

TRUE BLUE

ACTOR AND MUSICIAN **JEFF BRIDGES** IS FAMOUS FOR HIS INTENSE PERFORMANCES, INCLUDING AN OSCAR-WINNING TURN IN *CRAZY HEART*. WITH A NEW ALBUM INSPIRED BY THE FILM, HE RIFFS ON HIS SECOND CAREER AND WHY HIS BEST ROLE MAY BE THAT OF HUSBAND AND FATHER
BY **KIM IZZO** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **WARWICK SAINT**

The Pacific Coast Highway bends and swerves like a serpent along the California coastline. This passage north to south and back again may be man-made, but it is also so iconic to the American mystique that it's become an indelible part of the natural landscape. On one side are weather-beaten mountain faces, pockmarked with sparse vegetation that looks barely rooted, as though it had just blown in from the Mojave Desert and is grasping the sand in a last-ditch effort to avoid falling into the ocean. Which brings us to the other side, the Pacific itself: moody and beguiling, its greyness a perfect match to the crashing waves that sound like music you can't quite place but find familiar all the same. It is fitting that this most rugged, masculine and American of roads is the route I must follow to meet up with one of the most rugged, masculine and American of men: Jeff Bridges.

I drive up from Los Angeles. The plan is to rendezvous on the front steps of The Biltmore Hotel in Montecito, the picturesque town in Santa Barbara County where Bridges has lived since the 1994 Northridge earthquake destroyed his home in L.A.

I arrive early, and he's late, but his assistant calls to tell me he's only running behind by 10 minutes. You've got to love

a movie star with manners. And after all, it's Jeff Bridges, so I'd wait longer if need be. A movie star with a pedigree – his father the late actor Lloyd Bridges, his older brother the actor Beau, Jeff has starred in a long list of great films that include *Starman*, *Tron*, *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, *The Fisher King*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Seabiscuit* and, of course, his Oscar-nominated turn in last year's *True Grit* and his Oscar-winning performance two years ago in *Crazy Heart*. Even the bad films he has been in are so over-the-top disastrous they've gone down in cinematic history as the most spectacular of failures – 1976's *King Kong*, 1980's *Heaven's Gate* and 2010's *Tron: Legacy*. He definitely has a take-no-prisoners approach to his career.

Which is why I'm here during California's June gloom: EMI is releasing his self-titled album. At 61, the man – make that the dude – is reinventing himself or, at least, taking a leap of faith. The music is spellbinding, almost genre-less in a sort of country-meets-blues-meets-old style rock 'n' roll. After listening to it several times, you realize it's as tough to pigeonhole Bridges the musician as it is Bridges the actor. That it evolved thematically and musically from his performance as Bad Blake in *Crazy Heart* is obvious. It's not a stretch to think on some level he didn't or couldn't let go of the character he played in the film. Indeed, his follow-up in *True Grit* saw the handsome actor still sporting the scraggly beard that obscures his leading man features, though not entirely.

For when I finally set my eyes on him as he steps out of his car at the valet, I see his thick mane of grey and silver hair and, yes, that scraggly beard. But in a plaid shirt and faded blue jeans, it is unmistakably him, and he is still very much leading man material.

"Are you Kim?" he asks as I step toward him, my hand extended. Again the manners: he graciously waves me through the doors ahead of him and, as we walk to our table in the restaurant where he's suggested we have lunch, I'm suddenly nervous. First date nervous. I've never had a meal with a movie star. I wonder what I can order that won't get stuck in my teeth or spill down my top. As we settle into the table and scan the menu, I see head after head turn to look. Jeff Bridges the movie star is in the room. Everyone knows what he looks like, but after decades of disappearing into dozens of diverse characters, few of us know who Jeff Bridges the man is.

We order lunch. He goes for tuna tartare and a crispy soft-shell crab. I opt for a seafood Cobb salad since it comes chopped into bite-size pieces, which I think is my best bet. I admit to him that I've never dined during an interview. He smiles, and the

crow's feet surrounding his pale blue eyes deepen but don't diminish the mischievous sparkle that's been present since his first starring role in *The Last Picture Show* in 1971.

"We eat, we talk, eat and talk," he says in a drawl that sounds very much like Bad Blake. He makes eating and interviewing sound simple. So I ask him why, after his first album, *Be Here Soon*, released in 2000 on Ramp Records, a label he co-owns, didn't make a mark on the musical landscape, he felt this was the right time for a major record company debut.

"I think the success of *Crazy Heart* really kind of opened the way for this album to come about," he says. "It certainly primed the environment to release an album. Having more seriously played a character like Bad Blake, I got to work with my old buddy T Bone Burnett on it so it seemed like a logical thing to just keep going."

