

Jay Brannan

“I wanna be your housewife!” shouts a good-looking, 20-something guy to Jay Brannan, as the good-looking, 20-something singer-songwriter makes his way through the SRO crowd to step onto the House of Blues stage in San Diego. “No, I wanna be the housewife,” laughs Brannan, shaking his head as he straps on his guitar. “Why do so many people not get that?” The woman sitting next to me smiles and sighs in mock despair at her obvious exclusion from the domestic equation’s possibilities. She’s holding a copy of Brannan’s self-released CD *Goddamned* in her hands. “He’s so fuckin’ cute,” she says, softly.

Goddamned is a pointed throwback to the female singer-songwriter movement of the '90s: Shawn Colvin, Tracy Chapman, Ani Di Franco. Those women (along with Joni Mitchell, whom Brannan covers in concert) strummed the blueprints that inspired and now bleed through Brannan’s music. The title song is a biting epistle to religious fundamentalists—the leaders and their faithful—who stoke their share of the world’s chaos and despair. The balance of the songs, however, are about the damage that men as absent, unreliable, or imaginary lovers do to other men. They’re delicate and resilient, angry and funny, hinged on the sharpest of wit. In concert, Brannan’s banter is razor-sharp and laugh-out-loud hilarious, with his barbs aimed equally at himself and a host of more deserving targets. Sitting in the office of the HOB general manager, he answered a couple of questions before his set.

ERNEST HARDY: Some reviewers have taken you to task for what they deem the retro gender and sexual politics of [first single] “Housewife.” I hear the song as being about the desire to harness the power of the archetypal figures of “housewife” and “husband.” It’s about the perceived or imagined safety and comfort of a coupling in which each partner nurtures in their specific way. They’re ways that, for lack of better language or smarter collective imagination, are encoded in the gendered expectations and performances of the housewife who cooks, cleans, and maintains the homestead, and the husband who earns the paycheck and happily unwinds by tending to the menial tasks and manual labor around the house. It always struck me as tongue-in-cheek, but also utterly sincere.

JAY BRANNAN: Everything you’re saying feels accurate to me. I don’t want to say to certain people, “No, that’s not what it means,” because I think whatever you take from something, that’s what art’s about. You can interpret it however it speaks to you or resonates with you. A lot of people think I wrote it as an anthem to gay marriage or something. To me, it’s not even about gay or straight anything. It’s about wanting to be in a relationship and not have a job, you know what I mean? [Laughs] To be taken care of, but to also take care of someone in a different kind of way. Honestly, I don’t know anyone who doesn’t want that sort of thing in some capacity—gay, straight, men, women. Like, even straight men. I’m sure many of them would love to be in a relationship and not be the breadwinner. They may be ashamed or afraid to admit it, but I think the song has universal appeal. I don’t know if that’s the right word, but I think any person can relate to it if they can see past the pronoun. And that’s the thing—people get so tripped up on pronouns.

Because your songs are written in first person, and are so intimate and confessional, do you ever have the issue of people thinking they know more about you than they do, maybe crossing boundaries inappropriately? It seems that one downside to being a no-holds-barred singer-songwriter—or, artist of any kind—is that audiences can forget that for all the truth revealed, there’s also an element of playfulness with language and ideas, and that there might be some theatricality to the most unvarnished confession.

In any situation when you’re going in with expectations, rarely is something really going to be what you thought or wanted. But, honestly, for me, it’s a little bit of the opposite of what you are saying. I think I’m very myself in my music. It’s pretty accurate to who I am and what I want to say. And people respond to it. I get a lot of e-mails saying, “Thanks for saying all the things that I’ve wanted to say for so long, or that I’ve been feeling. It’s so great to know I’m not the only one...” You know, talking about the dark, cynical, self-deprecating stuff. But, at the same time that they’re saying they relate to all these songs for that content, they don’t want you to be that person in real life. It’s almost like you’re not allowed to be that person outside of your music, which, to me, is so strange. Why are these feelings seen as so negative and so bad, yet, in the context of art, they’re socially acceptable and validated? So, people like my music and then they meet me and they’re like, “Smile more. Why can’t you just be happy?” That, to me, is where the contradiction happens.

The other thing is I was an actor in [John Cameron Mitchell’s movie, *Shortbus*]. A lot of people have a hard time separating a character with written scenes from a real person, so they think they know you before they meet you. And I can never live up to those expectations. It’s a lose-lose situation. [Laughs]

Written by **Ernest Hardy**

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