



COOKIN', WITH JAZZ

He's Britain's most successful jazz artist ever, is married to Sophie Dahl and puts on electric stage shows complete with exploding pianos. Is there no stopping Jamie Cullum, asks **Christopher Silvester**

Photographs by **Olaf Wipperfurth**
Styled by **Gianluca Longo**



Jamie wears suit jacket, £935, Prada (020 7647 5000). Shirt, £99.99, Hugo Boss (020 7554 5700). Jeans, £19.99, Uniqlo (020 7290 8090). Chiffre Rouge A05 watch, £2,500, Christian Dior (020 7172 0172)

It is 6.30pm and Jamie Cullum is eating his first meal of the day, a chicken croque monsieur. Even so, he urges me to take a couple of mouthfuls. So this is the musician's diet that keeps him so svelte while on tour, away from the culinary ministrations of his new wife, the writer, former supermodel and TV cook Sophie Dahl. We are sitting in a tiny Parisian café a few doors from his hotel and just around the corner from L'Olympia, where Jamie will be performing in a couple of hours.

No jazz artist has enjoyed the same degree of crossover success that Jamie, 31, has in the seven years since his career took off; seven years in which he has sold 4.5 million albums worldwide. Yet there was a time, before he stumbled into the life of a professional musician, when he was living in Paris, sitting in cafés all day, a wannabe Ernest Hemingway trying to write a novel. 'Prior to that I was someone who played music,' he explains. 'I was in bands, played guitar and drums, and the piano. From the age of about 13 I would go to friends' houses and jam – it was always a part of my life. But never did I lie in my bed and think, "God, I want to be a rock star."'

Jamie is here for a two-night fixture performing songs from his latest album *The Pursuit*, as well as a smattering of tunes from earlier albums and a couple of jazz standards – part of an intermittent tour of European cities. I'd watched him perform a fortnight earlier at the London Palladium, and had been struck by the mixed profile of his audience, from children to seniors. Many fans discovered him through the theme song for the Clint Eastwood film *Gran Torino* (co-written by Jamie, Clint and Clint's son Kyle), which has turned over more than £200 million gross – the song, that is. New fans are still discovering him through his eclectic weekly jazz show on BBC Radio 2.

On stage, Jamie is an energetic, almost athletic performer, dashing about, unwilling to sit still for long. 'I never use a piano stool,' he tells me. 'I always use a drum stool. Because I feel that when you're down there you're playing in that way you're supposed to. I like to be above it.' With ballads he sings sideways across the mic, gazing at the audience, which I suggest he might have got from Elton John. 'When I do that I always feel like Elton. I didn't know much about him until I heard Ben Folds sing "Tiny Dancer". I came

home and I was trying to learn it, and my mum said it was an Elton John song. I didn't believe her. That's when she dug out *Tumbleweed Connection* and those early Elton John records. It opened up a whole new world.'

Jamie's mother is Anglo-Burmese, although there is some French blood on her side of the family a couple of generations back, and the moment you know this you can see it in his dark brown eyes and smooth, exotic complexion. His 'very dark-skinned' Indian-Burmese grandfather, who served in the British army, lived in a house with servants in Rangoon until Japan invaded Burma in 1942, when he brought his family to live in Wales. 'I can do a Burmese curry and my auntie makes incredible lime pickle,' Jamie tells me, though he adds that his wife 'doesn't need any cooking tips from me'.

What makes his provenance even more intriguing is that Jamie's paternal grandmother was a Jewish refugee from Prussia, who sang in Berlin nightclubs before the Second World War. His parents lived in Essex and later in Wiltshire, where Jamie attended a private day school. His father worked 'in finance', while his mother has been a school secretary 'for a thousand years'. Both of them, Jamie insists, have the souls of artists but neither had the opportunity to follow an artistic path until late in their lives. 'My mum sings in a choir and my dad plays a bit of guitar,' he says. 'They're both musical and my dad paints.' Because of the difficulties they had in establishing themselves, they encouraged their sons towards stable occupations. 'My older brother Ben broke through that barrier and once he did that they were nothing but supportive.

Ben is a musician, a record producer and a songwriter. He's written a lot of songs for my album with me. He writes for other artists throughout the world. Our parents could see that we were driven and they encouraged us. They're incredible people.'