Introduced to Bridges by Kris Kristofferson on the set of *Heaven's Gate*, Burnett's known for his work with Robert Plant and Elton John among others as well as the Grammy-winning soundtracks to *O Brother, Where Are Thou?* and *Walk the Line*. "T Bone was really interested in making an album that was grounded in me. While playing a fictitious legendary country musician, there was a lot of aspects of myself in that. My dear friend John Goodwin wrote a few songs on my album and also wrote a song in *Crazy Heart*. T Bone and Steven Bruton also wrote for my album and *Crazy Heart*, and we go back 30 years together, so there is kind of a natural progression through all of these things. We brought some of the songs that are on this album to *Crazy Heart* and, for one reason or another, they just didn't seem right for the film or Bad Blake but they seemed right for this album."

Bridges tells me that he's always considered himself a musician first, having taught himself to play guitar as he wrote music growing up. His musical tastes were influenced by older brother Beau's era, the birth of rock and roll – Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and so forth. But Bridges himself was a child of the '60s, which gave him the sounds of the Beatles, Bob Dylan and all the San Francisco groups.

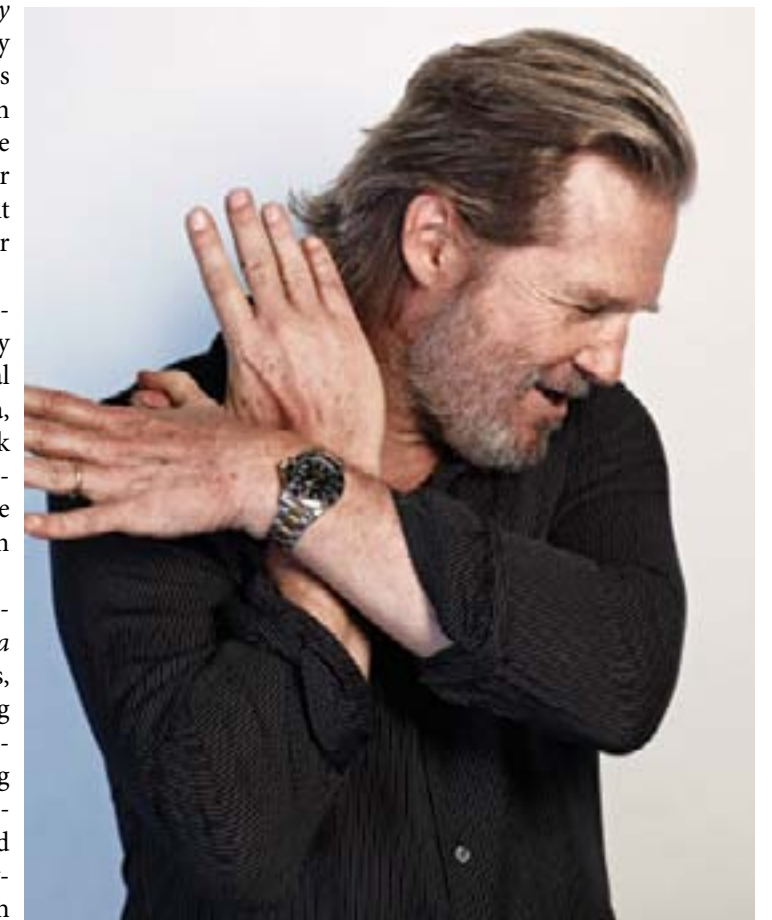
But acting was inevitable, if not genetic. His father, who rose to fame in the '60s as the star of *Sea Hunt* and who went on to appear in dozens of films, always encouraged his sons to step into his acting shoes. And Bridges says he learned most of his acting skills from him. "But the most important thing I learned from him was the joy with which he approached his work. He loved it so much. You could tell how much fun he was having, and that enjoyment was contagious, and it would spread through

the cast and crew. When you have fun, you relax, and then your best work comes out."

Bridges talks about family a lot. In fact, he lights up when speaking about his late parents. It is obvious that his childhood, even though it was drenched in Hollywood show biz (his mother, Dorothy Dean Bridges, was also an actress), was a happy one with both parents being strong supporters. "My mom, from her perspective, she was the source behind it all for my father's success and my success, like my wife is now for me. My mom would also tell me, when I was going to do a movie, 'Remember, have fun and don't take it too seriously,' and that's what my wife tells me now. That's where the challenge comes in and the darkness comes in, when you take it too seriously when you're falling short or something, you beat yourself up. But when you do that, you're missing all the other stuff that you can't hear because you're too busy yelling at yourself."

