

## Darren Michelangelo Smith

### **Rising star Darren Michelangelo Smith talks to us about where he is, where he's going and how he got there.**

Unless you've been waking up on Sundays lately, strangely drawn to a confusing lovechild of MTV's old Real World show (which begat Big Brother) and How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria, you're unlikely to have heard of Darren Michelangelo Smith. Darren was one of the Marias, or, rather, one of the Josephs, or, rather, one of the fresh faced young hopefuls on C4's T4's Musicool – a project to make a musical that was “cool”. It's easy to be cynical...

Darren's only a young guy, and, graced with the good fortune of appearing on a reality TV series (and sharing a middle name with a ninja turtle), has been making himself known to fellow 19-year-olds across the country. Upon such trebuchets, many a career has been launched. It has been enough so far, at least, to make him a star in his home town of Haverhill, Suffolk, near Cambridge.

“A lot of people knew me for my music before I did the show. But now there are more random people coming up to me because I've been on TV. There are definitely more people coming to my local shows now. The last gig I played was in a small sort of town pub but it was absolutely jam packed which was wicked.”

Now being promoted by The Monkey Love PR (which also represents this magazine), and putting his reality TV career behind him, his career as an artist in his own right in beginning to take off.

“It's weird... one minute I'm a builder and the next minute I'm a musician. It's cool when people clock on to who you are and stuff. The funniest one was a gig I was playing in Kingston. I was walking back and this homeless guy was staring at me, so I thought 'here we go' and reached into my pocket to get some change and he just pointed at me and said, 'weren't you on TV?' It was only a few minutes down the road that I sort of clocked and wondered, 'how did he see it?'”

And he's been getting loads more gigs since the T4 show, he says.

“Cambridge has got an okay music scene but it's nice to have a few more gigs in London and elsewhere. It just makes a change. I'm just taking on as many gigs as possible really. It's hard work but I've got to make the most of this opportunity. Hopefully the band I've got together, we'll go on tour soon.”

Clearly, being a reality TV star hasn't gone to his head, which is a blessing. He notes how his family are proud of him and says, “I think there were a few people on the show who played up to the cameras a bit, not in a really bad way but, I just made a point of being totally myself, and I think it just came across quite well because of that.”

One interesting aspect of the show is that it brought together musicians from a range of musical backgrounds, and asked them do something very different entirely. They were apparently entirely unaware of what was to be involved – a crash course in musical theatre – when they signed up, and whether the on stage results are as dubious as some in the industry have feared (we shall find out in September when Musicool is due to return for a follow up episode), one bonus has been the friendship that has developed between Smith and Dancehall MC Mr. Midas, now his number one Myspace friend, if that's anything to go on. The two are considering getting a flat together in London and maybe collaborating on a song or two. He has expanded his musical horizons, he says, and we all need a bit of that sometimes.

“I have begun to appreciate different genres a bit more, like I appreciate R'n'B a lot more than I did before I did the show. I've really gotten into the dance stuff as well, I used to hear it and think 'this is alright' but now I'm really listening to a lot of it. Grime too, I quite like that.”

"I'm loving the Trojan records stuff at the moment. There'd definitely be some Motown and soul stuff. I've really been into The Selector lately. A bit of Bad Manners, some hardcore like NOFX. Loads of different stuff. If you put my i-Pod on shuffle it's got everything."

He stays in touch with most of the crowd from the show, and is keen to do some more sessions with Josh and Tash (the show's vocal trainers). And if he ever makes it to London, to his flatshare with Mr. Midas, he's hoping to get in touch with them all and catch up.

"I'm hoping to release a single with Midas, and E4 are quite interested in that. It's gonna be a remix of one of my songs 'Same Old Story'. We did it live at the Proud Galleries in Camden but they didn't put it in the show. It's quite a nice sort of reggae/bashment sort of thing."

"The song is basically like, well, it's rare that my songs are ever about just one thing. With 'Same Old Story' it's just about, like a few of my mates started taking cocaine quite a lot, and it's about watching them turn from being a nice bloke to someone I just want to beat the fuck out of you know? Which is a shame to see, and it happens a lot. It's also more generally about the sort of school bully mentality of feeling like you have to look hard 24/7."

