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Published: Wednesday, April 22, 2009

Seattle Rock Star Living up 'Second Childhood' as Caspar Babypants

By Elizabeth M. Gillespie

Chris Ballew is sounding a lot like a born-again kid these days. With the zeal of a soul-searcher who's finally found his true self, the Presidents of the United States of America's lead singer raves about his new calling: children's music.

The Seattle-based rock star, best known for his mid-1990s Presidents' hits "Lump" and "Peaches," released his first children's music album as Caspar Babypants in mid-February. When he talks about *Here I Am!* and the next five albums he's already working on, he's all energy and exuberance. He's still playing and touring with the Presidents, but he says he's finally found a new vibe he loves so much, he's convinced he has enough material to keep him writing and recording constantly until he's an old man.

Ballew goes by Caspar in some circles (a nickname he once adopted because "Chris" struck him as boring) and picked the other half of his kids' music moniker from a pair of hand-knitted baby pants he wore as a hat when he was living in Boston. He recently sat down with *Seattle's Child* in the tiny recording studio behind his West Seattle home.

Taking turns strumming on a few of the dozen-plus guitars that hang on the walls of his studio, Ballew talked about what he loves about writing and playing kids' music, how fatherhood has changed him, and more – including the next five albums he's already working on: a new mix of originals and traditionals, a collection of Beatles covers, a Christmas album, a parody record (Tom Petty's "Free Falling" becomes "Free Crawling," and Snoop Dog's "Gin and Juice" becomes "Juicy Juice") and a record based on stories written by kids. Here are some highlights from the interview:

What made you decide to start writing kids' music?

I donated a record to PEPS (Program for Early Parent Support) in 2002. I made a record of mostly traditional songs ... and donated it to them so they could raise money to fuel their organization, and I just really forgot about it. But I really enjoyed doing it. ...

Flash forward to now, and my girlfriend, Kate (Endle, who designed *Here I Am!*'s CD cover), illustrates children's books and we started talking about doing a book-CD combination thing, maybe. So I started writing a few songs for that idea. We were going to do it about birds and bugs, and I started writing, and then as I was writing, I sort of started stumbling on these old nursery rhymes and traditional folk songs and had ideas about how to rewrite them and come up with new verses and suddenly something very small became really big – like, so big I feel like I've barely scratched the surface of it now.

Tapping into old music is such an eye-opener for me, because

CONVERSATIONS

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PHOTO BY MARCUS DONNER (click to enlarge)
Chris Ballew fascinates 2-year-old Sylvia Gillespie as he plays a melodica in the recording studio behind his West Seattle home.

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REVIEW: Caspar Babypants' Here I Am!

I had a hunch I was going to like this album a few verses into "Small Black Ant," a ditty Ballew adapted from a song his mom used to sing him when he was a boy.

"Lickin' up crumbs off a dirty broom. Shootin' his booty 'cross the living room. This is how I found a small black ant." In the next verse, the ant gets saved from a spider web, "now we're friends and I rub his head. This is how I found a small black ant."

It's cute stuff – catchy and charming in an easy-going, unassuming style that somehow seems like a perfect fit with Ballew's calming yet buoyant vocals. This first track on *Here I Am!* is easy to sing along to – my 2-year-old daughter started doing it

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29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
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I'm used to inventing everything from the ground up. ... It's really relaxing and fun and nice to tap into something that's old and draw on old traditions and let that influence my original stuff. ...

I've been searching for 12 years for a sound and a sort of palette, a place to be musically that's not the rock band, that is comfortable, and that I have no reservations about. I've tried a lot of different combinations, and this is it. I've found it. I'm just so thankful that I found it – it's really nice. And I feel like I'm just starting – it's baby steps – *literally!*

What do you like about writing and singing kids music?

I like it because I don't have to add a layer of irony to what I naturally do well. The Presidents' songs have that sort of innocence, but then there's a layer of coolness or irony or grown-upness on it. You know, I'm singing about peaches, but am I really singing about peaches kinda thing? With kids music I don't have to deal with that. I'm left to be completely exposed and innocent and simple, and that is just so relaxing.

The other aspect of it, outside of my own experience writing songs, is I feel like it's a very important time for a little human to be exposed to imaginative, vivid songs and lyrics and stories. ...

Another reason I feel great doing it is that the atmosphere in a new home where there's a baby is crazy. I mean, you can't sleep. It's hectic. ... It's hectic in the car, and it's hectic at home and you need something to lighten the load. So I'm hoping the music is that ... a load-lightener for the stressed-out family.

There's a lot of kids' music out there that's marketed as stuff that won't drive parents crazy, but it does. What are some of the mistakes you think kids' musicians are making and what are you trying to do differently?

Basically, don't tell kids what to do – show them is my thing. ... I want to take them for a walk under a rock or have a little ant be their friend. I'm really not interested in saying, "Time to dance, kids!" or "Here's how you tie your shoe," or "Here's how you count to 10." ...

I think a lot of children's music is a little too instructional and a little too bombastic. I think it's a chaotic sound that's telling people what to do. ... I want to go to a soothing sound that shows you a little movie – a little image that you can enjoy in your head and gives you a melody that you can sing later without the recording.

Why did you do this on your own? Did you not want to deal with a record label?

Yeah, I just wanted to get the ball rolling. ... Now I've got a little interest from some labels, and my goal is to put the next record out with a label and rerelease the first one on a real label, and, you know, just grow from there.

I feel like this is going to be the thing I do for the next 20, 30 years. The other thing I love about this ... it's something I could do as an old man. ... Unlike rock 'n' roll, where it's related to beauty and youth and all that intensity, this has a much more sustainable organic kind of long-term vibe. I love it.

