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Under Johanna J. Bodde byline

## Jim Armstrong, Mudtown; an artist speaks

If, four years ago, someone had told me that I would be back on a stage performing songs from my own album, I would never have dared to believe them. Oh, I knew that I wrote some great music and I loved creating new songs all the time, but I had reached the point where I was beginning to despair of living any sort of normal life – let alone be out singing my songs somewhere.

I survived encephalitis when I was about 6 or 7 years old and have lived with severe epilepsy ever since. Growing up, my seizures were fairly well controlled with various medications; I was always creating music and was a touring drummer from the age of 10. I was a lifeguard; I played sports and earned two college degrees. I never let the epilepsy stop me from accomplishing things even when I was first diagnosed with the condition and spent many weeks and months in and out of hospitals.

However, by my late 20s, my seizure activity began to increase and the medications were not working as well anymore. I sometimes consider it a blessing in disguise as I was forced to stay home and concentrate solely on my music. As a self-taught multi-instrumentalist and prolific songwriter, I needed to build my own recording studio and learn how to engineer and produce because I couldn't afford to do otherwise (besides, I love recording and producing).

This worked well for quite some time; I developed my craft of songwriting, created film soundtracks, learned to produce other people's material until I became too overwhelmed by my condition. It had finally begun interfering with daily living.

In December of 2003, I underwent brain surgery to remove the portion of brain tissue where the greatest amount of seizure activity was originating. It was an unnerving experience because the risks were great – death obviously, but also paralysis and a possible loss of my musical abilities, brain damage, etc.

Faced with these risks I began writing a lot of new material as the surgery date approached. I felt like I needed to stockpile as many songs as I could in case I could never create music again.

Fortunately, the surgery was fairly successful. I still need medication and I continue to have some seizures but I can cope. It wasn't the easiest recovery though; I was temporarily paralyzed and had to force my body to pick up the guitar and drum sticks again. Three months after surgery I began recording and producing our first Sonic Deli Records release, a compilation CD entitled Brown Bag Lunch.

Four of the songs on Mudtown were first included on Brown Bag Lunch; Angel in Our Corner, Hole In His Heart, Tomorrow's Gonna Be Grand and Oxygen Kiss. They were from the pre-surgery time when I was madly stockpiling material. Imagine my surprise though, when people kept telling me that they loved these songs and why wasn't I out there performing them. Well, my performing days had always been spent behind a drum kit, not singing and playing a guitar or as a front man!

So that is what I have been doing for these past 2 years, writing and recording Mudtown, putting a band together and getting out there and publicly performing the songs. I've been asked many, many times over the years about why my songs weren't on the radio or why it has taken me so long to get an album done – well, there's the answer.

Creating Mudtown has been a real labour of love and in fact the hardest part was deciding which songs to include (had to pare the list down from over 30 songs initially) Indeed, I have enough material to do another 3 or 4 albums without even creating anything new. However, I love writing songs too much to stop, so by the time we release another Jim Armstrong CD, I'm really going to be in trouble.

Mostly, I'm just happy to still be alive; able to do the music I love to do and hope that people will get to hear that music, like my songs and even come out to hear my band perform them on occasion.

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Before I begin a song-by-song discussion, I do need to make a few things clear; I am a self-taught multi-instrumentalist with drums being my first instrument. My mother's short-lived attempt at sending me off to a piano teacher as a young boy did not last too long. The teacher

soon twigged to the fact that I was just playing back the songs I learned by ear and not bothering to learn to read the actual sheet music! By my early twenties I was also playing guitar, bass, keys, harmonica, sax, etc. and writing and recording my solo pursuits.

In the early nineties, I met my songwriting and business partner, Andrea Poulis and I began to collaborate with others. Together, Andrea and I worked with various singers and musicians in many different genres, really developing our craft. It was also during the early nineties that we hooked up with our bass player, Wes Miller. Wes has played just about everywhere in North America over the years in a number of hardworking bands. Wes has become an integral part of the writing process and of our "sound" and co-engineered and co-produced Mudtown with me.

