



## James Hunter

“An overnight success that’s taken 20 years...”

That’s how James Hunter describes the outpouring of praise and acceptance for his 2006 album, *People Gonna Talk*. Issued in March 2006 on GO Records/Rounder, the Grammy-nominated *People Gonna Talk* was the singer/songwriter/guitarist’s first Stateside release after two decades of performing and recording in his native Britain.

In support of his album, James and his skin-tight band performed everywhere from hole-in-the-wall clubs to the Hollywood Bowl; they headlined in smaller venues and supported the likes of Aretha Franklin, Los Lonely Boys, Boz Scaggs, and Van Morrison in larger ones. The mellifluous R&B of *People Gonna Talk*, with its affectionate echoes of Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson, became an airplay staple on some of the nation’s most influential radio stations. The Los Angeles Times praised James Hunter’s “extraordinary soul voice”; Rolling Stone called his album “a treat not to miss.”

By the year’s end, *People Gonna Talk* was among the Top Ten “Best Albums of 2006” as cited by Mojo, USA Today pop critic Ken Barnes, and the WFUV/New York listeners’ poll, to name a few. *People Gonna Talk* was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Blues Album and James himself was nominated as Best New/Emerging Artist in the annual Americana Music Awards.

No wonder James Hunter’s second U.S. album, *The Hard Way* (due out on Hear Music in June 2008), is among this year’s most eagerly anticipated new releases. In terms of both inspiration and quotation, James has taken much from the musical past—as he will be the first to admit. But it’s his own infectious sound and inventive songwriting, blessedly free of slavish mimicry or retrograde nostalgia, that today’s audiences are responding to.

James himself wrote all the songs for *The Hard Way* and recorded the basic tracks with his working band, just as he did on *People Gonna Talk*. But now the instrumental palette is richer, the arrangements more detailed, and James himself is singing with more power and nuance than ever before. “We got further into our groove,” explains the singer, “and in two opposite directions simultaneously.”

“On the one hand, the sounds got a bit more sophisticated, a bit posher. Our tenor saxophonist Damian Hand and our drummer Jonathan Lee” – both have played with Hunter for 18-odd years, some of them very odd years indeed – “did a lot of the lush string arrangements and augmented the instrumentation with things like the vibraphone on ‘Tell Her’ and ‘Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.’”

“The upbeat tracks, meanwhile, are more rough ‘n’ ready, a bit wilder. I feel that on the previous album, we were a mite constrained. This time ‘round, we were able to let loose a bit more.”

These advances in sound were matched by James’ own progress as a songwriter. The real-life inspirations and emotions that fuel his writing naturally spur on the passion and commitment in his singing.

“A lot of the songs are composites,” he explains. “Like the song ‘Carina.’ There is a Carina, and she was a girlfriend of mine, but in truth ‘People Gonna Talk’ is more about her than the song that’s got her name on it.”

“‘Jacqueline,’ however, I wrote for my wife—we’ve been together for about three years now—and the sentiments are quite literally how I feel about her. That’s the only instance where the real name has been retained to implicate the guilty!”

The swaggering Bobby Bland-style number “Don’t Do Me No Favors” emerged from “a time when someone lent me some money when I really needed it, and later I felt rather grubby about it. Half the song is kind of denying that I’m being a ponce—a moocher, as you say in the States—and half is admit-ting that’s exactly what I am!”

“That sense of ambiguity made me feel that my writing was starting to develop. It was important to me that I could get more than one point of view into a song, because often people don’t just feel cut-and-dried about things that happen.”

The Hard Way was produced, recorded, and mixed by Liam Watson at his Toe Rag Studios in Hackney, East London. James and the band worked their way through multiple complete takes right there on Toe Rag’s postage stamp-sized floor.

“We’ve been cutting the vocals live with the band and for James it really works,” notes Liam Watson. “You don’t want that kind of music to be thought about too much. You don’t want to be too careful—you want people to be on the edge.”

James adds: “We played the songs many times—this isn’t an album of first takes—but they were complete performances...Having too much leisure to take things out and put them back in, it can make you a bit complacent. The pressure of recording live was quite exciting rather than daunting.”

While gratified by the career-high sales and positive press earned by People Gonna Talk, James himself has felt a special sense of validation when praised by musicians he’d long held in high esteem. Among them was the legendary New Orleans songwriter/producer Allen Toussaint, who caught Hunter’s dynamic live show at Joe’s Pub in New York and then introduced himself backstage during the Americana Awards in Nashville.