How has fatherhood changed you, or has it?

You know, it didn't for a long time. ... When I would lay the kids on a blanket and play for them, I caught a glimpse of ... how that unconditional love, how the chemistry that takes over when you have a kid and you think, "How am I going to not sleep and how am I going to deal with all that poo?" and then you just do it, because you are built to do it. And in some way, musically that happened to me, too. And I caught a glimpse at how relaxing and easy music can be when it's influenced by the love of a parent and a child. But I didn't get it until just recently.

It's influenced me in a way that I've gotten to be a kid again. ... I'm having a second childhood, which I think will last the rest of my life now.

(Ballew, 43, has two children: 11-year-old Augie and 8-year-old Josie, who split their time between dad and Ballew's "divoncée" – his term of endearment for his ex-wife, with whom he says he has a great relationship).

Do you plan to continue with The Presidents for years to come?

Oh yeah, sure. We're finishing up a record cycle now. And then the rest of 2009, after a European tour ... and a couple other little trips, is gonna be real quiet. I'm just really gonna focus on the Baby pants thing. ... We've talked about the Presidents coming into the Baby pants camp and doing a kid record – it might be geared a little older than the babies. ...

It's kind of unclear if we're going to do another full-bore Presidents' record. I'm kind of getting done with the loud rock n' roll, but who knows?

Of the five albums you're working on, do you know the next one that's going to come out, and how soon?

I think the next album (will be) originals and traditionals. ... I don't want to leap into cover albums and stuff early, because I have

is easy to sing along to – my 2-year-old daughter started doing it after the second or third time she heard it (she requests it on a regular basis now) – and it's hard to listen to without tapping your feet.

Other songs won me over with a similar mix of fun sounds and images: a poor, little broken truck that used to haul rubber ducks and sippy cups ... a brand new baby snake that feasts on bugs and chocolate cake ... poor little dust bunnies huddling beneath a door jam as they hide from a vacuum cleaner.

Ballew sings most of the songs and plays all the instrumentals (guitar, keys, melodica – a "blow organ" that's sort of a cross between an accordion and a harmonica). Jen Wood, an indie folk rock singer, does lead vocal on a few really nice tracks – one of my favorites is "Calling from Clouds," about a bird flying south for the winter. It's not your typical lullaby – it doesn't tell your baby it's time to go to sleep. It just sounds so soothing that it makes you want to close your eyes and start dreaming.

My current favorite (it's changed a number of times) is "Monkey River," a song he recorded with the Presidents on their 2004 *Love Everybody* record. He tells a sweet story on his Web site about what inspired him to write the song about him floating down a river, solo in his leaky canoe:

"When I was a wee child I wanted desperately to jump into the monkey exhibit at the Seattle zoo and live on the island in the middle with the monkeys. There is old super 8 footage of me trying to climb in over and over! My mom eventually convinced me that I would be better off with her at home, so I gave up on that, but put all that wanting into this song."

I've never been a big fan of "Three Blind Mice," what with tails getting cut off with carving knives. The Caspar Baby pants remake gives the story a more light-hearted spin, with the mice doing the boogaloo and staying up until half past two. It's not just the kinder, gentler lyrics. It's just a nicely done arrangement, plain and simple – when my iPod is on shuffle, it barely stands out as a kids' song when it follows some hip tune I've gotten from KEXP's daily podcast.

I checked in with KEXP's John Richards, host of the radio station's popular "Morning Show," to get his take on Ballew's debut as Caspar Baby pants. He called it "a nice change of pace for parents who want to listen to great music with their kid and neither are offended, bored nor embarrassed. The beauty of the music of Chris Ballew is that even when I was jumping off the stage and dancing like a fool at those early Presidents' shows, it was mostly because he and the band made me feel like a kid again."

– Elizabeth M. Gillespie

MORE ABOUT Caspar Baby pants' *Here I Am!*

Buy it online at baby pantsmusic.com, which also has a list of upcoming Caspar Baby pants performances. You can get an autographed CD in a recyclable cardboard sleeve for \$10 or a digital download for \$8. (Ballew encourages folks to buy the digital version because it's waste-free.) It's also available through iTunes, Amazon.com, www.indiemerchstore.com, cdbaby.com, and lala.com.

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so much of my own stuff. ... The Beatles' one will take a while, because it's a lot of work – you know, it takes a long time to understand the song and figure out how to produce it and get it done. ... The Christmas record will be for next Christmas. And the story record and the parody album will be once I get a label and some juice. ... I'm good friends with Weird Al (Yankovic), and he's been kind of counseling me on the parody thing. It's a legal ... just mess. Do you know how many people wrote "Gin and Juice"? Ten. The guy who delivered the pizza wrote "Gin and Juice." And you have to ask all ten, and if any of them say no you can't do it. So I want to wait until I have some sort of caché. ...

Are you going to go on tour as Caspar Babypants?

No, I'm just getting the ball rolling. ... Part of me was thinking I really wouldn't play live at all that much, but then I kind of changed my mind after I did it once. It was so fun and so cool to get into improvising with kids ... Where I'm inspired to make this music for is in the home and in the car. I think the music's main function is helping the home and the car be a more tolerable place. The live thing is almost an afterthought to me.

Elizabeth M. Gillespie is managing editor of Seattle's Child and mother of a toddler. Her current Caspar Babypants favorite is "Monkey River." Her daughter's is "Small Black Ant." Her husband's: "Three Blind Mice."

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