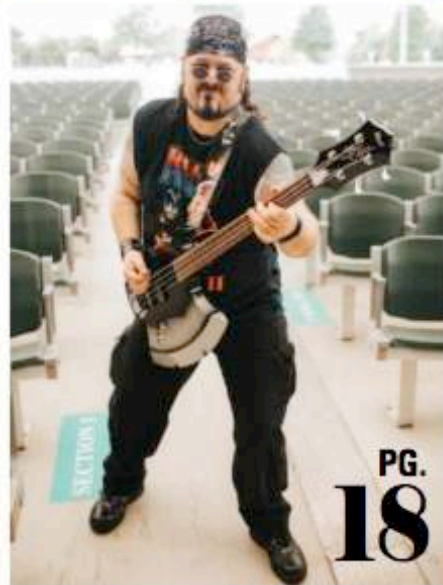
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The Hard Way

Jason Springs Picks the Brain of
American Aquarium's BJ Barham

WRITTEN BY JASON SPRINGS
PHOTOS BY JILLIAN CLARK & MIGUEL EMMANUELLI

In the midst of his "Great 48" tour, where he set out to play 53 shows in 59 days through 48 states, I caught up with American Aquarium front man and Reidsville, NC native, BJ Barham, touching on all things music, touring, growing up in the South, and a little bit of politics. At the time we talked, he was somewhere between Ohio and Pittsburgh, with wife, Rachael, and dog, Bueller, in tow. Being a songwriter and musician myself, I've followed Barham's music for the last eight years, watching and studying in admiration one of the very few artists from my area to have continued success on a large scale. Not one to subscribe to the idea of "write a hit song and get signed to some big Nashville label to try to get famous," he's spent his songwriting career simply putting in the work as an independent artist, through

extensive touring, continually releasing records, and constantly pushing himself to better his craft. He's been hailed as one of the top artists in his genre, and on this rainy afternoon, decided to let *Showcase Magazine* into his world a bit. Enjoy.

JS: You're in the middle of the 'Great 48' tour, where you set out to play shows in all 48 contiguous states. It's probably one of, if not THE most ambitious rounds



anyone's tried to make. How's that been going so far?

BJ: It's going really well, we've got a week and a half left. It's been intense, but a good kind of intense. It's me, my wife, and my dog, and we're getting to see the whole country. I'm very fortunate to get to do something like this.

JS: I keep up with you on social media, and you really seem to take advantage of that outlet to connect with your fans. I've gotten to see a lot of the pictures of you guys hitting all the state parks along the way. As an independent musician, you're kind of the king of social media these days.

BJ: I like to keep people up to date with what's going on. I've found it's a useful way of getting my music in people's hands. A good picture might get shared with somebody who's never heard of our band, they might go check out the picture, and then the band, and become a fan. All because of some crazy picture of some state park. A lot of negative things have changed in the music industry since the 90s, but I think the invention of social media has allowed folks like to me keep up.

JS: You grew up in Reidsville, NC. Can you tell us a bit of how that small life affects your writing and inspires you as an artist?

BJ: I think to be a good writer you have to be from the darker side of things. There's not too many good writers I enjoy who came with a silver spoon in their mouth. Most people come from hard times and small towns, and they've seen hard times first hand. I think that's what makes this style of music, the Americana/Alt-Country stuff, the left-of-center country music, that's what makes it real. Most of the people writing that stuff lived it. In the genre of music that we're playing, especially being southern and being from a small town, I think I have a pretty unique perspective on life. A lot of folks from the city, or from the north, or west coast, I don't think they see life the way we see it. They look at us as a bunch of uneducated hillbillies, and that's just not true. We just talk funny.

JS: So, how did you get started in music, was it playing in Reidsville or Raleigh or what?

BJ: I never played in Reidsville. I didn't pick up a guitar until I was in my late teens or early twenties. I started a band in high school, but I was just the singer, I didn't play guitar because I didn't know how. Then once I was in college, I started booking some gigs for the band. My guitar player quit, and I already had some shows booked, so I had to learn how to play guitar. I didn't want to cancel the gigs I had booked. I learned to play guitar out of

sheer necessity. I sat down every day for seven or eight hours and forced myself to play chords just so I could get through a show. From there, I continued to play guitar, and then I realized I was only going to be pretty good at the chords for so long, and then I needed a lead guitar player. So, I started putting together a band. For the last twelve years, it seems I'm continually trying to put together a band.

JS: You've had quite a few lineup changes, most recently a full turnover of new members.