"When I play it live to a crowd that maybe haven't heard of me before, they tend to shut up and take notice. That might just be because of the trumpet though." (Darren's keyboard player Steve sometimes doubles on trumpet.)

And by the magic of the internet, you can hear Darren's original version of the song in this month's edition of the website.

## **Haverhill**

Darren started playing guitar at school, "sort of just started taking music lessons, learning the guitar." He wrote his first songs when he was about fourteen, adolescent, forgotten things – inspired by early interests like Blink182 and Green Day. Eventually he and his friends decided to create a music scene that Haverhill had been lacking for all of the nineteen years he'd been around. He explains:

"It was literally because there wasn't much going on, we were going to the same pubs and night clubs and hearing just the same rubbish dance music everywhere. We knew a couple of the landlords in the area, and well, there used to be this really good punk band in the area and they took it upon themselves to do it, back in the 70's and 80's. So we sort of reinvented what they did really. It's good you know, places are getting busier and busier as indie music gets bigger.

"I used to be really into D.I.Y. punk sort of stuff. But there's is a certain stage, like, you can only go so far with D.I.Y. But I love the whole atmosphere of it."

Not far from Colchester, home to British ska scene, Haverhill and its residents have long been under the influence of ska too.

"It's the first sort of music I got into, and the first shows I went to were ska bands. For a while it wasn't cool to like ska but people like Jamie T and the Dead 60's are bringing it back. It's just such a good type of music, I just love The Specials and Madness and The Selector. My mate has got a tape from when the Specials and Madness did their tour together and its got all the footage of them and stuff it's amazing."

"Hardcore spoke to me that way too for a long time, bands like Minor Threat, and NOFX, Black Flag and all that. Henry Rollins is amazing. I do like the old school punk and hard core."

“It’s funny really, I’ve kind of gone full circle really. Because the first band I was in was a ska band. Then I went on to play in more hard core bands, playing more NOFX sort of stuff, and then emo got really big, so we sort of jumped on to that. Did that for like a year or two. Did quite well in a few different bands, then started up a country punk band playing like Johnny Cash songs sped up. They were called Jack’s Lads. We started for a laugh but ended up doing alright with it. I then started writing my solo stuff because I there was a while where we weren’t doing many shows and I just took it from there.”

“Someone asked me the other day, about who I’d wanna collaborate with... it would probably be someone like Paul Weller. My old trumpet player did like a mod album with him. Billy Bragg as well, I would love to me him. I’d love to support either of them on tour or something, that would be amazing. I’m really liking Jamie T at the moment as well, but really there’s loads, there’s loads of good bands out there that I would love to work with.”

Right now he’s concentrating on his live shows, edgy acoustic sets, and bigger gigs with his newly formed backing band. For now, “putting a CD out is a whole other world.”

### **Politics**

“These days, it seems to be all about haircuts and tight jeans now isn’t it? Which is a shame because there are some great bands out there, like a band from round my way called The Volunteers – they run a skate shop as well. Their shows are amazing because it’s always like a certain crowd and they just go mental.”

He has a healthy respect for greats like Billy Bragg, as well as hardcore bands, which had a real message (when a real message was needed perhaps), but identifies himself with the apathy of today, “it really annoys me when I see bands that talk about politics but don’t really know what they’re talking about. [Hopefully he missed the big Live Earth sham in July.] I wouldn’t like to do it really, well there’s a few tunes with a bit of political stuff in them like about drugs and stuff but generally I don’t want to pretend to be anything I’m not.

“That novelty anti-war song that was in the charts a while back... It’s a strange thing, I mean I’m really into Mike Park and he’s really anti-racism and runs Plea For Peace as well and stuff like that. I’m not sure the anti-war or anti-bush stuff really does anything though. It’s great to have a voice and that, but I just don’t think I’d do anything like that myself. I can’t see it changing that many people’s opinions.

After all, he is of course only young – a sincere songwriter, not overly enamoured by his own talent. He has said there’s a stage you reach, where you can only go so far with D.I.Y. He is long past that stage now, passed into the fateful hands of the industry, and well on his way to having a serious influence on the UK indie scene. We cannot help but wish him all the best of fortune for the future.

### **David Walter Hall**