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Brendan Benson



Article by: Justin Guinn | Photos courtesy of Brendan Benson, Kayleigh Gregg, Reid Rolls | Posted: 06/26/2012

From disproving social media, challenging old-time music rules, and starting his own label, Brendan Benson is a busy man. On top of all that, he is raising his two-year-old son and touring with Young Hines and the Howling Brothers; and did we mention he's already made five records this year?

Benson got his start in 1996 with his debut album, *One Mississippi*. In the 16 years between then and now, he has released four more solo albums, all on different labels. The process of finding a new label for each was tiresome for Benson.

"There's a lot of time between records," Benson said. "There's the finding the right label and then negotiating the contract and all that crap. It was becoming a real pain." Benson was equally fed up with seeing his projects get dropped. "I had worked on some projects and produced some things that never saw the light of day -- [things] that were on major labels and for one reason or another just didn't come out."

Brendan Benson - "Bad For Me, (Live on KCRW)"

Enter ReadyMade Records.

Benson and his manager Emily White set up ReadyMade on a quick whim. He was about to start his new record, *What Kind of World*, and wasn't sure whether to look for a new label or do it himself.

"She, [White], suggested doing it ourselves, and I said, 'OK. Great.' I had always thought about doing it but just never felt confident enough. I didn't have the right team around me, the right manager." He felt confident when White made the suggestion and said she had come up with the business plan overnight. Now, seven months after ReadyMade moved from being merely a concept to a full-fledged, legitimate label, it has generated six albums and three acts currently touring the country together. "I'm just a total workaholic; I'm just obsessed with it," he said.

According to Benson, Young Hines' album, *Give Me My Change*, (which Benson also produced), didn't take much work at all.

"To this day, I wonder if I should have taken the credit... Those songs are not far from the demo," he said about Hines' album. He has equal admiration for the Howling Brothers' album he produced. Though the band has a different feel and style than his own, Benson said he and the band connect well on a personal level. "We just enjoyed each other's company and wrote songs. They had to school me on old-time music. I didn't know anything about it. I just knew I wanted to be around them and make a record with them." The

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schooling must have been immense, because the Howling Brothers album spans many genres. “The record is so dynamic. They do old-time music, but they also do folk, country, and blues. It’s really all over the place. There’s even a Cajun song on there.”

As for the tour, Benson is taking it leisurely, not wanting to stay away from his 2-year-old son for too long. Still, he claims the shows have all had great energy and have been entertaining. It’s common for Benson to play drums for the Howling Brothers, or for Ian Craft, (of the Howling Brothers), to play fiddle on one of Benson’s songs.

“It’s really fun. I think it’s a fun thing to watch. I think you can tell how much fun we’re having, which in turn makes it fun to watch.” Benson has his own fun by creatively experimenting onstage, which adds another dimension to the traditional, folk sound of the Howling Brothers. “I don’t know what the rule is in old-time music, but we’re going to challenge it,” he told the Howling Brothers.

That’s not all Benson is challenging. He refuses to embrace the new business and marketing age of music, constantly declining White’s request to embrace social media outlets.

“She’ll ask me to tweet, but I just can’t do it. I don’t work that way. You know, I don’t give a shit what you ate for breakfast or that you’re really excited to play tonight in this particular city. It sounds fucking fake.” From simply being around as long as he has, Benson has witnessed firsthand the ongoing transformation of the music industry. He believes the business side of things has begun to trump the art. “I could barely wrap my head around it in the beginning. So now, I’m just clueless. It’s so complicated now. You don’t just make a good record, put it out and it sells. You have to do more than that. You have to go further than that.”

The intrigue and mystery Benson saw in the music he grew up on has evaporated. Songs of uncertainty like “Gimme Shelter,” or albums like Bowie’s *Diamond Dogs*, have given way to a facade of transparency that is our current music industry climate. Still, he keeps hope that the art will come back around.

“I think it will change. As much as my manager is keen on that kind of stuff, I’m constantly turning it down. I want to disprove it. I want to prove that people still just really want good music and a little bit of mystery and intrigue and not every question answered.”

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