Bridges tells me, and I'm sure anyone who'll listen (and that's most people), that he's as in love today with Susan Geston, his wife of more than 33 years, as he was the day he met her. And he wants to prove it to me.

They met while he was making a movie in Montana, →



1975's *Rancho Deluxe*. He explains how he saw this gorgeous girl in a restaurant who had two black eyes and a broken nose and he couldn't take his eyes off of her. "I was very attracted to her, and she kept catching me looking at her over my menu. I finally got the courage to ask her out, and she said, 'No thanks, but it's a small town. Maybe I'll see you around.'"

Her prophecy came true, and they did see each other at a bar where a band was playing, and they danced and fell in love. Now, Bridges is standing up and again all eyes in the room are on the actor as he pulls a wallet out of his pocket and continues the story.

"Flash forward and now I'm married and I've got three girls and I'm in my office opening my mail and I come across a letter from the makeup man from *Rancho Deluxe*. He said, 'I was going through my files and I came across two photographs, one a close-up and then a two-shot of you asking a local girl out.' So I have a photograph of the moment I met my wife, the first words we ever spoke and her saying no and then this picture being taken, which I'll show you right now."

He hands it to me. Susan is very young, blond, almost Nordic-looking – and drop-dead gorgeous. She is looking away, and Bridges is staring at her.

"Do you always carry it with you?" I ask.

"Of course," he smiles again, the sparkly eyes beaming at the photos and points to the shot of him and her like a schoolboy with a crush. "Notice the look on my face. I'm totally smitten. Here's the close-up. Isn't she pretty?"

She is extremely pretty. Then he hands me two more.

"Here's my girls and my wife today."

Then a final snapshot is held out to me.

"And just to keep all of the women in my life, here's my mama."

I take the photo of his mother and examine it. She's older here but also remarkably pretty and soft-looking.

"Myself and Sue, we've been through so many movies together. She's supported me in the most beautiful way that isn't really heralded at all. She doesn't get a credit up there but she certainly should be right up there. I couldn't do what I do without her."

Long-term marriages in Hollywood are nearly impossible with a few notable exceptions, and they're rare enough with non-famous people so I ask if there's any mystery formula to a happy union, and he chuckles.

"The thing that pops in to my mind when you say that is practise! Practise having a relationship and what that means and not taking it for granted. Use those opportunities to get that tightness. Whether it's been 33 years or a week, you might butt heads but look at those times as not

times to draw the line and say, 'I've had it! That's it!' Use those times as an opportunity to get more intimate, find out what's going on and why they're feeling that way."

Of course, his wife's support is just as important for the album. With so many hit movies on his resumé, it would seem obvious he would want the same type of acclaim – critical and commercial – for his first love, music. But it turns out that's not necessarily so. Bridges didn't achieve longevity in this business by putting all his eggs in one basket and sitting around waiting for stuff to happen.

"I feel about [the album] like I feel about my movies. When you make a movie, you're doing your best. You're engaged because it's something that interests you and you want to realize it in the best fashion it can be realized, and then there's a period of time in movies where they're cutting the movie and putting it together and I'll be relaxing and doing something else and then get involved with another movie. So when the first movie comes out, my concentration is on something else. With music, it's the same kind of thing. I was very focused and pleased with the results, and I'm hoping it does well and people like it but I guess it's not that important. I want it to be successful but if not, it's not going to stop me from making more albums or making more music."

He cuts into the crispy soft-shell crab and chews for a moment. I can tell he's still thinking about my question. Sure enough, he continues: "Sometimes, the bad things look like good news. If the album was a big success, then they'd want you to do this, this and this, and now your life is busier than ever. I didn't want that. I'm not a lazy guy but I like doing nothing. I don't like one thing falling right in to the next. I don't like having a bunch of things lined up."

He may not like it but he certainly does seem to gravitate to a busy schedule. He'll be touring the album a bit in the U.S. but he's also signed up to star alongside Canadian heartthrob Ryan Reynolds in *R.I.P.D.*, based on a graphic novel about a newly slain police officer (Reynolds) who joins a team of undead cops working for the Rest In Peace Department to find his killer. Bridges plays a former Wild West lawman who died in the 1800s. Portraying a man who will live forever makes me ask Bridges how he feels about getting older.

"Once I turned 60, I could feel my mortality close to me. Almost like two voices speaking to me inside my head, one saying, 'Jeff, you've only got a certain amount of time if you want to do something. Now's the time,' and success really makes these things more realizable. At the same time, there's another voice saying, 'Will you please relax? Do you want to spend the rest of your life with this giant homework assignment?' It's about the balance between those two forces." ■