BJ: Yeah, I've never made a record with the same band that was on the previous record. We've always either lost somebody or gained somebody. The lineup's consistently changed, I've never had a complete turnover before, but

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I've already got a new band, and I'm excited about the new challenge. We start touring on August 31st, and I'm tickled, man. I can't wait, I couldn't be happier with where things are going.

JS: That's great, man, I'm excited to see what you come up with next. So, Reidsville is very similar to Danville in that both cities kind of depended on that blue collar textile/tobacco income and such. It's also kind of the same with the music scenes, we have the Carrington Pavilion, Reidsville has Market Square, but was there any other music around the area when you were younger?"

BJ: There really was nowhere to play in Reidsville. Growing up, I thought you were either a guy who plays covers in a bar, or I thought you were Tim McGraw. I didn't know there was an in between. Moving to Raleigh allowed me to realize there is this middle ground where you can play original music and get paid for it, and work, and try to make something for yourself. Then I realized most towns had a scene where they supported original music, so I started traveling around the country at 21 trying to figure out where those scenes were. And, I'm still trying to figure them all out.

JS: Did you ever have to deal with The 3-4 hour "cover band" gigs, or did you just jump straight into original music?

BJ: Yeah, I refused to do cover gigs. I came right into Raleigh doing original music and never deterred from that. It was a lot harder, because I had friends who did that to pay the bills, but they never got out of the cover gigs. Those gigs pay pretty good money, but they got used to the money, and didn't want to sacrifice the money for the artistic merit. And, the artistic merit was the most important thing for me from the beginning. I didn't want to be known as the guy who did a really great Van Morrison cover, I wanted to be the guy that, "Oh, wow, he's got a couple songs that are really good that he wrote himself." And at first, nobody cared, nobody wanted to hear my songs. But, it's about cultivating a culture for original music. Early on I stubbornly refused to play covers, but if I was the guy who got penned as the "cover guy" and played six nights a week and made a couple thousand bucks a week playing cover gigs, I don't that I'd be where I am today.

JS: It's funny, because there's times when we'll put together shows we'll pride ourselves on bringing in another quality artists and promote the shows as, "Hey, man, if you're

coming out for this, you're going to hear mainly original music, and we're proud of that." And we sort of get hated on by some other musicians in the area because of it sometimes.

BJ: And there's nothing to be ashamed of in that, you're doing it the right way. The right way in most instances tends to be the harder way, but there's a reason that whatever you build that way sticks around longer than what you build the easy way. I've always kind of prided myself on this band being a band that earned it the hard way. It took us twelve years to get where we are today, but I wouldn't go back and take an easier road. I've seen friends who've taken the easier road, and don't get me wrong, the payout is usually pretty instant and quick, but it's not long lasting. And this is something that I want to do for my entire life, so I'm okay with taking the slow and right way if it means that I get to play music for people for the rest of my life.

JS: Well, and that's kind of the difference in people going into music trying to land that huge record deal, or going about it the way you guys have and sticking to it as an independent artist, and being proud of that.

BJ: For sure, we built a name on not bending to the conventional. We definitely wanted to do it our way. Like I said, our way was the hard way. It was the stubborn way. But, looking back twelve years later, I wouldn't have changed a thing. It got me to where I am right now.

JS: So, you went to NC State to study political science and history, and I know that you're a huge advocate for human rights in general. What are your thoughts on crossing that political line in music? It seems to be big conversation these days. Is it something that you would aim for simply just to do it, or if there's a subject you feel that needs to be written about, then that's simply fair game?

BJ: Most of my writing is pretty autobiographical, and I haven't gotten too political in records. *Rockingham* may have been my most political record, a very, very subtle political record. I haven't come out and written a "White Man's World" yet. (see Jason Isbell's 2017 release, *The Nashville Sound*) But, I applaud folks like that for coming out and saying those things, especially when you have that kind of stage to do it. When you literally have the entire Americana world at your fingertips, coming out and making a statement like that is a really, really great thing. I've never shied away from having conversations with folks. I understand the type of music that I play crosses party lines. I play for just as many Democrats every night



as I do Republicans. I try not judge people based off of their political preference. I like to think that most people are good people at heart until they prove me otherwise. If someone wants to have an educated talk about politics with me, I'm totally okay with it, but when you start either calling me an idiot for what I believe in, or tell me that what I believe in is wrong, then we have a problem. Because, usually what people want to tell me I'm wrong about isn't a right or wrong thing, it's just basic human decency. Especially being from the South, when it comes to race, when it comes to sexual orientation, I don't see any of that stuff. We're all human beings, and I think we need to work pretty hard to be good to each other. I'm pretty vocal about that, just because I don't believe we should start segregating people because of who they are.

