

T O M O D E L L

Tom Odell – Ivor Novello-winning songwriting sensation, precocious master of the ivories – is at the very top of his game. It's not as if, with multiple awards and 1.8 million sales under his belt, the Chichester-born prodigy has anything to prove. His debut album, 2013's *Long Way Down*, topped the charts in the UK, on the back of breakthrough smash, 'Another Love,' and by late '14 he was in the Top Ten again with a cover of The Beatles' 'Real Love,' recorded for the coveted UK John Lewis' Christmas ad campaign. Alongside standout tracks such as 'Grow Old With Me,' 'Heal,' and 'Can't Pretend,' public affection for Tom and his quaveringly emotional way with a tune was only deepened.

Odell's second long-player, *Wrong Crowd*, pretty much replicated its predecessor's success, hitting No. 2 in '16, with another biggie aboard in 'Magnetised.' Still only 27, he quickly strikes back with his third, *Jubilee Road* – a career-defining record, which saw the multi-talented young artist take full control of his music, not only writing, singing, and vamping up his vibrant piano style on all ten songs, but also self-producing them, providing horn arrangements on three tracks, and layering up his trademark backing choir largely out of multi-tracks of his own voice.

Packed with grandstanding melodies and scintillating performances, it is, its auteur proudly declares, his bravest outing so far, and also his most honest and personal. It features ten songs each in their own way destined for classic status, rivalling Tom's own heroes Elton John and Billy Joel (who now count amongst Odell's most vocal fans) for sheer imagination and quality. Leading the charge, the terrifically catchy, gospel-soaked 'If You Wanna Love Somebody' may just be his highlight so far.

"I wrote the album in a house on a quiet terraced street in East London," he explains. The lyrics are inspired by the lives of the friends I made whilst living there. I recorded most of the songs in the living room of the house, and if I listen back closely, I can still hear the sound of the old man's television shows coming through the walls from next door, the kids from the house opposite playing football in the street below, and the sound of my girlfriend's footsteps on the wooden floorboards above."

The listener can't help but be drawn into the affecting real-life dramas that Odell paints, from opener 'Jubilee Road's' scene-setting of the street's colourful community, through the kids playing outside ('Son Of An Only Child') and the whiskey-shaking gamblers in the local betting shop ('Queen Of Diamonds,') to the almost unbearably bittersweet celebration of 'Wedding Day.'

If you search Google Maps or an A-Z for *Jubilee Road's* titular thoroughfare, however, you won't find it. To preserve his erstwhile neighbours' privacy (and peace and quiet!), Odell has chosen to fictionalize the street name. As he balefully explains: "I don't live there anymore – my life has changed somewhat," so his short-term occupancy there was, for him, "a time, and a moment, all about the people there, and the experiences, and the feelings I had, more than the exact geography of where the road is." The album is about capturing that moment, with all the thoughts it provoked about his own life thus far, and as a microcosm of trends he perceives in wider society right now.

Odell first moved into the house shortly after completing *Wrong Crowd*, but the ensuing blur of Transatlantic touring meant he hardly saw the place until New Year 2017. It had been a non-stop, four-year upward climb since he'd secured the coveted Brits' Critics Choice award at the turn of 2013, which culminated in a "toxic" final stretch of touring. "I'm surprised I didn't ever have a flip-out," he says today. "I mean, I'm sure I had my moments. You're being given the keys to the kingdom, and suddenly you've got money, and you're travelling around the world – you can see how it all goes wrong for some people."

Finally landing up at the house on the real "Jubilee Road" was, it transpired, just what he needed to level him out. "My girlfriend at the time," he recalls, "who I was completely in love with, moved in, and I went out and bought the furniture, and got a new piano, and just sort of settled in. It didn't take very long before it really felt, for the first time since I left home when I was 17, 18, that I finally had a home."

