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# Crazy Good!

After breaking through on *American Idol*, James Durbin is back with a new sound and a new album.

By Pete Crooks



The legend of James Durbin is the classic underdog success story. The Santa Cruz-raised singer is a rock 'n' roll Karate Kid, a nice kid who overcame obstacles — the death of his father at a young age, as well as Tourette and Asperger's syndromes — to make it big in the music business. Durbin went from singing in local musical theater and battle of the bands shows to winning the hearts of a national audience by singing heavy metal songs on *American Idol*.

*Idol* fans loved Durbin's personal story as well as his talent, and the kid who was terrified to talk in class as a teenager became a bona fide rock star in his early 20s. After skyrocketing through his first 15 minutes of fame (and some very respectable album sales from his debut LP, *Memories of a Beautiful Disaster*), Durbin went back into the recording studio to explore some new directions, sonically and otherwise. On April 8, Durbin will release his second album, *Celebrate*. The record, packed with poppy hooks, is a departure from the headbanging brand that Durbin built on *American Idol*.

Durbin, now 25, took time out for this interview during a New Orleans stop of his latest national tour, which wrapped with a show at the Catalyst in February.

Santa Cruz rocker James Durbin.

Photo: © Ken Phillips Publicity Group



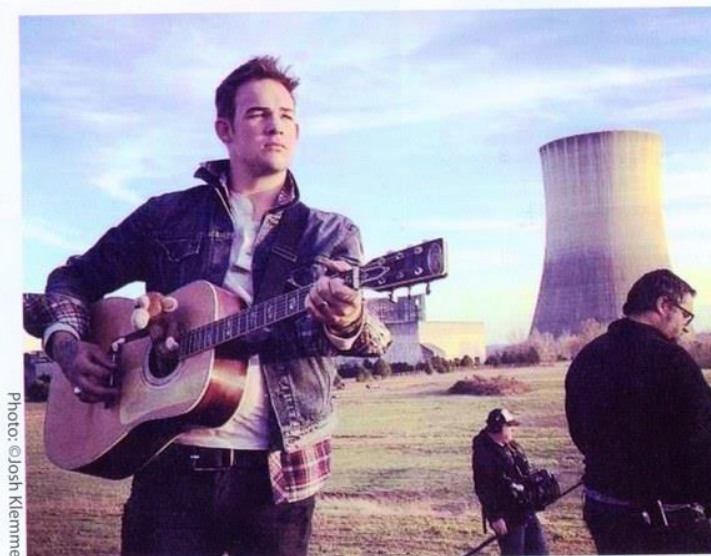


Photo: ©Josh Klemme

An abandoned nuclear power plant, near Nashville, provides an ominous backdrop as Durbin rehearses during the filming of a music video.

**Santa Cruz Style:** I just finished listening to *Celebrate* and was surprised by its pop texture. This is clearly a new direction for you, so can we start by talking about your approach to crafting this album?

**James Durbin:** Sure. Let's start with the obvious first thing you'll notice that's different about the album, which is the title: *Celebrate*. My first record was called *Memories of a Beautiful Disaster*. I'm proud of that record, but now that I've had a little time to grow as a musician and as a person, I don't look at anything at being disastrous. Nothing in my life has really been that sad or unfortunate.

So, *Celebrate* is a realization of how much I actually have. I think we should be thankful for what we have — we don't have famines; we don't have tornadoes or hurricanes turning our world upside down. We have it pretty well off.

This record just sounds a lot different than my first one. It is full of different sounds and styles, because I like to try new things. These songs are fun to play. The songs are poppy, but they still hit.

**What is your writing process like? Where do these songs come from?**

**Durbin:** The songs are based on different things that have happened in my life. I got to write most of this record — I wrote 10 of the 11 songs. I cover a lot of ground, more recent events in my life like being a father or being recognized on TV, to stuff way back from childhood. There's a great song about getting into mischief at the Boardwalk that Santa Cruz listeners are going to like.

**What did you learn from writing and recording your first album that helped you in the creation of this new record?**

**Durbin:** On the first album, the song "Higher Than Heaven" was the only song where I was in the room with the songwriters. The other songs were written for me, and I would go in, and maybe change a few things here or there, and then record them.

This one I was physically there for the whole thing. Some sessions

were quick and the songs were just there, very organically and naturally. Others took a lot of work to get just right.

