

# R O R Y B U T L E R

## BLOG

Every acoustic singer-songwriter will claim they were born with music in their blood, but few were born with music in their basement. Rory Butler's childhood home was built on music; his father ran a recording studio in the cellar.

"I've never felt anything other than it being very normal to want to play music and write songs," he says. "Everybody in the house and in the family was doing the same thing so I never really thought about doing anything else. We romanticised it as kids, trying to push the studio door open while bands were in recording songs. They still have some recordings of us babbling into microphones and making beat tracks behind it."

It's unsurprising then, that music became Rory's world. Growing up in a town in the Dumfries area - "in the middle of nowhere, seven miles away from the nearest pub" - and then in Leith, Edinburgh, he wrote his first song aged seven, a "really crap song" called *My Heart Goes Down When The Sun Goes Down*. "I've listened to it since thinking 'what the fuck was going on in my head?'" Encouraged by his parents and their love of Woody Guthrie, Joni Mitchell, Tim Buckley and early John Martyn, this creative young soul recorded whole albums of "very strange material" in the basement studio with his brother, the experimental post-rock foil to his budding acoustic artistry; the picture of an inside-out Sooty puppet on the pre-teen's makeshift album sleeve was an early clue to his interest in subverting the conventions of acoustic.

At school, in thrall to Muse and Radiohead, he played electric guitar in formative indie rock outfits - the release of Muse's *Origin Of Symmetry* had a "massive impact" on his earlier song-writing attempts. But at home he always reverted to trusty acoustic, and when he came of age and moved to Glasgow to study English at university, he shunned the rock community to play solo acoustic shows at local pub open mic nights, where he gradually developed his endearingly open onstage persona, unpicking the stories behind his songs with a dry, self-deprecating charm.

"I felt like in order to get through to an open mic audience you had to speak to them and not feel nervous. They're nervous themselves about you going up onstage and playing intimate songs - that part of my performance relaxes people into thinking that I'm not shitting myself about what I'm about to do."

After graduating in 2012, Rory returned to his remote childhood home, got a labouring job stripping wallpaper for eight hours a day and spent his nights hunched over his guitar, wallowing in unrequited love and the helplessness of entering adulthood in Cameron's Britain. "In my generation there's a real sense of people feeling stuck, not knowing how they're gonna get on," he says. "It's a real struggle to get the opportunities that we feel like we should have, there's confusion about what you want to become, how you're going to live up to any ambitions that you've got. There was a lot of that going on in my head, and then there was a lot of falling in love with chavs and that not being requited. I was much more focussed on myself. I had this idea that I was this romantic, thinking about the world but with me at the centre of it."

All the while he pored over John Martyn's autobiography and dreamed of the dusky folk dives he once frequented with Bert Jansch and Jimi Hendrix, "I had this idea that I would go down to London and meet people in smoky bars in Soho and somehow become involved in a scene that's only imagined in Dumfries, and probably not imagined by that many people."

When he made the leap in 2013 to stay on the sofa with friends in Seven Sisters in North London, he found the streets were lined with fried chicken boxes rather than gold, but via countless open mic nights full of Elvis impersonators and stoned street poets, he eventually found his people, his niche. Fellow songwriters helped get him spots at proper acoustic gigs and he found himself a manager, dumbstruck by Rory's rich, keening vocals, raw emotion and growing mastery of embedding political polemic within his stunning acoustic laments.

"It's important for me to have a message behind songs or at least something you can get your teeth into," Rory explains. "Everyone can relate to love but there's a hell of a lot more out there to feel bad about. Once upon a time being a singer-songwriter was about being very openly engaged about what was happening socially and politically in the world and that's kinda been lost. But I like the idea of being a voice that raises questions and engages debate but I have to earn it first. I'd rather engage in areas of social debate that matter but at the same time allow people to make decisions about them for themselves. One way of doing that is by writing political songs that also have love in the middle-eight, to relax the situation a wee bit."

Take *Window Shopping*, a litting ballad that could easily be mistaken as the confessions of a young man lost in the endless, closed mall of modern romance. "It's actually about how difficult it is to find employment," Rory says. "That was a big deal after I left university. The number of people that got graduate jobs was very small. If people that I was around aren't able to get a job in cafes or bars, what hope is there for people that don't have any of the opportunities that we had? There's a western expectation to have the ideal job and the ideal partner, everything has to live up to this ideal, it makes people unhappy."

Within a year Rory had been introduced to Crispin Hunt, ex-Longpigs frontman and songwriter for Jake Bugg, Ellie Goulding, Lana Del Rey, Florence & The Machine and Newton Faulkner. Excited to have discovered an artist that could be a shard of real, honest humanity, cutting through the processed studio noise of pop artifice, Hunt worked with Rory in his home studio for six months to hone a demo, recorded in just a few days, of stunningly intimate recordings; one man, a guitar and a fresh window on the struggles of youth in a messed-up millennium.

So *Pay As You Go*, written in a single afternoon, is a love song underpinned with confusion about religion, small-town life and the "see you all in hell" attitude that bubbles beneath the West's polite liberal façade. *Every Change Of Heart* concerns youthful inconsistency in a world of intangible opportunities. *Have I Come Down* is a comedown tune about facing the bleak real world after a wild, hedonistic Glastonbury blow-out and *Cigarettes in Silence* tackles the unreal aspirations that reality TV, the media and social networking implants in impressionable young minds. "It started off as a reaction to *The Only Way Is Essex* and those kind of TV programmes that promote this unbelievably unhealthy image of what we aspire to become," Rory says. "I remember feeling really mad about the effect it was having on people, particularly people a lot younger than me."

There's a strong humorous strain to Rory's work too; take *Black And Blue*, which revels masochistically in the pain of falling in love with a couple of lesbians. "I recently moved into a new house in East London with these two beautiful political activists and that changed my whole life in terms of how engaged I was," he confesses. "Obviously I immediately fell in love with them but they were both lesbians so I was condemned to unrequited love, (which is handy if you're a songwriter!), I eventually came to terms with it and now we're the best of friends."

Keeping up his job as a barista in an East London vegan café - "If my former self had met my current one, I probably would've kicked my own ass" - the original plan was to reveal Rory's light gradually, with low-profile, one-off singles. But support slots with Scritti Politti at the Roundhouse and a Radio One play from Annie Mac at the end of 2015 had the major labels pounding down his door. "We were getting emails from major record labels asking me to go in and play them a song in the office, which I really liked," he says. "I feel most comfortable in situations of unbelievable pressure and intimacy that's absolutely terrifying, I respond really well to that."

For the time being, though, the majors have been kept at arm's length. "It all came very suddenly, there was no opportunity to respond to it reasonably. We thought 'let's wait a minute, record stuff ourselves and do it the way we want to do it before any of that has an influence over what we're working towards'. The reason I came here was to try to make a noise, but I also wanted to see if what I was doing could make an impression."

Rory Butler, you see, is a singer with principals, standards, a fresh outlook on modern singer-songwriting and an unwavering vision of how he wants it portrayed. "What I'd really like is an album of songs where each song is as important as the last and the next," he says. "It's important to me that it sounds like a man with a guitar playing a song, and it's about the song and the man singing it."

Stark and simple, comic and confrontational, raw and radiant; it's in Butler's blood.

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