In his London Palladium show Jamie did a song in which he accompanied himself by standing up and strumming the exposed strings of his grand piano and using the wood above the keyboard as a makeshift percussion instrument. 'I used to drum on the table at school,' he says. 'I think a handful of my school reports say that they thought I might have some kind of ADD because I was making sounds. I was far from being an ADD child. I was actually quite quiet and well-behaved. But I used to drum on things. My

brother and I would make drum kits out of bins, saucepan lids, cardboard boxes and stuff. And we'd record them. I think when I got to the piano, because I hadn't had years of being told how to do it properly, when I started messing around with it, it just seemed like a natural thing to do. I saw the strings and thought, "Well, why doesn't someone play them?"' He learned to play the piano by ear and to this day can't read a note of music.

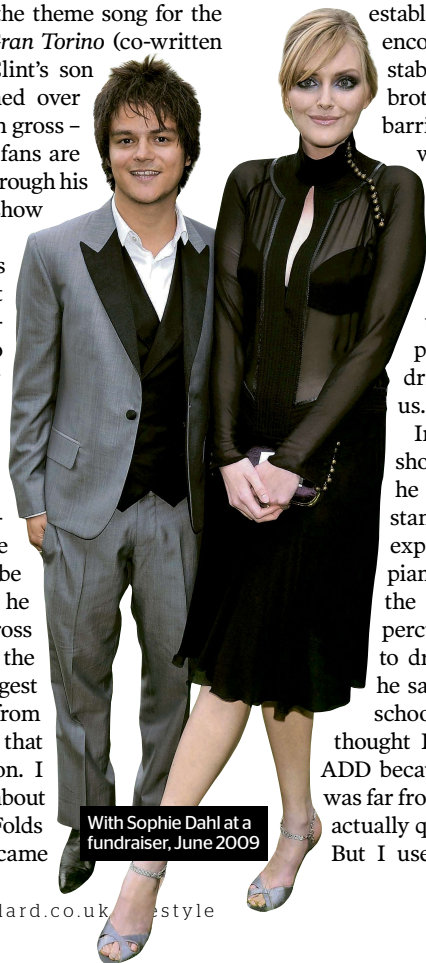
By the time Jamie was in his final year studying film at Reading University he had recorded his first album ('which people were buying – admittedly out of the back of my car') and so he decided to move to London and try to be a musician for a year. Sharing a basement flat in Paddington, he was signed to one record company as a solo performer while playing in a rock band that had a record development deal. 'I had piano gigs, was earning my living, paying my rent, living at night-time, writing songs... it was a really good time. I didn't expect this stuff to take over.'

This stuff took over principally because of an appearance on Michael Parkinson's chat show in 2003, after which Jamie was offered a £1 million, three-album recording deal with Universal. By the end of that year, his status as Britain's most successful jazz performer ever was sealed. His biggest thrill, however, was getting to play the clubs he'd been going to for years, where his heroes had played – the 606, Ronnie Scott's, the Pizza Express Jazz Club Soho, the Vortex – and realising that he couldn't get tables for his friends.

Jamie met Sophie when they performed together at a fundraiser for the breast cancer charity The Lavender Trust in 2007. He accompanied her on the piano as she sang Nina Simone's 'I Think It's Going To Rain Today'. After dating him for a couple of years, the delicious Miss Dahl became Mrs Jamie Cullum in a register office ceremony a few weeks prior to a vicar's blessing and wedding celebration at Lime Wood, the Hampshire hotel, in January. Sophie arranged for an elaborate circus-style tent decorated with mirrors and stained glass to be flown in from Europe and Jamie performed a medley of songs he had written for her.

