

**Broadway Veteran** JC ALVAREZ

# Matt Zarley

## Makes Dance Music Meaningful

**Controversy hasn't deterred this singer-songwriter from being true to his craft.**

It's a tale as old as time. Boy wants to sing and dance. Boy comes to New York, works hard and realizes his dream. Boy makes good – and becomes a pop star in the process. Matt Zarley was “was always obsessed with music,” he said in a recent interview. The out-gay musician's first influence was the '70s duo The Captain & Tennille, but Whitney Houston was his biggest. Calling her “gold standard,” Zarley said the singer's passing affected him deeply, especially since he had an opportunity to work with his idol on the film *Cinderella*. “No one was better,” he said.

Born in the Midwest, Zarley grew up in California. Like so many of the stage-struck, he was only 17 when he made his way to New York City, where he auditioned in an open call, along with 400 other dancers, for the national tour of *Cats*. “I was so green,” he admits. But “a week later they called me, and I got it.” The new high school graduate was about to join the life of the Broadway gypsy.





“I don’t really think of myself as a **dance artist.**”

After appearing in several Broadway musicals, the ruggedly handsome Zarley began turning his attention to becoming a singer-songwriter. “It was that boy-band era when I was starting out,” he said, the frenzied days of mega-popular ‘90s boy bands like 98 Degrees and the Backstreet Boys and breakout singers like Justin Timberlake. He released his first solo album, *Debut*, at the turn of the millennium. The appropriately titled work showcased Zarley’s versatility and commercial appeal with a series of songs not unlike the big-name boy bands. *Debut* featured the solid R&B/pop vocals that were dominating radio and the soppy wet ballads that brought young girls to tears.

### **DEALING WITH A CHANGING INDUSTRY – & WORLD**

But Zarley didn’t seem to win over mainstream listeners. “I had crazy expectations,” he admitted. “The album, to me, was really strong. Working on it was nothing but joy, but there was so much

happening in the world.” Not to mention the music industry, which was in the midst of drastic changes wrought by the Internet. File-sharing sites like Napster and, eventually, the primacy of iTunes were wreaking havoc on record labels and music stores. And then 9/11. “I kind of got lost, and nothing ever happened,” he said.

He took some time off before returning in 2008 with *Here I Am*, this time as an independent artist. “It’s more expensive, but I’ve gained a lot more doing it all myself,” he said. “That is so rewarding.” The creative process is what excites Zarley. “If I had a label, I don’t know if I would have that same sort of outlet.”

*Here I Am* consisted of more modest and personally crafted tunes. Zarley paired the launch with a club-ready set of remixes. Those for the lead single, “Here I Am,” were produced by some of the best in the business, including Love to Infinity and Solar City. For their day,

these remixes had every bit the feel of a summer anthem – with lush productions to complement his soulful vocals.

“I don’t really think of myself as a dance artist,” Zarley said. “I was a Broadway dancer before I really started singing and writing, but I know that if I have a strong pop song that can be remixed, I’ll get more bang for my buck.”

### A VIDEO INCITES CONTROVERSY

It seemed to have all the makings of a dance floor hit. And yet, the remixes barely penetrated the dance-music world.

In 2011, Zarley released *Change Begins With Me*. “I knew on this particular album, with singles like ‘Trust Me’ and ‘WTF,’ I would have a wide range of marketability.” Having taken full control of his music and image, Zarley began to shake things up. Little did he imagine the controversy he’d court over the music videos for his singles: “I started out in this business as a dancer. I wanted to show a little bit of that, especially in the ‘Trust Me’ video. I’d really never shown that side of me before.”

Zarley played up gay images and current politics. But the album is also intensely personal. “The whole album was my own personal journey after a breakup,” he said. Each song on *Change Begins With Me* was designed to play out the stages of that ill-fated relationship. But Zarley didn’t get maudlin, especially when it came to the accompanying videos. “The video is meant to be so ridiculous,” he says of “WTF.” “It was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but it was meant as a commentary on our gay culture. On how we’re so looks- and body-conscious. It’s supposed to be all in fun.”



It backfired, however. In the video, Zarley plays a “man of a certain age” who falls for a young stud, “a heartbreaker and master manipulator.” In the end, he enlists his age-appropriate buddies to help him clean house and ends up with a hunky daddy to boot. Sexy and simple, with all the tight underwear shots you’d expect.

But many gay men were not amused, which took Zarley by surprise.

“It was really strange,” he said. “Some people got it, but a lot of the gay audience thought it was a horrible stereotype. Well, that was really the whole point. The whole thing was meant to be absurd, I was very disappointed by how cruel some people’s reactions were.” Though two of his favorite artists, Pink and Katy Perry, often poke fun in much the same way, “I think the fact that a guy was doing that bothered some people,” Zarley said.