I think the overall collection of songs will show a different side of me, a side that didn't always get expressed on *American Idol*. Because I'm not always talking about Judas Priest, exclusively. I have so many more influences than that — Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson, for example. So, I wanted to show off a much broader range of influences. I tried to focus on all these good parts from a range of styles, and then find what I want to keep from all of them. It creates a much more interesting sounding record that way.

**I have to imagine the experience from *American Idol* was both exciting and confusing. One minute you're a local musician, the next you're a national celebrity with this huge platform. And then the show's season ends, and you're on your own again. What did you learn from the whole experience?**

**Durbin:** I've learned not to be so hard on myself, because you simply don't feel good when you are constantly talking yourself down. The past few years has let me do some hard thinking about my life, and the greater experience of life in general.

When I say hard thinking, it's that Santa Cruz way of thinking, that universally conscious way of thinking. Like, when you go outside at night and you look at Orion's Belt, and the far left star. To us, that's just one tiny little star, thousands of miles away, but in fact that star is this amazing burst of energy, far more powerful than any of us here on Earth. It makes you realize that it's up to you to know who you are and know what makes you happy, but also not to be too self-absorbed or take yourself too seriously.

**That perspective sounds very mature. But still, four years ago, you became this young musician with a dream to someone who goes running across the Shark Tank in San Jose singing Guns 'n' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" in front of a huge crowd, most of whom were there to see you. What did it feel like to perform on a stage that huge?**



**Durbin:** You know, it's hard to think that that really happened. It definitely feels like that was an out-of-body experience, a once in a million years kind of thing. But then, who's to say that won't happen again?

As great as a moment like that was, it's not the end-all, be-all. If you found your end-all, be-all what would be there point of being an artist? There's no limit. No artwork is ever completely finished.

I put out a record that sold 200,000 units. That's something to be very thankful for. But now I have a new record that I'm excited about, and I hope it sells well, and people have new and different experiences with it.

**I'm interested in the work you're doing with the national Tourette Syndrome Association. Can you talk a bit about that?**

**Durbin:** Yes, I'm excited about this. I'm part of the organization's Different is the New Normal program and an anti-bullying campaign. I'm on a video they produced, and I'll be able to go into schools and talk to kids about respecting everyone who's different.

It's awesome. I never had anyone like that while I was growing up, someone who would come into school and say, "I got bullied, just like you're getting bullied." I get to be that guy for people. I get to help people.

That work is kind of an extension of the thing that I have always loved about being a musician. It's about being able to touch people in a different way. I love the idea that my voice might have healing powers for someone. A woman came up to me at a show recently and told me that listening to my music helped her in her battle with cancer. That's just amazing, to realize that something you're doing is helping someone else out there in the world, someone you have never met and don't know.

**Your father passed away when you were young, so he wasn't able to see you grow up and find all this success as an artist. Now that you have a young son, what is your approach to fatherhood?**

**Durbin:** Well, it's been a big learning process, but I would not trade it for anything. Even though my dad died when I was a kid, I do feel like someone has always been keeping an eye on me. And now it's time to make sure that things happen right.

I would never give up on being a father. Some people can have kids and leave them. That's not me. I love my son Hunter with all my heart, and I always will.

**You're currently bouncing around the country playing clubs and theaters. I noticed that your tour ends with a headlining gig at the Catalyst here in Santa Cruz. How do shows in your hometown compare with the gigs in New Orleans and New York and Dayton?**

**Durbin:** I love playing shows in Santa Cruz — I have a lot of history there. But, I don't like to do it all the time. I like it to keep it special. It's not good to keep playing the same show at the same place at the same time every week, you just need to keep moving and get your music out there to more people.

That said, it's really humbling to go back there, to the place where the fans made you. Santa Cruz is always going to be home, and I will take Santa Cruz with me wherever I go. That's why I have it tattooed on my leg. 🍌



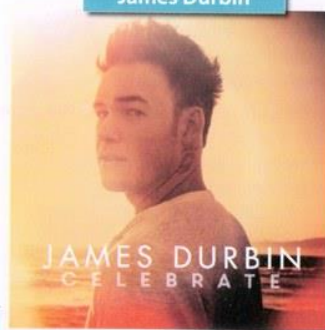
(Above) James warms up in our nation's capitol before a special acoustic show at the Kennedy Center.

(Right) The beaches of Southern California often provide a substitute for a James' hometown of Santa Cruz.



Photos: ©James Durbin personal collection

#### New Music from James Durbin



**The album:**

*Celebrate*, to be released April 8.

**Download this:**

The catchy first single, "Parachute."

**More info:** [Durbinrock.com](http://Durbinrock.com).