**M:**

BBC Sounds Music Radio Podcasts hello, I'm M: and this is the Desert Island Discs podcast. Every week I ask my guests to choose the eight tracks, book and luxury they'd want to take with them if they were cast away to a desert island. And for rights reasons, the music is shorter than the original broadcast. I hope you enjoy listening.

My castaway this week is the singer-songwriter John Legend. Born John Stevens in Springfield, Ohio, he grew up surrounded by music. His father played drums at the local Pentecostal church whilst his mother directed the choir and his grandmother played the organ. John sang in the choir from the age of just seven. Music wasn't his first career path, though. He was a management consultant in his early 20s while trying to find his way as an artist. The name Legend was bestowed on him for his ability to channel the greats of soul music. And he's become one of the most powerful voices in American entertainment as a musician and a campaigner. He's one of just 16 living artists to earn the ultimate acronym EGOT. With two Emmys, 12 Grammys, an Oscar and a Tony Award all under his belt.

John Legend welcome to Desert Island Discs.

**R:**

Thank you for having me.

**M:**

You have created some absolute classic tracks. *All of Me*, the song that you wrote for your wife, got more than 2 billion views on YouTube.

**R:**

Yeah, I'm grateful, honestly. You write songs and the process for me is almost always the same. You're just sitting in a room, maybe with another person and maybe a couple people in the room and you try to create something beautiful and you don't know what's going to happen with it when you create it. But sometimes you stumble on something that is life changing. And *All of Me* is one of those songs for me.

**M:**

And do you know in the moment, like when you've got lightning in a bottle, you're holding it there?

**R:**

You don't know. One, because I'm excited whenever I finish a song. So it's kind of like a similar level of excitement.

**M:**

Okay.

**R:**

And it's hard for me in the moment to know if this one is way more special than the other hundreds of songs that I've written. So in that moment, I'm not sure. It felt good. I was happy with it. I thought it was a well written song. I changed a few lines in the subsequent days. And we had started with a version that had drums and a four-on-the-floor drum pattern. And we just decided to keep it simple and strip back. And it worked. When I first sang it for Chrissy—

**M:**

That's your wife, the model, Chrissy Teigen.

**R:**

She cried, so that was a good sign. And the more I played it for people, I just was getting the sense that this one wasn't just another good song. It was special. And it turned out to be just that.

**M:**

We're going to ask you to choose eight discs today. For someone whose life has featured music from the very beginning, how has it been narrowing down your choices?

**R:**

You know, it's hard to say these are the eight songs that I would want to listen to forever, but these are definitely eight songs that I love. And several of them have real sentimental meaning for me and were part of really important moments in my life. And, of course, they're artists that are incredible and influential to me.

**M:**

Well, I think we've got both two of those things, at least with the first track. So let's get started. Disc number one, what have you chosen and why?

**R:**

I've chosen *Here Comes the Sun*, the Nina Simone version. Of course, it's the great Beatles song and it's been covered by many, including myself, but Nina Simone's version is very special to me. I named my daughter Luna Simone after her. And I feel like if I'm on a deserted island and I wake up every morning to this song, every day is gonna start beautifully.

**M:**

Nina Simone, *Here Comes the Sun*. R:, as you said, an important artist to you as well as a wonderful track. You actually covered her track, *Feeling Good* at the presidential inauguration, right? Joe Biden's inauguration.

**R:**

So January 2021. A lot of us were very pleased that the former president was the former president. And we were feeling good, feeling optimistic, and I wanted to sing a song to capture that feeling.

**M:**

And what's it like playing a show like that? I mean, it's not your average gig. How do you prepare?

**R:**

Well, it's cold, first of all, extremely cold. So it was still in the height of pandemic precautions, so there was no audience. We were just there with the Marine Band and me on the piano in the freezing cold.

**M:**

I mean, your fingers must have been seizing up.

**R:**

They were freezing.

**M:**

Let's go back to the beginning of your story, John. Then you were born into a very musical family in 1978, the second of four children to Ronald and Phyllis. So, growing up in Ohio, what are your earliest musical memories of the family?