With the exception of the bass guitar and some of the lead guitar tracks, I play all the instruments on Mudtown. I was very fortunate to have a few different guitar virtuosos to guest on the various tracks.

My only regret for this album is that due to unforeseen circumstances, we were unable to coordinate our recording schedule with my band drummer, Alvin Lapp. Alvin was Buddy Guy's drummer for 3 years, and also played for the Goo Goo Dolls for a year or so. He is always in high demand as a studio session drummer for many, many name artists and I am indeed fortunate to have him with me!

I include the following from my "official bio" as it describes Mudtown accurately:

"Mudtown is a straight ahead alt-roots-rock album that shoots from the hip and aims at the heart. With his first solo CD, Mudtown, Toronto-based musician Jim Armstrong has crafted a collection of thirteen songs with musical and emotional hooks that stick unshakably with the listener. Released through Sonic Deli Records ([sonicdelirecords.com](http://sonicdelirecords.com)) May 2007.

Armstrong is an accomplished singer/songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer who has spent many years performing (drummer and/or front man), developing and producing indie artists, as well as writing and recording for corporate clients. He has also scored films such as Canton Film Studios' *The Adulterer's Guide to Toronto* (2007). Now, he's stepping authoritatively in front of the curtain to unveil Mudtown, his solo debut.

The title and driving spirit of Mudtown were born during Armstrong's wanderings through downtown Toronto, where he lives, works and walks his dogs. Armstrong explains, "Life can be dirty, rough and mean, but there's a breed of people who struggle against the grind and somehow keep their humanity. They don't get hard,

like the city, and that's what makes Mudtown livable."

"Jim is a genuine hero, an inspiration to all who are faithful to their art." — Andy Frank, CI UT 89.5 FM

He defends the underdog through his music by dispelling the modern myth of perfection. This is an album that the working class will understand. He writes songs about real characters from everyday life, singing their stories with passion.

Early reviews of Armstrong's new material have already drawn comparisons to the master singer-songwriters of Americana roots-rock — Bruce Springsteen, Steve Earle, Tom Petty and Canada's own Fred Eaglesmith — in that their music shares a working-class sensibility and honesty."

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Heaven Only Knows began as a piece of music I had kicking around (I have thousands of these "pieces" kicking around so "heaven only knows" why this one surfaced when it did) but fortunately it did during a recording session I was doing with a young guitar player, Kenji Miura. Kenji, or Kenmi Chank, as he prefers to be called, was here in Canada on a visa and had been playing all over Toronto as a session musician. He was about to head home for Sapporo, Japan and offered to lay some tracks down for me on various songs. I truly believe that Kenmi is one of the world's finest guitar players and I would do just about anything to work with him again. With one listen and then with only one take of the lead guitar track, Kenmi brought that song to life and the lyric followed very quickly. This is a powerful, bluesy, southern-rock style opener.

Mudtown was one of the last songs actually written for the album — I decided it might be fun to write a "title" track — and my band's lead guitar player, Phil Kane (Jeff Healey, Michael Buble) laid down some excellent tracks. Good friend and fellow singer-songwriter, Rob Maurin, provides the great backing vocal track. Rob has been a longtime vocalist and collaborator with us here at the Sonic Deli. Here's some trivia for you; Rob was once part of a vocal quartet with the Creegan brothers of Bare Naked Ladies fame.

I'm Coming Home was a gift; one of those songs that just seem to spill out with ease and pretty much complete. I wrote and recorded it in one night and then Wes came in and laid down his bass line. One of my favourite ballads.

Oxygen Kiss was one of my four original songs from the Brown Bag Lunch compilation CD. (Actually, many of the songs from Brown Bag Lunch were written or co-written by me, but I only sang on those four tracks) Wes and I remixed this song – I also re-recorded my drum tracks, as I felt that I had better refined my personal “sound” and style during the intervening 2 years between releases. This is also one of two co-writes on Mudtown that I wrote with Andrea. I’d describe this song as a strong “outlaw rock-alt country” cross.

