

JODIE ABACUS PR BIOG

You can credit abject misery with Jodie Abacus writing "I'll Be That Friend", the feel-good song of this summer to come. The south London keyboard man's annus horribilis was 2013, a year during which he threw every penny he had at launching a music career that stubbornly refused to take off, almost died of pneumonia and then, as the icing on a particularly nasty-tasting cake, split up with his girlfriend of five years.

"That was the worst, mental, fuck-with-my-head year," he says. "It was the year I worked my hardest, putting all this money into making videos for my songs that never got completed." He was also working two jobs, assisting an autistic boy in a primary school by day and singing in a Motown tribute show at night. "Then in the midst of all that I came down with pneumonia."

He was in and out of hospital in Croydon, misdiagnosed with a bronchial infection at first. When he was hospitalised for the last time, it was a close thing. "They said if I hadn't come in when I did, it would have been curtains."

And then he became a single man. "By the end of that year I wished I could still have the pneumonia instead of such bad heartache. I was crumbling, sitting in an empty room, just me and a bed and my keyboard. I started playing and crying at the same time. I felt like, if I was looking from the outside at this situation, I would give that person a really really big hug and say it's all right. That's when I wrote I'll Be That Friend."

What an unexpected joy that song is, retro but modern, with Stevie Wonder's soul, ELO's strings and a message of hope that is irresistible. It's an easy like Sunday morning hug in your headphones. After years of slogging round London's open mic nights and talent contests, sharing bills with the likes of Ed Sheeran and Jessie J and watching them leave him behind for the pop charts, it finally marked the South Londoner as a bright young one to watch. Zane Lowe played it. Household signed him. And it's gratifying to note that there is plenty more sunny, surreal electronic funk where that came from.

Check out the rubbery groove of Halfway to Mexico, produced by fellow hot funk tip Royce Wood Junior. Or the double bass, handclaps and Coca-Cola endorsement of Hot Kitchen. The piano soul of Good Feeling couldn't be more feelgood if it came with free ice cream. How on earth did he end up sounding so cheerful?

You can blame Abacus's refusal to give up during the lean years on two things: a restaurant-running, video-editing, club DJ-ing, belated university degree-acquiring father who is "probably the hardest working guy I know", and who gifted his middle son with a taste for hard graft and wide-ranging musical interests. "As a kid I was allowed to play his records when he set his decks up in the living room. We'd listen to Billy Joel, Hall & Oates, Earth, Wind & Fire. There was a lot of country music around. Caribbean families listen to loads of country, actually."

The other influence he knows less about, as it sounds like she might just have been an angel. After a night clubbing on holiday in Miami, Abacus and a friend were approached in a café

by a grey haired American lady with glasses. “She said, ‘Listen, I don’t know who you are but I just felt really compelled to come and talk to you. I don’t know what you do but I want you to know that you need to keep doing what you’re doing and make sure you treat the people around you, that you’re going to have influence over, with a lot of respect. Because the thing that you want inside your heart is gonna happen.’ She said a lot of other things in between that brought the emotion out in me. I started crying, my friend started crying. I wondered how she knew all this shit. She said, ‘Before I let you go, I want to give you something.’ She took out 100 dollars and gave it to me. Then she left. I was cynical, but this money, it was the last bit of cash we needed to fly back home, down to the last penny.”

Fate or what? “There had been points in time when I was just tormented, thinking maybe I’m not good enough. But I couldn’t turn back. I had to work harder even when I was let down.”

He hasn’t lost sight of his goal ever since he left college in south London and drew two arrows pointing in opposite directions in a notebook. One pointed to a music career, the other to acting. As a teenager he had studied drama and worked with the Young Vic Youth Theatre, appearing their production of Euan Smith and David Roper's *Promised Land*, in which, funnily enough, he played a music producer.

Of course he picked music, and even wrote down his reasoning in that notebook. “I didn’t want loads of money, or girls, or a big house. I wanted to do it because I love it and it makes me feel good. My dream was of a massive stage, loads of people singing my songs back to me, feeling happy, changing a life.”

That dream is now well on the way to coming true. His long gestation period puts him in the rare position of being a new artist with a formidable back catalogue of great songs. He has been working with a slew of distinguished collaborators and producers recently as well as longtime collaborator Raph. A. - a French producer/songwriter who has been central to Jodie Abacus’ sound thus far.

The music that was his therapy is soon to become everyone else’s happy pill. “I must be able to take shit and grow flowers,” he says. “That’s my motto.” You can count on Jodie Abacus having a well overdue fantastic year.