He says he doesn't get too bothered about the tabloid obsession with Sophie being much taller than him, although the couple did issue a legal warning to the press after one newspaper website had apparently manipulated photographs to exaggerate the difference. His song 'Photograph', which has a line about a girl sitting down in order to kiss him, preceded Sophie. 'I've always been shorter than most girls I've gone out with,' he says, 'so obviously I'm very used to it.' While he was growing up, he recalls, his musical talent was 'pretty much

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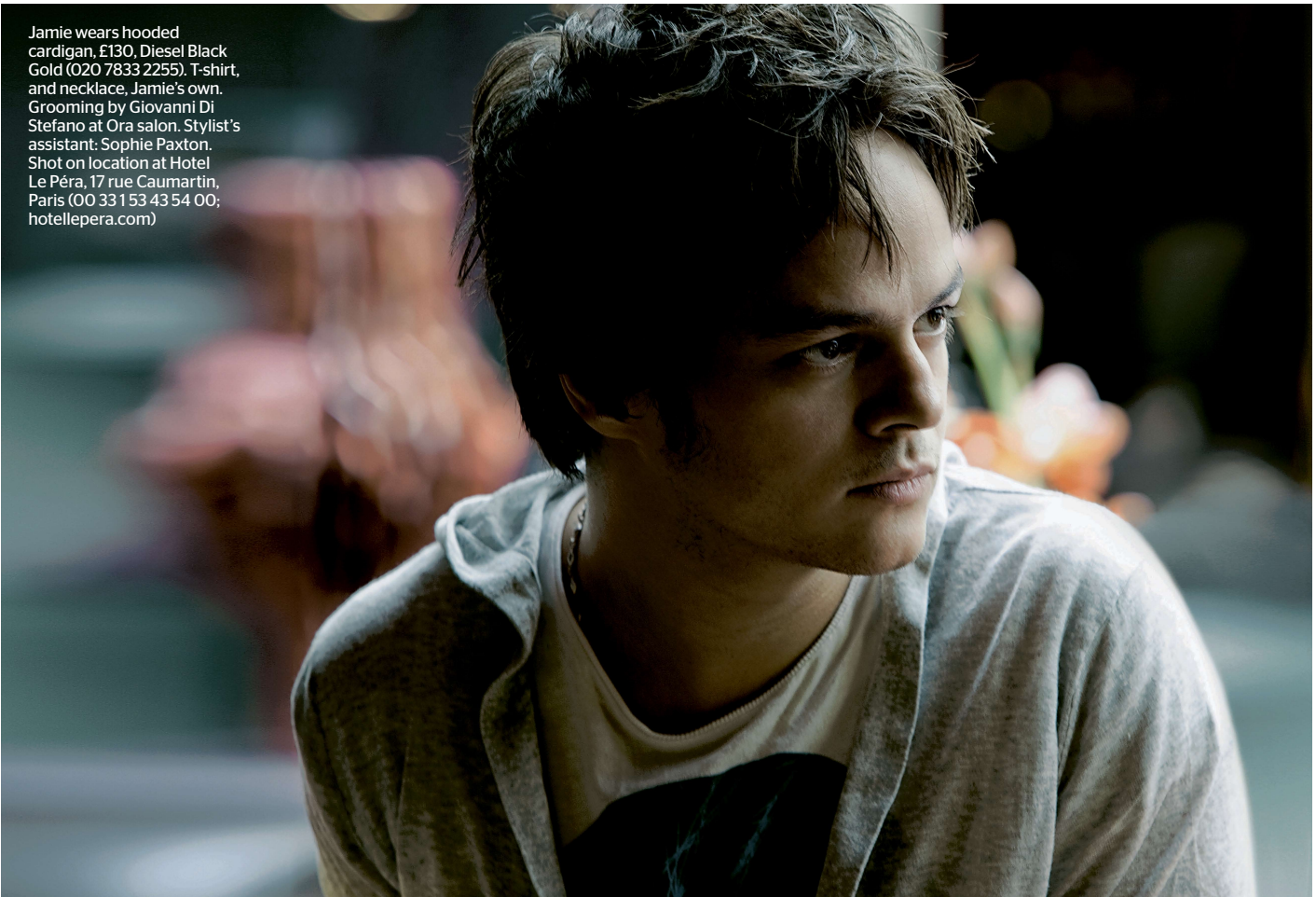


With Sophie Dahl at a fundraiser, June 2009



Jamie wears shirt, £95, Diesel
Black Gold (020 7833 2255).
Jeans, £19.99, Uniqlo (020 7290
8090). Belt, Jamie's own.
Chiffre Rouge A05 watch, £2,500,
Christian Dior (020 7172 0172).
Shoes, £350, Church's at Matches
(020 7221 0255)

