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## JD Malone is inspired by the magic of making music

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Posted: Friday, December 2, 2011 12:15 am

By NAILA FRANCIS Staff Writer |

It's an admission few musicians might make. But JD Malone does so with utter sincerity.

"I've always wanted to be the worst musician in my band," says the guitarist and singer-songwriter. "I don't have to be the focal point of the group that I'm in."

Never mind that Malone, who put his band, The Experts, together in 2009, has been generating some of the biggest buzz of his career this year with the release of the double-disc album "Avalon." A CD/DVD package, the debut project for the roots-rock outfit has received positive reviews from several publications and online sites and entered the Americana Airplay charts at No. 4, making it the highest new artist entry upon its July 12 release. There were comparisons to John Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen, to Tom Petty and Creedence Clearwater Revival — the latter two fitting, considering album covers "I Should Have Known It" and "Fortunate Son" — as Malone plied a rugged poetry in his tales of worn and battered romance, ungirded cynicism and fumbling through loss.

But he is not one to let such attention inflate his ego. That's partly why he's surrounded himself with stellar musicians like Tommy Geddes on drums, Avery Coffee on electric guitar and Tom Hampton on everything from dobro and mandolin to pedal steel and baritone guitars. Doing so, he says, leaves ample room for growth.

It's also why, despite a palette steeped in rock and Americana, with the occasional country twang or bluesy edge, he never strived for a specific sound on "Avalon."

"What I'm interested in, with the musicians that I play with, is cultivating their personality into my music. I want them to feel like they have the freedom to take chances," says Malone. "What I'm interested in is magic. ... I'm looking to inspire people and I'm looking for them to inspire me."

The chemistry he has with The Experts has translated into a palpable authenticity, live and on the album, with the band seemingly intent on having as much fun as it is displaying a tight musical prowess. But the spotlight the guys have found themselves in during the last few months hasn't all been a boon. Sure, Malone is grateful that "Avalon" proved to be a game-changer, drawing more widespread appreciation for the band, but the business of making music has already taken its toll.

Malone co-produced "Avalon" with Dean Sciarra, president of the Philadelphia-based indie label [ItsAboutMusic.com](http://ItsAboutMusic.com), and Grammy-winning producer Phil Nicolo (Santana, Aerosmith, Lauryn Hill). While he knew the collaboration would capture the grit of the band's live sound, he wasn't prepared for the marketing and publicity machine that was often at odds with his creative impulses.

"I developed this band for two years to where people saw it and were, like, the world needs to see this or hear this, and then they get their hands on it and try to change it. That doesn't make sense to me," he says, adding he eventually found himself in a situation where he was compromising instead of thriving.

And so, in 2012, he'll scuttle his label trappings to reclaim The Experts' independence, a move that is perhaps no surprise for a man who even as a teen forged his own path through music. The Bennington, Vt., native was reared on his mom's collection of '70s pop, everything from Fleetwood Mac to ABBA. And though he was a shy kid, singing was the one place where he could easily banish his bashfulness.

Malone remembers bringing records in to his home economics class and sitting on a table to sing to his classmates. On school bus trips, he was the one they turned to for renditions of their favorite songs.

"In every other aspect of my life, I was very shy, but when it came to singing in front of people, I wasn't," says Malone, who performs at Puck in Doylestown on Saturday. "I just felt that was what I was meant to do."

He didn't take as naturally to guitar, however, shunning technique in favor of a 13-year-old's fervor to thrash to Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple.

"It's been a long road because my route has been learn a song that's already written and then take what I've learned and apply it to my own," says Malone,

who is mostly self-taught. "I never really had any mentors that got me on the fast track."

And so he felt his own way, feeding off the joy and discovery of playing his instrument before immersing himself in the more technical and theoretical aspects of music. He eventually enlisted in the Navy.

After starting a few bands while at sea — the captain realized music was a morale booster and started booking him gigs in various ports — Malone decided to make a career of his passion when he left.

About three years after moving to the Philadelphia area in 1989, he formed the pop-rock band Steamroller Picnic, which built an enthusiastic following along the East Coast. But after 12 years, Malone felt it was time for something new and left the band.

Since then, whatever he's done, he's remained mindful of tapping into something bigger than himself, whether that's creatively or through the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life through music. In October, he kicked off his "Do What You Can Do" tour — borrowing the title from an album cut inspired by a friend he lost to cancer — partnering with charitable organizations in each city he played to make a difference in those communities. At his Puck show, he'll be collecting non-perishable items for the Doylestown Food Pantry.

"I want to skip the middle man," says Malone. "I can't cure cancer ... but I can have people who knit hats and scarves for cancer patients come to a show. I'm interested in seeing more immediate results and I think a lot of people feel that way, too."

Even the regular open-mike nights he holds at Puck, driving an hour from his Phoenixville, Chester County, home have a "philanthropic vibe" to them.

"I think I can be inspirational to up-and-coming singer-songwriters. Wherever I am on the food chain of songwriters, here's a place they can go and see something they can aspire to," he says. "For people just starting out, it's something concrete. They can say, 'I'm never going to be Elton John, but I can get to that level.' And maybe once they attain that, they'll go even further."

JD Malone & The Experts perform Saturday at Puck, 1 Printer's Alley, Doylestown. Show time: 7 p.m. Tickets: in advance, \$10; at the door, \$12. Information: 215-348-9000; www.pucklive.com. The band also opens for Marcia Ball at 8 p.m. Dec. 29 at the Sellersville Theater, 24 W. Temple Ave., Sellersville. Tickets: \$29.50 and \$45. Information: 215-257-5808; www.st94.com

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