



T O M G R E N N A N

Having your career kickstarted by drum'n'bass royalty isn't a particularly well-trodden path for an acoustic musician, but it's working a treat so far for soul sensation Tom Grennan...

WORDS: GEORGE HENRY KING

Every year, for over a quarter of a million university graduates, the bleak prospect of having to finally acquire a full-time job is a chilling inevitability that makes their former sports team's torturous initiation tests seem like fun.

For Bedford-born solo-artist and recent graduate, Tom Grennan, however, life outside of education couldn't come soon enough. His early steps on the other side have brought critical acclaim, TV appearances and high-profile collaborations. It's a concoction of ingredients that would understandably lead any 21-year-old to get ahead of themselves – but not Grennan.

"I'm enjoying every minute of it, but I don't think it will change me. I've got no one blowing smoke up my arse. I've got a sick team around me who are all just normal people."

The team Grennan is referring to is led by manager, John Dawkins – a man who Grennan has described as a brother and who discovered him in 2015 after seeing a video of him performing online. With Dawkins' help, Grennan had soon signed a record deal with Sony Music's Insanity Records only a few months prior to completing his drama and physical theatre degree at St Mary's University in London. It was a life changing moment – but one that he assures me wouldn't have happened without a move away from his hometown.

"I got out of Bedford at the right time. I love it, but Bedford was not for me, and I could have gone down two paths. I could have been, 'this is my life' or I could be ambitious – and I was ambitious. I didn't really know what I wanted to do and I was

in limbo, and I still am. I did acting because it was just an easy class and I ended up really enjoying it and that was the only thing I could get into London to do."

Grennan discovered his outstanding voice after getting drunk at a house party

“I went for the acoustic guitar because I don't have to rely on anyone else, I could just go out on my own and gig and get my voice out there”

while having a sing-song. But despite constant efforts from his friends urging him to take up singing professionally, it wasn't until he experienced the thrill of performing live, after getting roped into an A-level music project and starting a band,

that he realised a career in music was for him.

"Music was never a part of my life. I never studied it at school and I wasn't fanatic over music you know? And even now I wouldn't say that I'm a fanatic, but I'm doing it. I got hounded by a few boys at school to help them do this A-level thing and I got a buzz for it. Then people were telling me that I was really good and then I started a band and did gigs. And when we did the gigs, that was when I realised, 'yeah, this is what I want to do.'"

Tom's first band disbanded after he moved to London and so his first year at University was mostly spent teaching himself the acoustic guitar.

"I went for the acoustic because I don't have to rely on anyone else, I could just go out on my own and gig and get my voice out there. I'm playing this nice, hard and big-bodied Epiphone at the moment, but I learned on my mate's guitar that I'd nicked. I can't remember what it was – it was a really shitty one – but I loved it. I can play and I can get around a guitar, but I'm no Jimi Hendrix."

As well as honing his guitar playing, Tom was also starting to pen some of his first songs in-between lectures. One of which was 'Something in the Water' – a vocally raw and emotive track that went on to be his debut single and receive interest from drum'n'bass superstars Chase and Status.

"It was mad! I got a call saying that Saul and Will [Chase and Status] really wanted to work with me. I went into Metropolis



Studios and straight away they were cool and we just cracked on with the writing. They'd heard 'Something in the Water' first and they said that they wanted to use that song, but I told them about this other song ['All Goes Wrong'] that I had. It was only a backbone of a song, but then we made it into this beautiful person."

Following the collaboration, Grennan was shortlisted on the BBC Sound of 2017 shortlist and went on to perform with Chase and Status at major music festivals and glitzy awards ceremonies. But it wasn't until Tom performed with the duo on Jools Holland that he realised how serious his rise to prominence had become.

"I shit myself," he admits. "I stood there looking around and I was thinking 'this is mad', but I wasn't listening to Jools Holland. So, he turns around and goes, 'Tom Grennan!' and I've gone and missed my cue. Jools Holland is laughing and I'm thinking my career is down the toilet. It was on the pre-recorded one though - I

was so lucky it wasn't on the live one. But that was the moment when I realised this is kind of real."

For most young musicians, performing on Jools Holland could be seen as the epitome of 'making it'. But Grennan's got far more ambitious plans - for both his live shows and his album.

"I don't think I'll ever think that it's happened until I'm playing Wembley Stadium or something like that - that's my goal. There is no plan B, and I don't think there was ever a plan B anyway because that's just human nature.

"When I see the album in my head, it's brass, it's a very big sound, it's a punch-you-in-your-face type of sound. I want an orchestra. I'd love that kind of big sound that Adele has, but also with some up-tempo tracks that make you dance."

Despite wanting to achieve a bombastic, Adele-like sound, Tom has so far been repeatedly compared to fellow London-troubadour Jamie T and Scottish singer-

songwriter Paolo Nutini due to his cheeky attitude and his soulful growl.

"I'm just different," Grennan says. "I don't want to sound big-headed, because I'm not big-headed, and I'm not saying it's the best voice, but there isn't a voice like mine out there and I think that's what people like and why they are catching on. I'm not saying no one else does, but I write about real things, instead of singing about cookie jars."

And because Tom has dyslexia, writing about real things, from a personal perspective, is an essential method that helps to combat the difficulty he occasionally faces when trying to communicate what he's really trying to say.

"I've got this thing where if I want to say something, I know what I want to say in my head but then it comes out and everyone must think I'm the dumbest person. Writing music is just an easier way for me to get what I want to say out without sounding like a common London boy who uses all these slang words." ■