**R:**

I grew up singing and playing in church, but even before that, I grew up around my mother directing the choir and my grandmother playing the organ at church. And I was at choir rehearsal in the womb. I like to say we just were raised in a house full of music. We had a piano there, drum kit there. I started taking piano lessons when I was 3 or 4 years old and started singing in the church choir when I was seven. And I've always loved being in front.

**M:**

Of people singing, and I wonder about the context of the music. You know, you're in a Pentecostal service in church. What function is it serving there? It's celebratory.

**R:**

It's very celebratory. It's very charismatic. In the Pentecostal Church, the music is the soundtrack that kind of moves the service along. So it has to match the energy or even bring up the energy. That's the kind of music I was raised around.

**M:**

Yeah, the original soul music, I suppose.

**R:**

It was indeed, you know, and so many of our great soul artists come from that kind of tradition, and I'm no exception.

**M:**

And you had your first piano lesson when you were, you know, babe in arms, really four years old, which is incredibly young to start. There's the most gorgeous photo of you deep in concentration on the piano stool. Who was your first piano teacher?

**R:**

Her name was Gloria Smith, and she was at a local music store in our neighborhood. And then my grandmother on my mother's side, she was our church organist. And so on Sundays after church, I would go to her house and we would have a meal, and sometimes she would show me how to play some of the songs she was playing at church. So I was getting a combination of classical training from Mrs. Smith and gospel training from my grandmother.

**M:**

So we're going to hear some more music now. John, it's time for your second disc.

**R:**

Well, this song is Pete Rock and CL Smooth’s *They Reminisce Over You*. I have a special place in my heart for early 90s hip hop. This song—*They Reminisce Over You*—it's a perfect song, I think, if you're on a desert island, because you're probably missing a lot of people. The song craft is just beautiful. And this song never gets old to me. I could listen to it all the time.

**M:**

Pete Rock and CL Smooth, *They Reminisce Over You*. So, R:, I'd love to know a little bit more about your parents, Phyllis and Ronald. Your dad was an assembly line worker by day, but very creative, too. Still is, I think. What did he used to make and do when you were growing up?

**R:**

So my father made everything. He was so good with his hands. And he was Mr. Fix-It around the house. So anything that was broken, he would try to fix it himself rather than call someone in. But he also made clothes, and he painted and did portraits in pencil. And he would find anything he could build or create or carve around the house, he would do it.

**M:**

He must have grown up surrounded by his creations, maybe wearing them.

**R:**

Yes. So I would wear clothes that he made, and my mother was a tailor as well. So both of them would make clothes for us and we would wear them to church. We have old pictures of us wearing the same thing—all siblings matching. Yes, classic. That my parents made. They were very handy and crafty around the house.

**M:**

So you're born into this churchgoing family, John. Your mum was the choir director, as you mentioned. Your grandma was the church organist, your dad playing drums. I wonder about the influence of growing up watching that group and someone taking charge of the musicians and how that influenced your career, because you do always seem to have had a bird's eye view, a kind of producer's eye, and arranger’s eye for the music that you've been making.

**R:**

Well, I've been arranging music since I was very young, so I think probably by the time I was 10 or 11, I was arranging for our church choir. And I had numerous vocal groups I was a part of when I was in middle school and high school. And so I've been understanding harmonies and arranging them for other vocalists for such a long time. I think that's helped me throughout my career. I've always had a sense for thinking about the whole picture—thinking about how the whole thing is supposed to sound, what the drums need to do, what the guitar needs to do, what the strings need to do, what the vocalists need to do. All of the things I did as a kid were preparation for where I am now.

**M:**

You were homeschooled, John, until you were 11. Why did your parents decide to educate you that way?

**R:**

They were very religious and they wanted religious education for us. And one that was kind of sheltered from the secular world. And for a time, they sent us to a private Christian school that was based at a local church, but it got a little too pricey for them to afford. And so they decided rather than send us to public school, they would just bring us home and teach us from the curriculum of the Christian school. But my mom would teach us herself. And she was a stay-at-home mother and quite a good teacher, even though she didn't have any formal training as a teacher. In some ways, it was a pretty conservative curriculum. It taught creationism, and so I think I got the least amount of good teaching in science. And I had to make up for that later in life on my own, going to the library and independent study. But yeah, it kind of had a conservative bent to it.