

## CURRENT

### DON'T SLEEP ON JAZZ CHAMELEON JOSÉ JAMES



BLUE NOTE ARTIST AND JAZZ PIONEER  
JOSÉ JAMES

By **Kory Cook**

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Sporting a Yankees snapback cocked to the side and rhyming over fresh hip-hop beats for one session, then donning a suit and channeling vocal jazz luminaries for the next, Minneapolis-born, New York-based José James is a true visionary. Helping lead the new school of jazz, the vocalist, songwriter

and bandleader will grace the Empire stage with the material from his newest Blue Note release, *While You Were Sleeping* (full disclosure: Cook is employed at KRTU, which is a media sponsor of this event). Impossible to pigeonhole, *While You Were Sleeping* is a journey through soul, funk, R&B, hip-hop, rock 'n' roll and back to James' roots and upbringing as a jazz performer.

Officially released on Tuesday, June 10, *While You Were Sleeping* is José James' fifth recording as a leader since 2008 and his second to drop on the legendary Blue Note label. Guests on the new album include keyboardist Kris Bowers, vocalist Becca Stevens and Japanese trumpeter Takuya Kuroda. James wrote nearly all of the tracks on the recording, with a closing tribute to soul singer Al Green on a cover of "Simply Beautiful." Not only does this Saturday's performance mark James' first show in San Antonio, but also his first visit to the Lone Star State.

He explained his musical philosophy and hinted at his Saturday set via phone from the Blue Note Records office last week.

**Jazz purists may argue that your music, and especially your latest recording, signals a trend toward a more pop-oriented sound. Do you make that distinction as an artist?**

I think today the focus is back on the artist and not the genre. This album is a result of not just my growth coming from jazz as a vocalist, but the entire band, all of whom are trained jazz musicians. And we can all turn around and play standards. My repertoire goes back to the '20s in terms of standards. But what we're interested in experimenting with now is, what kind of impact does this training have on the world right now? How can we make music that feels contemporary and reflects the world around us?

**The new album's opening track "Angel" kicks off with a scorching riff from guitarist Brad Allen Williams. It sets the tone for the entire album, and is a powerful way to prepare the listener for what they're about to hear.**

It's funny. There's been a lot of talk about electric guitar and the use of it on the album. A lot of people attribute it to a rock thing. I was talking to my guitarist [Williams] about it and he said the origins of the electric guitar as far as he's concerned begin with [jazz guitar legend] Charlie Christian. That's kind of funny when you think about it.

**As a vocalist and bandleader you've collaborated with various artists from around the world, including prominent UK DJ Gilles Peterson, Finnish saxophonist Timo Lassy and hip-hop icon Flying Lotus to name a few. How do you see the level of musicianship and mindset among players internationally compared to your home base of New York?**

I feel like there's more freedom [among European players] and I really think it's cultural. There's a lot more emphasis on having to prove yourself within the community in the States ... which is good in a lot of ways. I think the musicianship is at an extremely high level in New York versus any city in Europe, and that includes all of the European musicians who come over here, study and stay. So it's just a different thing. A different cultural meaning of the music.

**Listening to your latest release *While You Were Sleeping*, one can't help but notice the radical shifts in style and genre-hopping that occurs track by track. Is there a particular message you were trying to convey going into the recording?**

I definitely wanted to have fun. And there's also a message of spirituality and freedom in it. I listened to a lot of Alice Coltrane while I was making the album. She's a huge influence on me. And that kind of late '60s jazz I really adore. So it's all in there. I think there's a real message of love in the album.

**José James**

\$29-\$110

7:30pm Sat, June 21

Charline McCombs Empire Theatre

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