To James’ amazement, Toussaint later agreed to fly to England and play on the Toe Rag sessions. His trademark acoustic piano lights up “The Hard Way” and “Believe Me Baby,” with a brilliant Professor Longhair-style solo on the latter track; Allen also played electric piano on “‘Til The End” and added his unmistakable voice to “The Hard Way.”

Of the determinedly old-school Watson/Hunter style of recording, Allen Toussaint says: “The method is superb. I would say nostalgia, but not really because everything is very much alive and wide awake...By all the instruments and the song being sung at the same time, you are playing the song and not just making a track that something is going to go on top of.”

As for the sound of *The Hard Way*, Allen calls it “music that you feel you know, but is very fresh today. There’s a lot of forethought in it, but it’s not a concoction of correctness, not a carbon copy of trying to do what has happened... [It’s] more of an extrapolation than an elaboration. And it’s truly, truly a joy.”

## The Story So Far

James Hunter was born October 2, 1962 into a working-class family in Colchester, Essex. “It wasn’t quite like growing up with the blues in Alabama but in my part of England, anywhere south of Watford would be considered Alabama!” he notes with a hearty laugh. “In the States, you’ve got the Mason-Dixon Line and in England, we’ve got the Watford Gap.”

Among James’ earliest musical influences were a collection of 78 r.p.m. discs of Fifties rock & roll and rhythm & blues given to him by his grandmother; and his older brother Perry, “the one responsible for me learning how to play a G chord.” (Perry Hunter later became an accomplished acoustic guitarist; he performs regularly on the Midlands folk club circuit, playing in a traditional finger-picking style.)

James’ passion for the music of the Fifties and Sixties never waned as he toiled for seven years as a railway lock fitter in Colchester, tending to a Victorian-era safety feature found in signal boxes. He put together his first band to play at the Colchester Labor Club; his first original song, the Muddy Waters-style “Evil Eye,” was composed in 1984 for a mostly-rockabilly compilation entitled *Dance To It*. Later in the decade, he released three albums as Howlin’ Wilf & the Vee-Jays before Ace Records issued James Hunter’s solo debut, *Believe What I Say*, featuring guest appearances by Van Morrison and the late Doris Troy. James’ second solo album, *Kick It Around*, was produced by Morrissey guitarist Boz Boorer and released on Ruf Records of Germany in 2001.

In the early Nineties, Van Morrison was stopped at a London newsstand when a fan approached and began regaling him about this great unknown rhythm & blues singer he’d heard. Van went to hear James at a gig in Wales and subsequently hired him as a backup singer for several years of touring and recording. James appeared on Morrison’s live album, *A Night in San Francisco* (1994), and on the studio set, *Days Like This* (1995). But by 2003, James Hunter was 41 years old and without a record deal or a gig. His dreams of a career in music were rapidly fading.

“I went through a particularly skint time,” he later told an interviewer. “I was forced to do laboring jobs through an agency. It was terrible. I discovered that busking [playing for tips on the streets of London] was better. The hours were more sociable; the pay was better, and the crack addicts were far better company.”

Steve Erdman had been a James Hunter fan for nearly 20 years, ever since the first time he'd seen James playing on the street in Camden. In late 2003, Erdman and his partner, Kimberly Guise, created GO Records to release a new James Hunter album. "The sole purpose of the company was getting me recorded," says the singer. "It was extraordinarily nice of them." Then came People Gonna Talk, and in its wake the reviews, the airplay, the award nominations, and loads of gigs.

With the release of *The Hard Way*, James Hunter takes a giant step toward staking his place in the pop-soul pantheon alongside Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson, Charlie Rich and Van Morrison. In his typically straight-forward and self-effacing way, the singer told *The Boston Globe*: "The history [of rhythm & blues] is so rich with great singers and performers. I'm just trying to tap into that vein and try to make music that is about love and romance and heartbreak—all those great things that will fuel songs long after we're here."

At home, on the road, or in the studio, James Hunter is rarely without his 16mm Bolex movie camera.

"I really love making these home movies, and I also collect 16mm films including other people's long-forgotten home movies. I've always got the camera with me—I want to document all this because I'll be back in Colchester one day and I want someone to believe me when I tell them what happened!"