

JOSEPH ARTHUR
BIOGRAPHY – THE GRADUATION CEREMONY
Written by: Jonathan Cohen

If there's such a thing as the opposite of writer's block, **Joseph Arthur** has it. Indeed, the Akron, Ohio-bred/Brooklyn, N.Y.-residing singer/songwriter, who once released four EPs in the span of as many months, was deep into work on two distinct albums when the music that became **The Graduation Ceremony** suddenly bubbled to the forefront.

Arthur had written a new song, *Out on a Limb*, on a friend's guitar while in Los Angeles. That song turned into 10 additional acoustic tracks, which were recorded spontaneously at **Sheldon Gomberg's** studio in one marathon session. "I'm always looking for creative outlets when I'm in L.A., because L.A. scares me," Arthur says. "There's great energy in not being home. So I called Sheldon and said I had some songs to record, and would he be up for it? He said, 'Sure,' and I said, 'Well, I'm already outside. Can I come in?' (laughs) I went through all these tracks -- some old, some brand new ones that I hadn't recorded - on mostly first or second takes, and that was going to be a record."

But Arthur began to feel that the sessions were "undercooked and underproduced," so he turned to legendary drummer **Jim Keltner** to give them an extra kick. Keltner had played on Arthur's 2000 breakthrough album "Come To Where I'm From," and the pair had re-connected while working on **Fistful of Mercy**, the eponymous 2010 debut from Arthur's band with Ben Harper and Dhani Harrison.

To nudge the new material closer to completion, Arthur then teamed with producer **John Alagia**, at whose Village studio *Fistful of Mercy* had played its first public gig in 2010. Alagia had previously produced *You're So True*, Arthur's 2004 contribution to the **Shrek 2 soundtrack**.

"I said to John, 'Maybe you could mix this acoustic, Jim Keltner thing,'" Arthur says. "I gave it to him in the state it was in, but he thought it wasn't quite where it should be. So, he came to my place in Brooklyn and I played him all this different stuff I was doing. Then I went to his place in Santa Monica. We didn't know what we were doing - suddenly there were 50 different tracks from a bunch of different works-in-progress that were potentially going to be deconstructed."

"But it wound up coming all the way back to just the Jim Keltner stuff. It had a soul and a vibe. It was perfect. We could produce it up a little bit. All it really took was adding a little production on the choruses to make them pop out more." Under Alagia's direction, adding additional color were indie queen **Liz Phair**, who contributes vocals to "Midwest," violinist **Jessy Greene**, who also played on the *Fistful of Mercy* album, and Line and Circle front-man **Brian Cohen**, who sings throughout the record. Cohen, who grew up across the street from Arthur in Akron, Ohio, accompanied Arthur on the initial trip to Gomberg's studio, which birthed **The Graduation Ceremony**.

"Brian was like the other voice on this album. He's great in that context," Arthur says. "He's got a really great voice, and there's great chemistry between us. And, he was very supportive. He really helped this record out with his enthusiasm and support."

The finished product is one of Arthur's most beautiful, understated pieces of work in a two-decade career that includes seven prior studio albums and 11 EPs, plus collaborations with Peter Dinklage and R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe. The material is rife with Arthur's trademark poetic lyrics, whether sketching a portrait of his hometown (*Midwest*) or recounting a breakup in

unflinching detail (*Gypsy Faded*).

Of the former, Arthur says, "That song has been in the cage for a long time. I have different versions of it. It's about childhood, and growing up in a town with a dead downtown, and going into your imagination out in suburbia." Of the latter, he reveals, "I was writing from the heart, even though it was a bad situation that was creating it. That song has a force because of it. It's hyper-real." Elsewhere, album opener *Out on a Limb* and *Almost Blue* harken back to dreamy, deeply felt songs like *Honey and the Moon* from 2002's [Redemption's Son](#), while the strident *Over the Sun* deftly incorporates layers of vocals with atmospheric keyboard textures.

Arthur will release **[The Graduation Ceremony](#)** on his own Lonely Astronaut label. "This record is important for me right now. I feel like on some level I've been in the penalty box," he says with a chuckle. "I don't feel like the work I've put out warrants being in the penalty box, but maybe the manner I put it out is why. Or maybe there is no penalty box, or there is no me (laughs). Either way, it was important that I put out a strong record, and I think this fits the bill."

Growing up in the '70s and '80s in Akron, Arthur's musical life started off like many others, with mandatory piano lessons. But once he realized he could use the piano to conjure up his own musical worlds, he took to the instrument and began writing songs, eventually playing in bands while in high school. Days after graduation, he moved to Atlanta with a band, playing bass and supporting himself with day jobs at a music store and tattoo shop.

At the time, Arthur aspired to be a world-class jazz or fusion bass player in the vein of the late Jaco Pastorius. But when a demo tape of Arthur's songs somehow made its way to Peter Gabriel and his Real World Records label, "I came to find out that Peter thought the bass playing was weak on my stuff, but what he liked was the lyrics."

Next thing Arthur knew, he was playing at Gabriel's WOMAD festival (despite having played solo acoustic "maybe one time before"), jamming with Gabriel and Joe Strummer in Real World studios in Bath, England, and was subsequently signed to Real World Records. "It was crazy," Arthur says. "I think I like repeating the story more the older I get."

And while Arthur's 1997 debut, [Big City Secrets](#), attracted a substantial following abroad, the artist didn't connect with Stateside listeners until [Come To Where I'm From](#), which features his signature song, *In the Sun*. That track was covered by R.E.M.'s Stipe and Coldplay's Chris Martin in 2006 on a charity single to benefit victims of Hurricane Katrina, having previously been recorded a decade earlier by Gabriel for a Princess Diana tribute album.

Previously nominated for a best recording package Grammy for his 1999 EP [Vacancy](#), Arthur is an accomplished painter, having displayed his works in galleries around the world. His online-only "Museum of Modern Arthur" serves as a repository for his creations.

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