On top of vibing about the sense of community there, Odell reconnected with the instinctive pleasure he gets from sitting at a piano and playing recreationally. "I'm unquenchably obsessed with the piano," he says. "I always have been, and it never goes away. The only way I can describe it is, I can feel all this confusion, but

then I sit at a piano, and as soon as I feel my knees under the keyboard and I play a chord, and I feel the music come up, suddenly there is just utter calm. Everything seems to make sense, and there is possibility.”

Initially, he didn't want to write songs. He needed a break, but, he says, “my piano was in the living room, and every night I'd see this family who lived exactly opposite on the same level sit down for dinner, and that just set me off thinking about my own family. Then there were all these different characters, like the old man at the end of the road, who ended up becoming a dear friend and used to come over the whole time. “

“There was this couple that were about to get married, who I got really friendly with. My sister was getting married at the same time, and me and my girlfriend were just getting quite serious as well, so we were having this moment, where we bought a cat and stuff, and I was just experiencing these things for the first time. Through all these other people's lives, I saw stories, even more clearly than I would about my own life. So I pretty much wrote the whole album there in this house, through the year.”

With so much going on around him, Odell wasn't short of material. In the past he says he's always needed to write 60-odd songs, in order to nail an album's worth of killer tunes. This time, there were only 15 or 18 – he had a much clearer idea of what he wanted to say, and do musically, and spent his time editing and honing those.

“Most of the time went on the piano parts,” he reveals. “Working with the producers on my first two albums, whilst I learnt so much from them, they would always tell me to play less piano.” With *Jubilee Road*, because I was running the show, I would spend hours doing the piano parts. I play more than I've ever played, and it was so liberating.”

“I was obsessed with doing this call-and-response thing, where you embellish the vocal melodies with responses on the piano – just constantly trying to find ways of doing that, this classic blues/jazz thing where you're never playing over your vocal, just in between, and there was a lot more space to do it, because we'd stripped away a lot of the instrumentation, particularly from *Wrong Crowd*, which was pretty dense.”

For *Jubilee Road*, Odell corralled a small, close-knit team, which befits its themes of meaningful community. His backing trio included Max Goff, who has been his bassist since he first formed a backing band eight years ago, on moving from Brighton to London's Goldsmiths college. Guitarist Max Clilverd also predates his major-label signing, and the three have developed a telepathic understanding across three albums, and some 500-plus gigs. On drums, their buddy and sometime live companion Andy Burrows (Razorlight, We Are Scientists) ably synced in with the kind of loose spontaneous playing they were after, while engineer Ben Baptie was so down with their programme, that Odell ended up giving him a co-production credit.

After recording mostly in London, the finishing touches on the album were achieved in New York, where the horn section (which included one member of the Dap Kings) played on three-tracks in an exhausting one-day session.

Odell rightly makes no bones about his pride in *Jubilee Road*, and its completion according to his own vision is all the validation he needs. “I never got into this to be the biggest and best. I just love making music and I love jamming with my band, and I hope I get to do it forever. I feel like for the last ten years I've been working towards making this album. Every gig, every song has been pointing towards this. It's the body of work I'm most proud of.”

Some may be tempted to scour Odell's lyrics for salacious implications about his private life; others may be hellbent on finding the 'real' Jubilee Road. Interviewers might better deploy their face time with this perceptive, well-travelled songsmith by asking him how he sees the world: about the generational tensions between the baby boomers, on whose watch the world heedlessly plunged into debt crisis, and the youth now left relatively impoverished and downtrodden; about the debilitating effects of Instagram, and the soullessness of post-millennial “quantized” pop; and of course about the greats of piano, ranging from Nina Simone and Oscar Peterson, through to Shostakovich and Liszt.

Most of all, though, *Jubilee Road* itself is something to shout about: a fabulously cohesive collection which makes a mockery of the supposed 'death of the album' with its artful weaving of themes, and rollercoaster emotions. It confirms, if confirmation were needed, that the voting academy at the Ivors know their onions: Tom Odell is a songwriter from the very top drawer.