Jim Brickman

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The Center for Performing Arts
Governors State University

Presents

JIM BRICKMAN

Saturday, February 10, 2001
8:00 PM

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Audiences do, indeed, respond to the keyboard artistry of Jim Brickman. He is a staple of adult-contemporary, pop, country and smooth jazz radio playlists. During the past four years he has become a concert headliner. In 1997 his albums By Heart, Picture This and The Gift all became Gold Records. Brickman’s songs “Valentine” and “The Gift” have been adopted as new holiday favorites. His syndicated weekly radio program “Your Weekend” has been picked up by more than 75 top A/C stations coast to coast, and has featured such guests as Jim Carrey, Tom Cruise, Whitney Houston and John Travolta, among others.

Last fall Brickman was named “Songwriter of the Year “ by the SESAC performance rights organization. “Your Love,” his collaboration with Michelle Wright, won an award from the Canadian Country Music Association. “It’s been a wonderful thing,” says Brickman, who Billboard magazine recently called the “Cornerstone of Adult Contemporary Radio.” “The whole joy of this is in people’s reactions to the melodies. It’s funny — I never thought I would be a performer. It never occurred to me as a kid. I always thought I’d be a songwriter for other people. You have to remember that at that time there really was nobody, no solo pop piano player, you could use as a role model.”

Jim Brickman grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. Neither his stockbroker father nor his librarian/journalist mother was musical in any way. Yet as a boy he was fascinated with a neighbor’s piano keyboard. “I was four when they began to let me play it. I think the idea of melody is what I was attracted to. My mom signed me up for music theory classes and piano lessons. They bought me a piano when I was 10.” Not a fan of his lessons, he realized that the reason he wasn’t was because he was a composer at heart. The piano was his vehicle for self expression, not an instrument on which to polish clinical technique. To this day, Jim Brickman will not describe himself as a virtuoso pianist. He is, however, an eloquently expressive one. As a teenager, he performed in a high school band with singer Anne Cochran, who still tours with him as a vocalist. A piano arrangement of the Boz Scaggs song “We’re All Alone” earned Brickman first place in a Cleveland “Battle Of The Bands” contest and a recording session that led to local radio airplay. But he harbored no fantasies of following in the footsteps of boyhood idols like Elton John, Fleetwood Mac or The Eagles. He was, after all, an instrumentalist.

So while he was a classical-piano student at the Cleveland Institute of Music and a business student at Case Western Reserve, Brickman mailed piano tapes to jingle companies and ad agencies. This led to a 12-year career as a composer of themes and jingles. “It was all leading up to this, although I didn’t know it at the time. I was learning to run my own business and polishing my craft. I knew I wanted to do something else, but I didn’t know what it was. I moved to Los Angeles. I thought about writing music for movies or maybe making records. I’d been in L.A. for two years or so, doing some work for Disney and getting by. Some friends came to visit from Phoenix. When they got ready to leave, one said, ‘We’ve been here for a week and you never played the piano once.’ I realized I’d been writing for so long that I never actually thought of my playing as being marketable.”

In a world that sometimes seems insane, it is a comfort to know that there is still a place for a gentle melody. Amid the anger and shouts, the thunder and screaming of the pop-music world, a solo piano player has found his way to stardom. His name is Jim Brickman; and he is one of the most remarkable success stories of the 1990s.

With Destiny, Brickman’s fifth album, the collection follows its predecessors with signature piano solos, as well collaborations with guest performers Carly Simon, Michael W. Smith, Pam Tillis, Michelle Wright and the new duo Jordan Hill and Billy Porter. These voices, as well as the trumpet of the legendary Herb Alpert, add various textures to Brickman’s distinctive compositions.

“The concept of Destiny, before I started, was to create something that was hopeful, positive,” says the pianist/composer. “I like simplicity. There is so much singer/songwriter angst out there. I wanted to offer only good feelings.”

When it comes to his guest artists, Brickman has one criteria. “I try to pick singers who can communicate with my audience,” Brickman says. “On Destiny, I chose Michael W. Smith for ‘Love of My Life’ because he’s a guy with a voice that sounds like your
boyfriend or your husband. He’s believable. Michelle Wright is a fantastic singer who’s a very big star in Canada; in the case of Carly Simon on ‘Hush Li’l Baby,’ it was just me being a total fan. I’ve always loved her as a singer.”

“I met Jordan Hill at a Knoxville Children’s Hospital benefit concert and thought she had this amazingly soulful vocal quality. I put her together with Billy Porter on ‘Destiny,’ even though the two of them had never sung together. I like to put things together like that.”

One of the modern pioneers of pop instrumentals is Herb Alpert, whose work with The Tijuana Brass defied expectations by selling millions during the go-go ‘60s. Brickman says he was thrilled that his predecessor knew of his work and agreed to appear on the track “Rendezvous.” The album’s “bonus track” is “What We Believe In,” a collaboration with award-winning Nashville star, Pam Tillis.

But the core of Brickman’s artistry remains his lovely piano compositions, so eight of the Destiny tracks are his solo instrumentals.

“This is who I am,” he comments. “This is the way I write. And you have to give the people who love you more of what they love.”

Brickman listened to the instrumental records that were around at the time and decided his work compared favorably to what was available. He booked studio time, recorded some original melodies and took the result around to easy-listening radio stations. He collected letters from broadcasters who heard his audition tape. They said, basically, “If Jim Brickman had a record album, we’d play it.” Then he presented his package to record labels.

In retrospect, it was brilliant. Jim Brickman was a 32-year-old businessman with no background in entertaining. However, he had a sublime gift of melody and a keen marketing sense. Windham Hill signed the unknown and issued the aptly titled No Words in 1994. Brickman rolled up his sleeves and went to work.

“I listened to A/C stations and realized that their superstars — people like Whitney Houston and Rod Stewart — weren’t visiting their stations. So I went. Back then, it was a new approach — free station concerts, interviews, listener-appreciation shows. I was basically marketing myself. I wanted to be an artist they could ‘own.’ It was hard trying to get in there and do something different. They don’t make videos of instrumental songs. There were stations that had ‘no instrumentals’ policies. But I slowly built up my touring business.”

In 1995 a Wisconsin station sponsored Brickman in a “Salute to Working Women” concert that became a huge success. He’d found his audience. He learned that people were playing his instrumentals in massage-therapy sessions, at dinner parties or during candle-lit bubble baths. Word was spreading. The romantic “Angel Eyes” and “If You Believe” began picking up radio airplay from his second album, By Heart. The following year, the CD’s title tune became his first top-20 A/C hit.

Brickman began coloring his instrumental records with occasional vocal performances of his melodies. His 1997 collection, Picture This, included a track sung by country star Martina McBride. “Valentine” rocketed up the charts at both country and A/C stations and became the overnight theme song for that most romantic of holidays. Brickman issued his Christmas CD, The Gift, at the end of the year. This time his guest vocalists were Susan Ashton and Collin Raye, who added a solo version of the title tune to his million-selling hits collection. The song became another instant holiday favorite and a hit on three different charts when it was embraced by the contemporary-Christian market and honored with a Dove Award from the Gospel Music Association.

With his past successes on record, on the radio and on tour, Jim Brickman has certainly found his destiny.
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“MY VALENTINE”
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Jim Brickman souvenirs available in the lobby
during intermission and after the show.