

THE MAN MAKING BEETHOVEN SEXY

*With childhood abuse,
drug addiction and
suicide bids behind him,
James Rhodes is not your
typical classical pianist.
Yet his passionate
playing and rock-star
aura could be just
what the music needs.
Alan Franks meets him*

PORTRAITS Jude Edginton



ALBION MEDIA | PR

10 STRATFORD PLACE • LONDON • W1C 1BA T 020 7495 4455 F 020 7495 4459

JAMES RHODES

It's a bold start to a classical piano recital when the soloist ambles on in jeans and trainers, munches on a Twix bar, stuffs his fag packet into the instrument and hushes the welcoming applause by telling his audience: "Don't clap yet; it might be complete crap."

Not so much a start as the opening shot in a continuous statement that threads its way between the pieces over the course of the next hour and a bit. "The last time I played this," he confides to the packed house, "I was in a locked psychiatric hospital in America." Then off into Busoni's majestic arrangement of Bach's *Chaconne*, rolling his head, slouching his shoulders and looking for all the world like the keyboard hero of an indie band.

This brings us straight to the heart of the strange story of James Rhodes's career, as he is the first classical pianist to be signed by a rock music label. That is, the first pianist performing the core classical repertoire. No drifting over into more populist genres, no three-minute singles from the famous bits of the *Moonlight Sonata*, no quick snatches from the Hovis ads. The true C-word for this liberally profaning young man is "crossover", which he describes as "offensive to humanity".

The company that has picked him up, after just two recital albums on Signum Classics, is the giant Warner. This puts him on the same label as Metallica, Red Hot Chili Peppers and R.E.M. His response is that Beethoven and Metallica have much in common, at least in their hair. As does he, which is as insistently dishevelled as his own 35-year life has been. Which is very. The president of Warner Music Entertainment says that Rhodes can be to classical music what Jamie Oliver has been to cooking. "A unique artist with a no-nonsense mass-market approach to music," is how he describes him. As Rhodes unfolds the awful details of his past, some of it not so distant, this billing sounds positively sober and formal.

We meet in Steinway Hall, a renowned piano emporium in Marylebone. With the great wood-cased instruments standing there in silence, the building has a peculiarly morgue-like feeling. Then Rhodes sits at one of them, tears into a Beethoven concerto, and the place starts to resonate. It is startling, intense and unorthodox, although less so than the things he then says, and the way he says them, as the last chord fades.

"So poor Joe Schmo leaves work, goes home. It's 6.30, there's no time to eat, he goes out again, sits, the lights go down, everyone's sitting straight-backed and wearing ties, they can all pronounce the names and they know when to clap and they have studied long essays by Oxford dons about the sonata form, there's a quick 20-minute interval, the guy's exhausted, if he's in London he's freezing as

well, he's dying for a big juicy steak and he's missing his kids at home, and then it's 9.45pm and he's out in the middle of town trying to get home, and it's cost him 60 quid. I would genuinely rather whack on a CD and get a hooker round, which would be more fun, more relaxed. Why not have the concert starting at 6.30, for an hour, no interval, no programme notes? I'll talk about the pieces and say why I want to play this one or that one."

And he does. Many of his reasons have to do with the lives of the composers almost as much as the splendour of the music they created. Our perceptions of them tend to be austere, almost religious, whereas the fact is, he argues, that some of them were "nut jobs". He mentions the madness of Chopin, the despair of Beethoven, the promiscuity of Bach, "fathering 20 children, screwing his way round Leipzig". Rhodes ruffles feathers. It is part of his mission, rather as it is for Russell Brand, whom he resembles slightly, with his piratical charm and professionally unguarded mouth. But then one of the very characteristics that is being marketed is a kind of danger, the sense that something inappropriate is about to be said. He has already drawn gratifying amounts

**'Go to a concert hall?
I would genuinely rather
whack on a CD and
get a hooker round'**

of outrage with his complaint that a typical English concert hall is "full of people with blue rinses and smells vaguely of urine".

What is certain is that the audience at his Roundhouse concert last year had a younger average age than that of, say, a Wigmore Hall recital. Many present – perhaps a majority – had never been to such a performance, and were drawn by its taking place in a space better known for rock gigs. Far from being alienated by his manner, they seemed drawn in by his irreverence and the user-friendly manner of his presentation. The *Chaconne* he introduced as being "like a f***ing cathedral".

