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Singer transforms beach culture into music

by LORALEE OLEJNIK
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Justin James sits strumming a guitar on the front porch of his PB home on one of those perfect San Diego summer afternoons.

You wouldn't know just by looking at the suntanned, blonde twenty-something sipping a can of Miller Lite what he's been through to get here. It's been a journey filled with island-hopping, a near-death shark attack and music. Lots of music.

Born and raised in Vancouver, Canada, James' music has taken him all over world, from touring with the British Columbia Boys Choir as a youth to several years living an "endless summer" throughout Hawaii and the Caribbean with a surfboard in one hand and a guitar in the other.

Though classically trained in cello and then choir, James said that the mobility of the guitar has allowed him to more easily integrate music into his lifestyle.

"For me the guitar was something that I could take everywhere," he said. "If I play the piano, you have to be in the room with me, in that environment."

The guitar also enabled him to write, one of his passions in life.

"As soon as I wrote my first song, I was hooked on writing. It gave me a high," James said.

It was not exactly fortuitous circumstances, however, that brought the gift of guitar into James' life.

Right after graduating high school, James moved to the Caribbean, catching waves, and, as he said, "loving life."

At 18 years old, while surfing in Venezuela, James was attacked by a tiger shark.

The attack severed his foot, resulting in severe blood loss, rendering him unconscious and leaving him incapacitated for about a year, he said.

During his recovery back in Vancouver, his grandmother, a former music teacher, gave him money for a guitar. He said he played guitar and video games until he was well enough to start traveling again, though he said to this day he still has little feeling left in his foot.

Excelling at guitar and deciding that a career in music was what he wanted to pursue, James moved to California to be formally trained at the Los Angeles Musicians Institute.

He found the music scene in L.A. distasteful and decided to head south to San Diego. "You've got to balance the whole music business with where you want to live," he said.

James packed his bags and landed in PB, where he now lives in a house with a studio in the backyard where he can rehearse.

Despite almost dying from the shark attack, James found that performing live has its dangerous moments also. Once while opening for Switchfoot at Pepperdine University, right before the opening lyrics of their first song, the former bass player Jake Styles spun around and smacked James in the face with his guitar, busting his lip and cracking his front tooth. Despite the blood and spit, and shock on the part of the bass player, the show went on.

Earlier this year James released his album "Sun Drenched," which has earned him a presence on television, including his single "California," on MTV's pseudo-reality show "Laguna Beach." His music has also been used for ABC's "What About Brian."

In addition to performing live, James said he also enjoys the business aspect of being a musician and the challenge of marketing and networking to get the next big break.

James performs at Canes Bar & Grill, 3105 Ocean Front Walk, Saturday, Aug. 11, with Rebellion, Stained Glass Saint and Slack String. The show begins at 8 p.m. and tickets are \$10. The concert is 21 and up.

For more information visit www.justinjamesmusic.com or www.canesbarandgrill.com.

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