

# Somerville singer & songwriter readies his 'Bull Rush'

By **Theremi**

Somerville resident James Christensen will release his second CD, "Bull Rush" at the Tir na nOg, Sherman Café, the Independent and Sally O'Brien's, where live music is regularly heard. Christensen said he was a singer songwriter before being a guitar player.

"It was only when I played the guitar that I started playing tunes I could remember." He humbly recalls practicing the "skill of remembering lyrics."

"A song exists and whenever I'm playing it I'm trying to be in that song," he said.

## The Artist In His Own Words

Sitting in Davis Square's Burren, Christensen discussed the upcoming release of his new album. The recording process for the new CD took six months, he said.

He and the other musicians started in March 2005 and finished in September. The album cover exhibits a black bull on a red background. Christensen said the bull symbolizes determination — "pushing forward — doing what I want to do regardless of what may come my way — a personal call to arms..."

Christensen describes himself as "gritty" and "rough around the edges." His new work, he said, carries forth as an extension of himself, exhibiting a comfortable persona.

When Christensen describes the process of making this album, the community of contributors is central to him. Christensen lived in Somerville from 1999 to 2003. At that point, he moved to Jamaica Plain but after a year, came back, ending up in Union Square. Once he moved back, he said he "felt at home almost immediately." Since he has moved, he has met a variety of people, many of whom have contributed to his album, and connected with old friends. He cannot say enough

about the "great people" of all artistic walks of life that one can meet in Somerville, especially frequenting such locales as Tir na nOg, Sherman Café, the Independent and Sally O'Brien's, where live music is regularly heard.

Christensen said he was a singer songwriter before being a guitar player.

"It was only when I played the guitar that I started playing tunes I could remember." He humbly recalls practicing the "skill of remembering lyrics."

"A song exists and whenever I'm playing it I'm trying to be in that song," he said.

## Bull Rush

Christensen said his new album is "more eclectic" than his first release, *Road to Be Free*. That is, there are "slow ballads,

up-tempo tunes, but also more rock 'n roll." When asked if there was any theme to the album, Christensen candidly quipped "it's the best collection of songs I could put together — the theme is quality." There are lots of what he calls "Union Square songs" on the album, such as "Out of My Head," "Broken Beer Bottle Hands", and "Your Guess is as Good as Mine."

Christensen said he wrote the first verse of "Broken Beer Bottle Hands" on the way to the "nOg." Christensen said the city of Somerville has had a considerable impact on his art.

"Somerville is blessed with creativity and talent. It's a great place to live and a great place to play music," said Christensen. The contributions to Bull Rush are "just an example of the amazing talent in this area." Christensen said his roommate, John McCarty is one of the reasons why the album came out as well as it did. He also had a former roommate, Steve Mayone, play lead guitar on several tracks.



Somerville man James Christensen launches his new CD.

## A Thought-Provoking and Enjoyable Listen

"Bull Rush" features strong lyrics in a high-energy recording that includes several outstanding guest musicians. Real people and settings—denizens of pubs and blue-collar bars—figure prominently in the working class themes.

"The Hard Thing" is one song from his prior album that Christensen has recorded and flushed out in the new CD. Christensen wrote that song in 2002 and said at first he thought it was just a throwaway. Then, he said, he started playing it with his band and it came to life and took on a different feel. He called it a "tribute to people he grew up with" and his parents, "who worked hard and had not much to show for it."

In general, the album is an easy and enjoyable listen. "Linda's Unique Idea of Fidelity" kicks it off with some thought-provoking lyrics as well as music to go with it that provokes a mood and is even subtly sparse in places, to good effect. "I Can't" follows "The Hard Thing" as number 3, with percussive words on a platform of guitar and keyboards.

"Don't Be Blue" incorporates fun and enhancing lead guitar licks with piano drizzled in like icing on the cake of this song. "Crawl Away and Hide" changes things up in comfortable contrast to the song before it, presenting just the artist's vocals and his guitar.

"Out of My Head (and Outta Yours Too)" moves the listener back to a more dense arrangement as Christensen sings the catchy chorus, which picks up with drums, lead guitar and bass. "This Town" is the strongest selection from the album. It is delicate, sad and poignant. Christensen's voice

sets the tone and Neal Cadogan's drums push the background, with Steve Mayone's lead guitar beautifully winding and wrapping around the melody.