Rhodes might have turned out to be part of the establishment, musical or otherwise. One of three children of a Jewish North London lawyer, he went to Harrow public school. While the institution has produced any number of prime ministers, bishops and generals, it has also done a surprisingly brisk trade in rebels and one-offs, from Lord Byron through to Island Records founder Chris Blackwell and Baroness Thatcher's wayward son, Mark. Rhodes's contemporaries thought

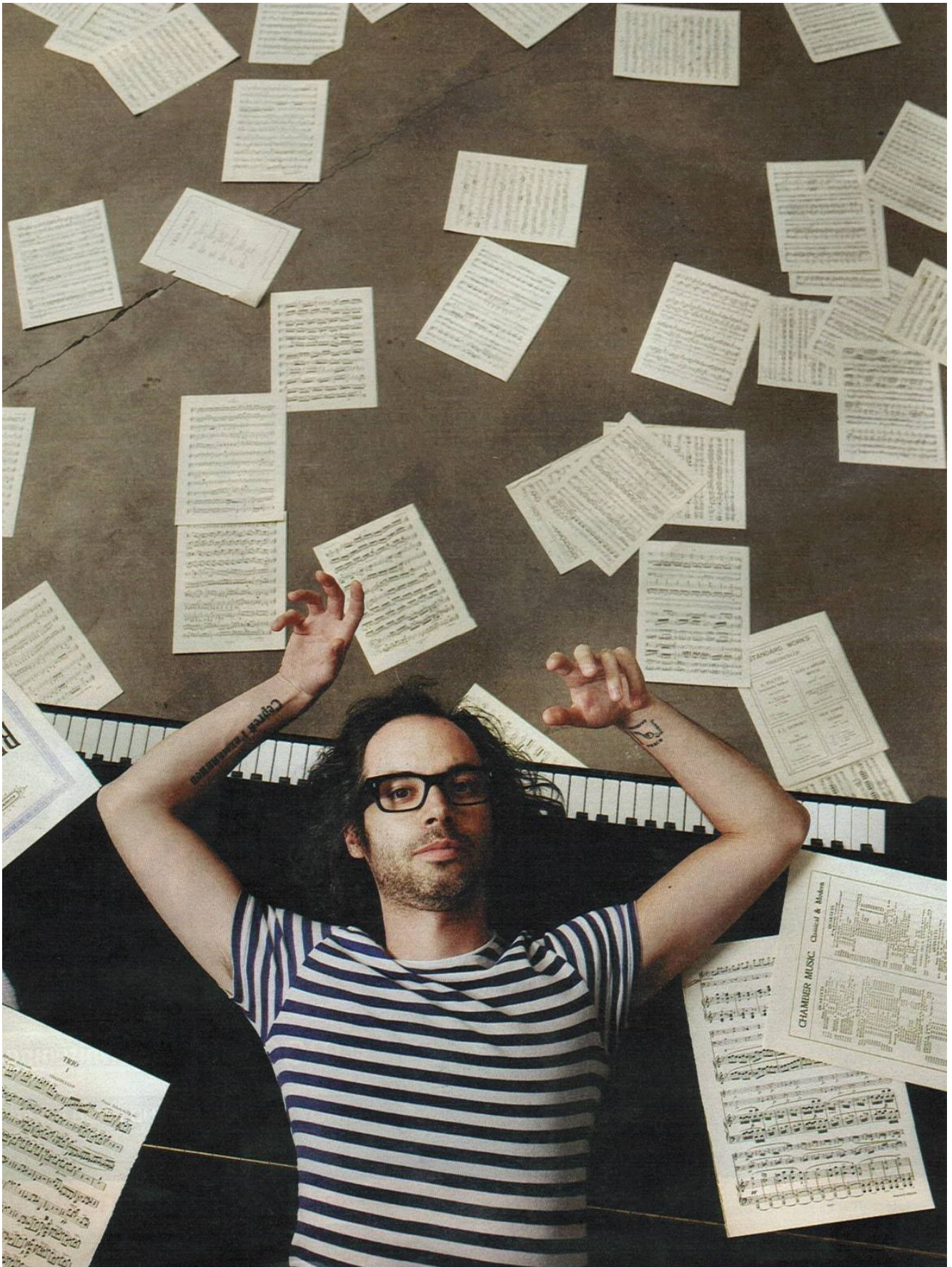
him odd for wanting to listen to Mozart rather than R.E.M. or the Smiths. He loathed the school, but had the benefit of an inspirational music teacher called Colin Stone. "He was great," says Rhodes. "I used to go round to his house and he would let me smoke in the garden." In one of Rhodes's reports, Stone said: "If enthusiasm equalled talent, James would rival Ashkenazy, but unfortunately it doesn't."

