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# Half Boyfriend

## Jay Brannan

by Simon Dumenco/photography Nicolas Moore

It's quite the coincidence that actor and singer-songwriter Jay Brannan ended up starring in *Shortbus*, John Cameron Mitchell's sprawling, random, and sweetly sexy improvisational experiment of a movie, because Brannan himself has been living a sprawling, random, sweetly sexy improvisational experiment of a life — out of necessity.

**"I never fit the mold in so many ways, not just sexually," Brannan says of his childhood as a gay boy reared in "a very Southern Baptist, conservative, Republican world."**

He's telling me this over crepes and coffee in a French café in Chelsea, the gay-friendly New York City neighborhood his parents surely can't fathom. We're here to talk about his music, which his parents will probably never really hear, let alone understand, and his movie, which he can't imagine his parents have seen.

**"I mean, not that I know of," he says. He pauses and laughs ruefully. "If they did see it, they didn't tell me."**

Brannan was born in Texas, but "grew up all over the place," including Canada and Oklahoma—his father was a petroleum engineer who got transferred often—before ending up back in Houston, Texas just in time for a difficult adolescence. "I graduated from high school in three years because I was so miserable," he says. It didn't help that he was accidentally outed when he kissed a boy outside his house one night, thinking nobody would see them. But his brother did, and told their mom. To Brannan's parents, homosexuality "fits in this category of, like, the whole sin, sinner, hell thing," he says with a sort of weary resignation.

His escape, he thought, would be a scholarship to the prestigious acting program at the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music. But that only lasted six months. "It's like basketball—they just sort of cut me from the team. They told me I shouldn't be an actor. I was there for six months. Six months! And I was 17. They told me I couldn't play straight roles, so

there was no point in, like, trying to be in the business...."

Straight roles, as in *heterosexual* roles?

**"Right," he says. "You know, I struggle with that now. I don't know whether or not that's the case. I'm not sure if that's within the realm of capability? I know I could do it if I tried really hard, but I'm just not sure if I wanna try really hard. Like, I don't know how much energy I want to put towards that, you know, since I've spent so much time trying to be comfortable with being a feminine person, a feminine guy."**

I tell Brannan that with his current close-cropped, military-issue haircut, he doesn't come off as particularly gay, whatever that means. He pauses and considers this.

**"But, like, my voice, my mannerisms—I'd have to work on it. And probably get coaching," he says, laughing again. "But I might get laid more. Sad but true."**

**"I have like the lowest self-esteem on the planet," he adds. "So I don't generally give myself the benefit of the doubt."**

No matter. His colleagues and fans seem to love him just the way he is. And by colleagues, I mean not just John Cameron Mitchell and the *Shortbus* gang—a group that's become like an extended family to Brannan—but his colleagues at the New York translation company where he works as a proofreader to pay the bills.

When he recently played an acoustic set at Joe's Pub, the legendary East Village performance space, five of his co-workers turned up to hear him. He says he was surprised and genuinely touched by their support, and even more surprised that he now has a following of fans whom he doesn't know—people who have learned of his music from his MySpace page, or his charmingly lo-fi YouTube performance videos.

Brannan's trying to scrape up enough money to record a whole album's worth of material.

He writes sharply observed, quietly intense lyrics about relationships ("*Being your half-boyfriend wasn't half-bad...*"), with song structures that call to mind Joni Mitchell.

Right now though, the translation job is really the only thing paying the rent on bachelor Brannan's tiny, one-room apartment in a low-income housing complex. *Shortbus*, of course, didn't pay much at all, given that it was an indie film.

Other than some random little commercial and modeling gigs in Los Angeles, where Brannan lived after getting kicked out of college, his life in "entertainment," as he calls it, hasn't exactly been lucrative.

*Shortbus*, at least, was an escape. Filmed in New York (his best friend suggested he audition for it after spotting a casting call notice in a trade paper), it took him away from L.A.

**"The industry out there is so impersonal—And there's so much competition. So the way John made *Shortbus*, by improvising with the actors and making it such a collaborative effort, brought me back to what I liked about the idea of acting: It was about self-discovery; it was about getting to know the people you're working with; it was about creating something together."**

**"From the start, even the audition process was very interesting, very personal," he continues. "They got everyone together in a theater to watch each other's audition tapes and they wanted to sort of assess compatibility early on."**

John Cameron Mitchell had made it clear throughout the casting process that in this film about the intersecting lives of a group of New Yorkers, he intended to include sex and sexuality—actual sex, actual nudity—as part of the narrative.

**"So we watched each other's audition tapes and had to fill out these worksheets to, like,**

rate people about how much you'd want to sleep with them," he laughs. "Like 1 to 4, probably, maybe, definitely, never... I forget what the exact ratings were."

From that chemistry came the alchemy of *Shortbus*. "There was no script whatsoever," Brannan says. "They cast the actors before there was a story, a script, anything."

Somehow, over nearly three years of improv and co-writing, Mitchell and his cast created an improbably cohesive love letter not only to New York City, but to the very idea of sexual healing in a very troubled world.

*Shortbus*, Brannan thinks now, was a blip—an amazing bit of happenstance, of creative good will, of the sort that will never happen to him again.

And he may be right. Mitchell's process belongs to a different time—think Altman, think Cassavetes.

But Brannan has his music. It's a world and a mode in which he can try to express the sort of truth he believes is increasingly absent from commercialized entertainment culture.

"Like on MySpace," he explains, "when people leave comments for me, they're like, 'I don't know if you're even going to read this, because you probably have a team of people operating your MySpace profile and reading your emails.' They think that anyone in the entertainment industry is this sort of packaged composite with no real person behind it, because that's sort of what it's become. It's all marketing!"

Well, maybe not *all* of it.

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[www.jaybrannan.com](http://www.jaybrannan.com)

[myspace.com/jaybrannan](http://myspace.com/jaybrannan)

[www.shortbusthemovie.com](http://www.shortbusthemovie.com)

<http://youtube.com/jaybrannan>

top *Acne Jeans*  
underwear vintage





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jumpsuit *Adam Kimmel*  
tanktop *Calvin Klein*  
underwear vintage



pants *Rick Owens*  
socks *American Apparel*  
boots vintage



overall *vintage Levi's*  
henley *Martin Margiela*  
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T-shirt *adidas Y-3*  
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shirt vintage  
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