The video for “Trust Me” took a more political slant. It depicted a presidential candidate who finds himself involved in a gay sex scandal that spins madly out of control. In the end the truth prevails. “I’m most proud of that video,” Zarley said. “It just seemed perfect and the right opportunity to do something like that. It came out a month before President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage.”

For all the messaging of his videos, he insists that the songs are autobiographical, not political messages. “My stuff isn’t really meant to make a statement per se,” he said. “It’s more personal. I wanted to find a way to make the music much more widely appealing and attainable.”



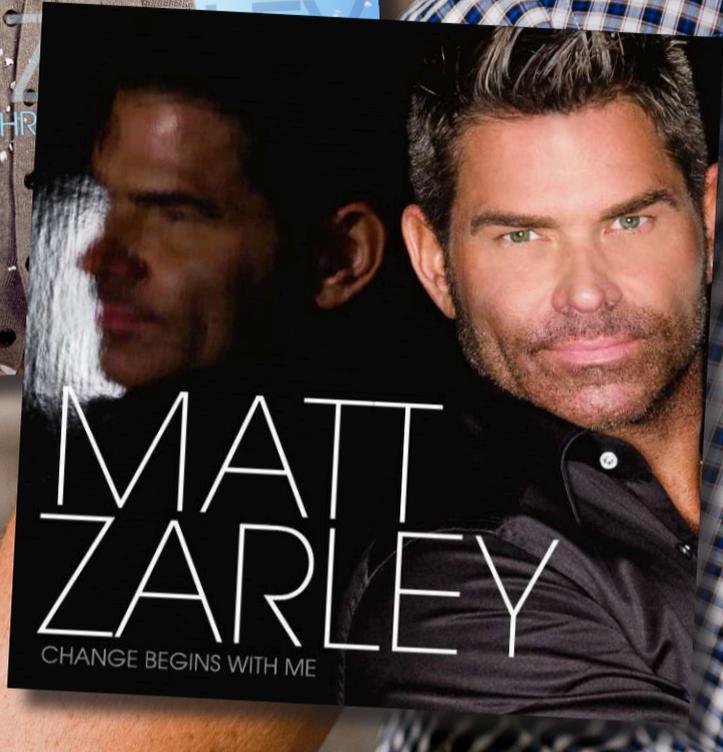
## **BATTLING THE FEMALE-YOUTH DANCE-MUSIC CEILING**

Zarley still finds that, in general, male artists have a harder time breaking through in dance music. “It’s extremely difficult for a male artist to get love in the clubs,” he said. Clubgoers and DJs are definitely more inclined toward divas and female anthems than to a Zarley remix, or something from artists like Ari Gold or Colton Ford (both of whom have current dance remixes out there).

“I had some really heavy-hitter remixers attached to this project,” including Moto Blanco and Cahill, Zarley said. “But they didn’t perform as well on the charts because they didn’t get the support. It’s really sad, but also so subjective. We just need to support one another.”

It’s also true that image has become nearly as important as artistic output. Zarley said he embraces the aging process. But “it’s a very touchy subject with people in entertainment,” he added – especially when the demographic determining music trends is women 18 to 25.

Zarley said he has been told not to sing “too well”



and not to “overproduce” the vocal, suggesting that the artist may need the help of auto-tune technology. “I can’t come off too youthful,” he said. “It’ll sound silly if I sing it too poppy.” Instead, he has been looking to “the edgier sound of artists like Maroon 5.”

Though his last album was about a break-up, Zarley has moved on. “L.A is a tough place to date,” however, he said. “It’s harder when you get older, too.” Looking at him, you’d have trouble imagining that with his charm, talent and dimples, Zarley would have any trouble – even in youth-and-beauty obsessed West Hollywood. He also doesn’t really like being in the dating pool, he conceded: “I’m a nester. I like to sort of play house.”

Musically, he continues to work on new material and look in new directions. Zarley released a holiday track late last year and is working on a stage musical – nothing autobiographical this time. “It’s strong and lean,” he said. “I want it

to be intimate. I’m excited to be getting back into theater. It’s my life. I’m excited to go back in a different way.”

Starting out as a teenager in *Cats*, moving into pop and now hoping to have a Broadway show of his own, Zarley has certainly not hewed to a conventional career path, even in the topsy-turvy world of show business. But now he’s seasoned with life experience. “I’ve learned the importance of letting a song settle,” he said. “It’s about conveying the story to the listener. For me as a listener, I want to be moved.”

In a nice turnabout from the video uproar, Zarley recently took home top honors at the OUTMusic Awards for “Single of the Year” and “Album of the Year,” both for *Change Begins With Me*.

With his gorgeous pipes, good looks, talent and drive, changes have just begun for Matt Zarley. 