The strange thing is that from the age of 18, when he left Harrow, to 28, he didn't play the piano at all. This lay-off, huge in the career of a young concert pianist, is one reason why some have questioned his ability to perform at the highest level. From school he went to the University of Edinburgh where, as he puts it, he was apparently studying music, but instead ended up in a drug rehabilitation unit. He tells this and other stories of his past with the same dark hilarity, offering the politest of apologies in case he is saying the wrong things.

Trace Rhodes's life back to infancy and the music becomes upstaged by a horror story of sexual abuse. In his account, this took place between the ages of 5 and 10 at his day school. There was, he says, a gym teacher who assaulted him "viciously for a number of years". The physical damage was so severe that, later, at the age of 13, he needed a back operation as the assaults had fractured his spine. At the time, he says, it would have been out of the question to tell his parents about it. Instead, he became "to use the technical term, totally dissociated, from as far back as I can remember. Everything was wandering around like a Womble in shades of grey. I was genuinely baffled by life, in every way."

At 7, while all this was going on, he stole one of his father's CDs, Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*, and almost at once became obsessed with the piano. Tuition at his school didn't go beyond Grade 3, so he set about teaching himself, learning to sight-read and memorise complex scores with little difficulty. He loved the loud, dramatic stuff, so when he listened to recordings, he would skip from the first movement to the last. But once, when he couldn't be bothered to get out of bed and fast-forward the CD, the second movement of the *Emperor Concerto* came on and he found himself crying for the first time.

Music, he says, became an escape, a place of safety. It was also a kind of addiction, albeit a non-toxic one, in a compulsive personality. The main thing was that it was getting him through. Looking back now, nearly 30 years on, it seems inevitable that when he cut the playing out of his life for those 10 years, something dreadful was going to happen. It did. He had a major breakdown and several attempts at suicide. He talks of blood all over the floor, of self-harming all the time, of knowing he was not a fraction of the man he was meant to be, but of being unable to do



ALBION MEDIA | PR

10 STRATFORD PLACE • LONDON • W1C 1BA T 020 7495 4455 F 020 7495 4459

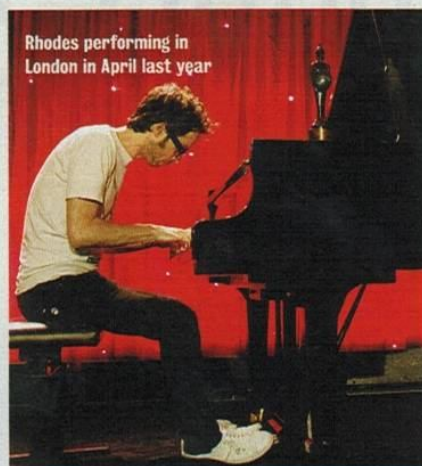
anything about it. The means by which he tried to kill himself included hanging – twice – and cutting himself, and there was a long time spent sitting on the edge of Beachy Head, looking at nothing. “On two occasions I was definitely ready to go,” he says. This despite the fact that he had been clear of drugs and alcohol for several years. “The others may have been cries for help, but a friend of mine who is a psychologist says that even cries for help have to be classed as suicide attempts.”

Back when he was 18, he had considered taking up the offer of a scholarship at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, but succumbed to parental pressure for a “proper” university degree. After Edinburgh he went to UCL – “To study psychology!” – and then immersed himself in the City. The way he now tells it, this too was a form of abuse, even though he was inflicting it upon himself. “Awful, just awful. I tried to substitute making money for music. Can you imagine anything more depressing? Into the office at six in the morning, first one there, last one to leave, going full throttle to try to make myself into the right shape. I was sales director at a financial publishing company. It was utterly tedious. I was telling lies. The whole time. Oh, I was great. I could sell ice cream to Eskimos.”

It sounds like deep self-perjury. “It was. The kettle was on the hob and the steam was building up and up.” He got married to a woman ten years older than him, an American Catholic writer, and they had a son. They have since separated. She and their child live abroad. The situation is difficult, he says, though he still sees the boy, now 7, and is in a new relationship. In fact, it was the fear that one day his son would tell him to stop wasting his time and be reconciled to his first love of piano playing that made him quit the City.