Jamie wears hooded cardigan, £130, Diesel Black Gold (020 7833 2255). T-shirt, and necklace, Jamie's own. Grooming by Giovanni Di Stefano at Ora salon. Stylist's assistant: Sophie Paxton. Shot on location at Hotel Le Péra, 17 rue Caumartin, Paris (00 33 1 53 43 54 00; hotellepera.com)



the only card I had. I looked about 12 years old when I was 17, but it was an added bit of intrigue. It definitely added to the minuscule appeal I had when I was a teenager. Me being a music geek, which is what I am, kind of took over rather quickly. I've always been the guy in the record store freaking out over some Fela Kuti seven-inch I've found that I've been looking for for ten years.'

His life with Sophie is serene and domesticated. In addition to his flat in Kensal Green (next to his brother's place), they now have a country house in the Buckinghamshire village of Great Missenden, where Sophie's grandfather, the children's writer Roald Dahl, used to live and where there is a museum dedicated to the writer, containing some of Sophie's own books. Since her upbringing encompassed ten schools and 17 homes in Britain, America and India, Sophie has said she has 'always aspired to have a one-place sort of life'. She attended both of Jamie's London Palladium performances as well as one of the Paris shows, and they see as much of each other as their busy schedules allow. 'I'm home a lot more than you would imagine,' Jamie tells me. 'There's always a bit of home time between tours.'

As his first encore song at the London Palladium on the night I attended, Jamie reappeared in the Royal Box, with the band carrying their instruments, and sang 'Cry Me A River', using his cupped hands as a

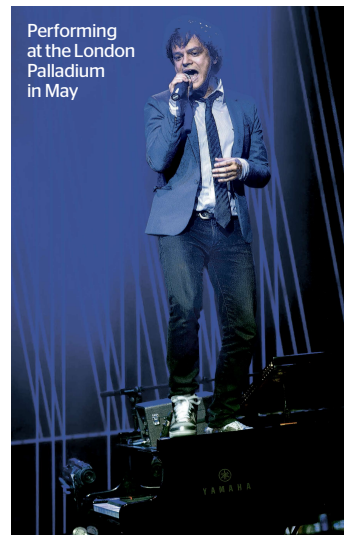
megaphone. 'Night to night it differs,' he explains. 'The week before we didn't play in the Royal Box, we played in the audience, but it all got a bit too nuts. I got pulled around and it was a little bit scary. On stage I have much better ideas in the moment and I just have the balls to go through with them and know that they will probably go wrong, but hopefully the audience will get to watch something being developed in front of their eyes. That's the basis of a lot of what I do live.'

The silent video footage that precedes the touring show has a piano exploding in slow motion and one press report claimed that four pianos had been dynamited for the picture on the cover of *The Pursuit*. Surely this is no way to treat a piano? 'Had they been real, yes,' he says. 'I worship pianos like they are prize diamonds and I never wilfully do damage to them. But I grew up playing guitars and you treat a guitar like a best friend or a little brother or a lover you have a tempestuous relationship with. When I was at school I wanted to play a piano and they said, "No, that's for the classical students." There's always been this air around pianos, which can very often discourage a young person from having a go.

There's no science involved in why a kid wants to play a guitar when he sees Kurt Cobain leaping around with it. There's a sexiness to it. The irony is that doing that early stuff on the piano is essential and very important, and treating a piano with respect is important, but what I'm doing with it is more symbolic – the jumping off it, hitting rhythms off it, the treating it roughly. I'm not actually doing damage to it. The blowing up of it was obviously crude symbolism. But it looks cool.'

Brimming with ideas, Jamie is determined that nothing will paint him into a corner. 'I want to make more albums, better albums, do better gigs, sing better, play better piano,' he says. 'With the radio show, I get the opportunity to experiment widely. I would love to do more film music, I'd like to be more involved with film. I'd like to get behind the camera one day. I would hate to act – no interest in that. I'm working on a musical with a playwright friend. The world is my lobster, hopefully.'

Jamie plays the Proms with the Heritage Orchestra at the Albert Hall on Thursday and is a guest judge on Must Be The Music on Sky 1 every Sunday. Clint Eastwood features on Jamie's Radio 2 show on 7 and 14 September



Performing at the London Palladium in May