Gypsy is a really fun song to sing and play; it’s simple, catchy country and my favourite fact about this song is that the lead guitar work was provided by my friend, hard-rock-metal guitarist, Ron Bechard (Edwin & The Pressure, Three Days Grace, Crazy Babies, Sin Dealer) Ron is also a drummer, multi-instrumentalist turned guitar rock god (who obviously hides a little country in there under the tats)

She Spins Around is good, twangy, rockin’ fun and we love playing it live.

Two Shooting Stars also predates brain surgery; it was mostly complete, but really came into it’s own months later when I finished it. This track has a little more of a pop, adult contemporary feel to it. Joining Rob Maurin and me on backing vocals is another good friend, powerhouse vocalist, Debbie Shessel.

Hole in His Heart; also from Brown Bag Lunch. I originally wrote this song using different instrument choices than my usual rock tendencies. We really featured Wes’ bass line and groove and called it our “swamp water” tune. When I met singer-songwriter Jennifer Claveau (lead singer of Likewater) she added the final missing pieces with a lyrical tweak and the compelling backing vocals and the song became a highly original track. It has recently been licensed for an independent feature film, All Along.

Tomorrow’s Gonna Be Grand is another one of those “muse-gifted” songs. It just spilled out of me fully formed and recorded in one session. It is also the only track where Wes does not play the bass. Jennifer Claveau again graced the track with her beautiful harmony work. It’s a piano driven ballad with drum samples and is a true metaphor of my life and I sometimes think I wrote it for Andrea. The stolen trans am is how I’m cheating death and how we keep moving forward for the music and all our un-rewarded, hard work. Or something like that...

Happier Times is a song that grew out of one of the many groove-oriented jam sessions I record when hanging around the studio with Wes Miller. I think we were feeling inspired that night by how well all the other songs were coming along for the album. I wrote a lyric, added a little Jennifer Claveau on backing vocals and there it was.

Rhythm of The Moon; partly written before surgery. I had the first couple of verses done but it sat around for a while. Andrea wouldn't let me forget about it and pushed me to finish it and I'm glad she did. It's has a nice pop-country vibe to it – reminds me a bit of an Eagles type of tune. Rob and Debbie provide some of those nice harmonies again. Actually Rob is on a few more of the tracks here and there as well.

When It Rains is another song that features the soaring lead work of guitarist, Kenmi Chank. The grungier guitar work is me doing my "Neil Young" inspired solos. It's a down and out story-song with a powerful, bluesy-rock feel.

I chose to end Mudtown with a re-mixed version of Angel In Our Corner. Angel was the leadoff track from Brown Bag Lunch and has since proven to be very popular. This is a song that Andrea and I had partially written before the brain surgery. We had the first couple of verses completed and had nailed the chorus but were unable to finish it at that time. Later on, after we had co-written another song with Shelley Jacobson, we invited her to help finish Angel with us. Shelley and her co-writer, Lorna Flowers recently penned UK country artist, Lucie Diamond's single, Don't Even Think About It. Also guest appearing on Angel In Our Corner is Amer Diab on backing vocals. Amer Diab's 2006 release, There/After is a critically acclaimed Americana album. Two of the tracks from that CD were first recorded and produced with Amer by me for Brown Bag Lunch. Check out those alternate versions of Champ and Backwards Beating Heart for fun sometime. Finally, rounding out the guest appearances on this song is lead guitarist, Bruce Dies (Ozzy Osbourne, Lisa Dalbelo, Lee Aaron)

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Jim Armstrong is a singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer with decades of performing and recording credits, and the co-founder (with Andrea Poulis) of the indie Sonic Deli Records label.

Jim lives and works in Toronto with two massive German shepherds, Seizure, the docile giant, and Dolby, a rescued dog with a crotchety temper. Find him at [www.sonicdelirecords.com](http://www.sonicdelirecords.com)

Mudtown is available for purchase from CD Baby & Apple iTunes