



**Bournemouth  
University**

## **ALEX JAMES**

My Lord and Chancellor,

Alex James is a musician and music producer, journalist, media presenter, farmer and entrepreneur. Born and raised in Bournemouth, he achieved international success as the bassist with Blur. Alex writes prolifically for national newspapers and magazines, and his first book *Bit of a Blur* was released in 2007. His Oxfordshire farm produces award-winning cheeses.

Alex attended Bournemouth School where much was expected of him academically; but he underperformed in the sixth form because he was already making music. This was in the mid 1980s and he was caught up in what he describes as 'the apotheosis of pop music and youth culture', at a time when music dominated the popular media, much as celebrity does now. His father had taught him the piano, and he learned the guitar by listening. Keyboards were too expensive, so he bought a bass guitar for £50 (the amplifier came later). Alex's first band was called *The Rising*; they wrote songs influenced by the 'doom-laden angst' of New Order and The Smiths, and what he calls 'out-and-out pop bands' such as Wham!

Alex ploughed his A-levels (a mixture of languages and sciences) and settled for a gap-year playing in Bournemouth clubs, working on building sites and taking a part-time Sound Production course here at BU, before going to Goldsmiths College in London. He read French because he loved France and all things belonging to it. On his day of arrival he met Graham Coxon and soon afterwards the remaining members of Blur (he was the last to join). In his second year the band was offered a recording contract and he dropped out of his course, with his department's promise that he could return if his musical plans came to nothing. But the second single was a hit and the successes multiplied.

In his autobiography, *Bit of a Blur*, Alex vividly describes the early history of the band (originally called Seymour) and the trials and tribulations of impoverished musicians living and struggling in and around the world of London music and art. The band released their first album '*Leisure*' in 1991, followed by '*Modern Life is Rubbish*' in 1993; '*Parklife*' in 1994 and '*The Great Escape*' in 1995. This body of work has come to symbolise 'Britpop', a mid-90s reaction to American dominance of the popular music scene, and Blur's leading role in this movement won numerous accolades including an unprecedented four Brit Awards in 1994. Alex attributes this success to the band's willingness to develop, experiment, and accept that some things would not work.

In 2009, almost 20 years after its formation, Blur reconvened for a UK tour and a celebrated appearance at Glastonbury. More acclaim and honours quickly followed, notably the 2009 Mojo Inspiration Award, and 'Best Live Act' at the Q Awards, and a Guardian review which called Blur 'the best Glastonbury headliners in an age'.

In recent years, Alex's marriage and family responsibilities have replaced a rock-and-roll lifestyle. His musical perspectives have changed too: he explains how his first hearing of the William Tell Overture 'blew him away' and he became immersed in the world of classical music. Since then he has presented the 'Evening Sequence' on BBC 6 Music, and 'The Tube' on Channel 4 Radio. His 100-part series 'The A to Z of Classic FM Music' was named Commercial Radio Programme of the Year at the 2009 Arqiva Commercial Radio Awards.

And then there was the organic farm, 200 acres of Cotswold countryside where Alex and his wife discovered a talent for making cheese, which they now do on an industrial scale and win medals for it. His work in farming and food created more media openings: he was invited to write a column about farm life for the Independent, and he now contributes widely to newspapers and magazines, including a regular food column in The Sun. He also broadcasts on farming matters as a regular presenter of BBC Radio 4's 'On Your Farm'.

Music still occupies a large part of his time and, from the studio on his farm, Alex works as a musician and producer with established figures and up-and-coming artists such as Florence and the Machine. But his versatility is such that he also maintains a lifelong interest in astronomy, working with Professor Colin Pillinger of the Open University and also the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in promoting the public understanding of science, particularly among young people. He continues to visit Bournemouth School, sitting in on music lessons and holding question-and-answer sessions, about which he says 'I get more out of this than they do'.

Alex James is one of Bournemouth's best-known contemporary sons, and it is very appropriate that BU should honour his achievements in music, journalism, broadcasting and enterprise – all areas in which this University seeks to celebrate excellence.

My Lord and Chancellor, I have the honour to present Alex James, and I ask you to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*.