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Gather round the campfire with Brett Dennen

Written by Cyndi Lieske

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It's easy to picture Brett Dennen as the camp counselor everyone loves.

The easy-going, frequently barefoot Dennen says he learned to write and perform in his teens while working as a camp counselor in California. His singing style has been called a cross between Dave Matthews and Jack Johnson, and his lyrics would suggest there's a little bit of Woody Guthrie thrown in.

Dennen's songs include "Heaven," recently re-recorded with Natalie Merchant, "Ain't Gonna Lose You," featured on Grey's Anatomy and

"Make You Crazy." This summer, he'll open a few shows for the Dave Matthews Band. When he's not performing, and sometimes when he is, Dennen promotes the humanitarian organizations he's started, The Mosaic Project and Love Speaks.

Headed to Michigan for his show at Hope College, Dennen talked with REVUE from his California home about what he's been up to lately, recording with former 10,000 Maniacs singer Merchant and how campfire songs spurred his love of songwriting and performing.

On Twitter you mentioned that you are going to be doing some shows with Dave Matthews this summer. Any other plans?

I do have some light touring with Dave Matthews in June and July, and doing some festivals and going to Europe. Right now, it is sort of the end of my album. So I'm not really out there touring like I was last year. Right now, I am just spending my energy on taking a little bit of time off and writing songs and recording and getting ready to go back out there and do it all over again.

When do you think you will have your next record out?

I've got all the songs written. I'm working out the details with my record label and with the players who are going to play on it. I'm just trying to figure out setting a schedule. I know I will probably start recording within the next couple of months. It could be out as early as this fall or it could be as late as the spring of next year.

How did the project with Natalie Merchant come about?

I've been a fan of hers for a long time. I recently gained a connection to her because she started working with the manager I work with. Because of that, I was able to have a good introduction to her. I just asked her if she wanted to sing on the song. She was nice enough to say yes. It was brilliant.

It must have been a thrill to record with her.

Absolutely. She's one of the first artists that I was a huge fan of. Beyond that, she's got a legendary voice, an unmistakable voice. To hear her incredible voice was a dream come true and also a very surreal experience. To hear her singing a song that I wrote was really bizarre in a good way and it really inspired me.

Brett Dennen

Dimment Memorial Chapel,

Hope College, Holland

April 24, 8 p.m.

\$20, \$10 Hope students

hope.edu/calendar, (616) 395-7890**Who influenced you to become a musician?**

When I was a kid, I went to summer camp starting at the age of 10. In the off-season I looked forward to going. More than anything, I wanted to grow up and work at the summer camp. I wanted to be one of the camp counselors. I wanted to be one of the camp counselors that played guitar around the campfire and sang the songs. To me those were like the rock stars. They were my heroes. They were my idols.

I did end up working at the camp as a teenager and started volunteering. Then I got a job. There were guitars around I learned how to play guitar and soon enough I was one of the campers holding the guitar and playing the guitar and leading the whole camp in songs every night. That's what really made me fall in love with the idea of just singing for people or singing with people, but also it is what really made me fall in love with songwriting, at least folk songs.

Can you talk for a minute about what it was like to be named one of the new artists to watch by Rolling Stone in 2007?

When I heard that I said, 'Oh wow!' That's an honor, but it doesn't mean that I have to be somebody different to be the Artist to Watch. I have to just say 'thank you' and accept it and keep doing what I do.

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