He thought of a career in music, but as something other than a performer. He wrote to the agent of his favourite pianist, Grigory Sokolov, thinking he might become an agent himself. To his surprise he received a reply and an invitation to meet the agent in Genoa. There was a Yamaha there, and Rhodes began playing it. “When he heard me,” says Rhodes, “his jaw hit the floor and he said he had never heard anyone play so well who was not a concert pianist. He told me I was not going to be an agent, but I was going to study with a friend of his to unlearn some of the bad habits I had picked up by being self-taught.

“So I did. He was a lunatic, this man [Eduardo Strabbioli], a proper madman, but also, I happen to think, the best teacher in the world. Every time I see him I want to kill myself because he is one of the most critical, judgmental motherf**ers. He screams and he slams the lid down. For a year I endured this guy kicking my ass. There’s still a long way to go, I’m the first to admit. Every other concert



‘My response to abuse was to disappear, to introvert. I was just terrified by everything’

pianist has gone to music college, done the competitions, studied from the age of 5, practised 6 to 8 hours a day, played Chopin studies by 12. I’m very aware of my own technical shortcomings.”

Rhodes spent much of 2007 being treated in the Priory for his mental breakdown. He believes the help he received there saved his life. Not long after leaving, he met a Canadian entrepreneur, Denis Blais, who is now his manager. Blais was moved to tears by Rhodes’s playing, was astounded to learn that he had made no albums, and got him the Signum deal. The first CD was the autobiographically titled *Razor Blades, Little Pills and Big Pianos*.

Blais is crucial to Rhodes’s emergence for a number of reasons. First, it was he who suggested he introduce his audiences to the pieces in the same way that he had explained them to him. And it is he who has helped him to reach new audiences by playing at such places as the Roundhouse and at this summer’s Latitude Festival, along with Florence and the Machine and Vampire Weekend. Second, Blais was also a victim of sex abuse and is a recovering alcoholic. They share a passionate conviction that openness is the only way of dealing with these problems. Both have no doubt that the trauma of their early lives led to the later agonies of addiction and collapse. Once you know this, the project that is Rhodes’s career takes on a second mission. It is one that is perhaps even more

important than the first, and it makes the emphasis of the story shift.

This is how the pianist puts it: “I only talk about it as I do because I know that if we don’t do that, then they [the perpetrators] win. The whole premise of abuse is that it is not talked about. They are very clever at convincing their victims not to do that. The automatic response in my case was just to disappear, to introvert totally. There was bed-wetting, twitches, weird sex stuff, torturing small animals – I was a serial killer when I was growing up. Just terrified by everything. The point about it [sexual abuse] is that there is nowhere to put this stuff, and the only way of telling people you’re in pain is not by doing the mature, healthy thing and saying just that, but by slashing yourself or wrecking yourself with drugs so people will see. This is one of the things that I really want to break down.”

And here is the dilemma for the two men: on one hand, promote this raw but undoubted talent; on the other, don’t get him known as the pianist who was abused as a child. Yet, as we’ve seen, the music, the self-destruction and the reclamation are all tangled up in the fabric of his life so far. He still struggles to express his joy in the safe haven that the music offers.

How good a pianist is he? Twenty years on, Colin Stone says: “He’s a real talent, definitely. It is extraordinary that he has managed to do what he has done. In some ways he is not as well tutored as he could be, and he struggles with the very demanding stuff, but he has this extraordinary passion. Many can claim to be better pianists, but that’s missing the point.” Chloe Cutts of *International Piano Magazine* echoes Stone’s caution about technique, but adds that he has some truly interesting ideas. “He has an amazing story,” she says, “which is the main thing. But he can certainly play, even if he is not up there with Evgeny Kissin. He is definitely bringing in new audiences.”

He’s definitely going at it fortissimo. The Jamie Oliver of classical music? Perhaps the Nigel Kennedy of the piano is nearer the mark. Or else the latest in a long line of eccentric and troubled players that takes in John Ogdon, Glenn Gould and David Helfgott. We shall see. “He’s told you a lot,” says Denis Blais, “but, you know, that’s not the half of it.” If the appetite for him is there, it is partly because of the success of such crossover artists as Katherine Jenkins, ironic though that may be. The selling point in Rhodes’s case is that the escape route of music is his way back into a life he did his best to lose. His means of introducing strangers to the repertoire entails letting them into that life. A little way at least. It must be better than getting out of it. ■

James Rhodes plays the Latitude Festival, which runs from July 15-18. To see Alan Franks interviewing Rhodes, go to thetimes.co.uk/music