"Broken Beer Bottle Hands" tells a story embedded in the community where it was written, all set in time by John McCarty's steady bass. "Sweet Anonymity" is another solo-type recording portraying an anthem that many can relate to. "Takin' My Love Home" moves the listener from the somewhat lonely tone of the prior song to a happier theme, including the extra enhancement of John McCarty's harmony vocals.

"Your Guess is as Good as Mine" is thoughtful and poignant, with Danielle Belanger's pure flute as touching as a welcome and unexpected ingredient — bringing to the song and an elegant and finished feel. The album ends with "Both Alone," a parting note from the artist with just his guitar.

## Rolling Tongue Records

Christensen has recently started his own Somerville-based record label. He said he has pursued the venture because he realized that people tend to dismiss your music as something less than professional if you just release it under your own name. At first he thought of the label as just an avenue to present himself in a "more professional way." However, once he started it in 2005, he realized he could release others as well. One artist whose release is in the making is Kay McKinstry, a local country-influenced singer/songwriter. The publishing side of Rolling Tongue Records is called Rolling Tongue Music.

## Sound

"People have said that I sound like Neil Young," and have

country influence," said Christensen, as if talking about descriptions of person. He said does not hear that himself but he does have an "affinity for a number of country artists." Christensen himself said he favors a variety of music ranging from Bob Dylan to the Clash.

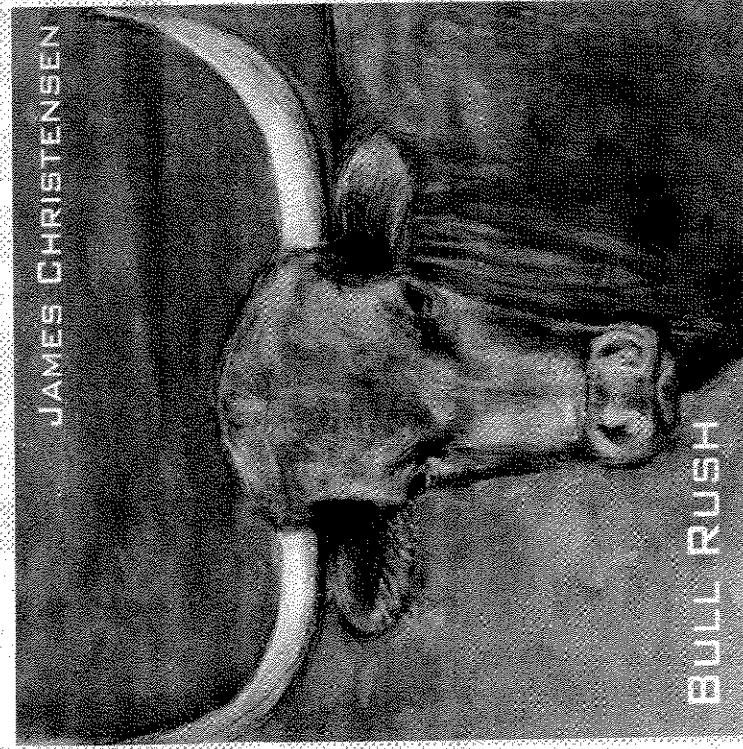
Indeed, Steve Morris of the Boston Globe described Christensen in a February issue: "He's reminiscent of national phenomenon Ray LaMontagne in the way he borrows the essence of older classic-rock acts (in Christensen's case the Eagles, Neil Young, and the Band) and writes new songs with a gentle, soothing grace."

## Last Words

That Christensen actually has no formal music training is surprising, based on the sound he achieves. A drifter in early adulthood, the tragic death of his older brother compelled him to structure his life in pursuit of a goal: becoming a musician. Christensen said he and his brother, Steve, were close growing up, though quite different. "[Steve] was organized and methodical, while I tend to fly by the seat of my pants." Christensen's wish to honor his brother led to him marshalling his energies to teach himself guitar and start writing songs.

While working an array of jobs—including pumping cesspools, assembling toys, and selling ladies' shoes—Christensen taught himself guitar by working through chord books and studying his favorite songwriters — Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Lucinda Williams.

"I was in an apartment on my own with no cable or Internet, so spent my time practicing," Christensen said.



Checkout Somerville's James Christensen and his new CD.