JS: Well, we did that 75 years ago, and it was completely wrong

BJ: Yeah, I refuse to let me, or my family, or my friends be on the wrong side of history. I don't talk about it too much on stage, because people didn't come to hear me go on a political rant, they came to hear songs. I talk about it as much as I can. I'm very confident in what I believe in. I'm very confident in where I stand on it. I just don't force it down people's throats. Because I would hate if someone on the opposite side tried to force it down my throat. There's a lot of negative things about the South,

but there's also a lot of positive things. The negative things are what everybody judges us for, and I think that's just life. Nobody's going to bring up the good things you did, they're going to talk about the bad things you did. The South has its fair share of skeletons in the closet, but I think there's a lot more young, southern men that are going out and getting an education. They're going out and seeing the world. And kind of learning that different doesn't mean good and bad, different just means different. I'm a firm believer that hate is taught, and the more we can reduce kids being taught to think that way, the better the world's going to be.

JS: I agree completely. Speaking of kids, I saw before you started the "Great 48" tour that this was kind of a big hurrah before you and Rachael jump into that next step of family planning. So, when can we expect a little Barham?

BJ: That's definitely the next logical step. My wife and I are getting ready to start our third year of marriage in a couple of months. We bought a house, we've seen the entire country, we've seen a lot of the world. We were very careful in planning our future, we wanted to kind of take it one step at a time and sort of methodically check off the checklist. I think we're prepared. I think we're at the point where we could bring a child into the world and

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give it a good life. Teach it things, and it be something to enrich our life. That's what I'm excited about. So, the easiest answer there is "yes."

JS: Well, I did see that you got Yard of the Month, so you're pretty much ready to roll, huh?

BJ: Exactly, we're the pride and envy of every 65-year-old person in Wendell, NC right now.

JS: Back to music. So, your last record, *Rockingham*, was a solo record. And I've heard that you've already got the next American Aquarium record written and ready to go?

BJ: Yeah, man, I've got a lot of it done. Still have a little tinkering to do, but it's called *Things Change*. It's definitely an American Aquarium record, and I'm really excited about it.

SM: You guys tour Texas a lot with a great following, how's that reception compared to the other places you get to play?

BJ: Before *Burn. Flicker. Die.* came out, we toured Texas how most bands tour Texas. We'd hit Houston, Austin, Dallas, and then we'd move west. Turnpike Troubadours and Jason Boland are the two bands I credit for all of our success in Texas because they put us in front of the right people. They put us in front of a music-loving crowd that still appreciates songs, that still appreciates the craft of

songwriting, that goes to shows, not for entertainment, but to be enriched. To feel something, to hear stories. That's a cool thing about Texas. They still appreciate the storytelling aspect of songwriting, and that's why we go there a lot. They treat us better than anywhere else in the country, and as long as they keep treating us with the love they have, and they keep supporting the songs the way they have, we'll continue to go back there a lot. I love it out there, if I didn't live in North Carolina, I would live in the hill country of Texas. I'd live in New Braunfels, Texas, right there on the river, if my heart wasn't so deeply rooted in North Carolina.

JS: A lot of artists get caught up in the party lifestyle of music. I know you've been on both sides of that. Now, you're completely sober, you take great pride in that. Have you seen your audience change at all since that happened?

BJ: Well, I got most of my audience when I was in college in my early twenties, and they're growing up with me. So, I think that at the same time I'm making these big life decisions; getting married, buying a house, trying to get sober, trying to get my life straight, I think they're going through the same thing. And, I think that's why these songs relate to so many people. I'm the same age as most of the people who are really into our band. We've just grown up together. I've taken them through the party and now is the coming down. Realizing that life's not a giant party. That if you go out five or six nights a week in your 40s and get messed up every night that you might have a problem. It got bad for me, it just got embarrassing because I had a problem. And I wasn't willing to admit that I had a problem. Once I got the drinking under control, the band started being successful. I don't think that's just chance. I think that it's because when I got sober I also started taking my shows way more seriously. I started taking music way more seriously.

JS: One last question. Is there anything you wish you would have known before you started writing and playing music for a living?

BJ: It's not easy. There's no such thing as a quick fix, as you'll learn in most situations in life. The quick fix is usually the start of the next problem. If you want to make it in this business, it's a real screwed up industry to try to make it in. But, if you keep your head down, and you keep your mouth shut, it eventually pays off. I'm a big believer in that.

**Editor's Note: American Aquarium will play the Blind Tiger in Greensboro, NC on September 15 with special, opening guest Jason Springs. Tickets can be purchased at theblindtiger.com.*