

Jamie Cullum's Big Break

Because jazz just doesn't sell itself.

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For a few weeks in the middle of summer it was easier to see Jamie Cullum in concert than not to see him. There were phone calls, then a sample CD, then a lunch, then a publicity pack, and then another call with various options but only one outcome. 'You should really come and see him... People are just blown away, even the most cynical... The main thing is to see him play live...'

I first saw Jamie Cullum at the Pizza Express in Dean Street, Soho, one of several showcases he was playing for journalists and music industry people. He was a short 23-year-old guy in jeans and a T-shirt, swigging from a bottle of beer at lunchtime as he played jazz standards by Cole Porter, George Gershwin and a cocktail version of Radiohead's 'High and Dry'. He was hugely impressive, springing around his piano trying to make each song sound as if he wrote it that morning, hitting the wood to get a beat, plucking the piano wire with his hands, fooling with his trio as if he'd been doing it for decades. He had an interesting voice, too, deep and varied and confident enough not to lapse into an American accent. Above all you could see he was an entertainer. When he sang the line 'Some get their kicks from cocaine...', he gave a little sniff. Just before he had gone into a little scat session like he was Louis Armstrong. He wasn't like Norah Jones or Diana Krall who just sit there as if they're in a room by themselves. Towards the end he introduced a song of his own. 'This is a tune I wrote when I was working on a cruise ship. I was playing "Moon River" to pensioners. I had just split up with my girlfriend and I was really happy about it. This is a song I came up with. It's called "All At Sea".'

The next time I saw him was a month later, when he played four songs for another lunchtime crowd at the Asda head office in Leeds. Every month, Asda holds an event where the company hands out long-term service awards and talks about sales targets, and the organisers try to get in a bit of entertainment to break things up. Louise has been up, and Gareth Gates. The record companies like this promotional slot because it gives them the chance to sell their artists to the people who sell their CDs, and as a big banner announced in the main atrium, Asda had recently assumed the second largest share of the market.

Cullum appeared not long after the stage had been vacated by people dressed as chickens and carrots. Behind him a sign carried a quote from Richard Branson: 'Mistakes are inevitable. Dissatisfied customers are not.' He had arrived with a hangover from another promotional day talking and playing to radio stations, and he met up with his drummer and bass player who arrived in the drummer's new Citroën Berlingo. They did four songs, and when he did 'I Get a Kick Out of You', he asked the supermarket executives to hold hands with someone they fancied. He did the sniff and the scat, and then introduced 'All At Sea'. 'This is a

tune I wrote when I was working on a cruise ship - very uncool, I know. I was playing "Moon River" to pensioners. I had just split up with my girlfriend and I was really happy about it. This is the song I came up with.'

I had travelled up to Leeds from London with Kevin Long, the national and key account manager at Universal Jazz. The big thing on his mind was the word 'crossover', that golden nugget that all record companies dream of for their minority artists. Nigel Kennedy crossed over, as did Russell Watson and Norah Jones; Harry Connick Jr almost crossed over; Courtney Pine crossed over for a little while and then crossed back. For Cullum to cross over, Long needs to sell more than 100,000 CDs, which would be very unusual for a young jazz artist. But he thinks he should do this by Christmas. He pulls out an early copy of the album, which is called Twentysomething; the photo on the front has Cullum sitting in the corner of a room in his flared jeans and Converse Allstars, his hands apparently keeping a beat on the floor, and he looks like a startled 15-year-old.

'For me, out of all of the albums I've worked on, this is the thing with the greatest potential,' Long says. 'This charismatic cheekiness he has... the look... there are two groups of women who go for it. There are the older, mature women who either feel maternal towards him or want to go to bed with him. And then there is the younger crowd. He played at the Barfly in Camden, and at the end there was this girl, about 18, who came up to him and said, "Do you want to come back to my place? I've got some Jacob's Creek in the fridge".'

Long saw him at the beginning of the year and says he 'got it' straight away. He did 'Singin' in the Rain' but also 'Lover, You Should Have Come Over' by Jeff Buckley, and he played his own songs and those by his older brother, which all combined teen exuberance with teen angst. He would look good in magazines. In other words, the crossover was on.

After the show at Asda, Cullum signed a few photographs of himself and climbed back on to the promotional trail towards BBC Radio Nottingham for a pre-recorded interview with Dean Jackson, who presents a freewheeling show on Saturday evenings. Cullum would be on with Tim Burgess of the Charlatans, a prospect which made Cullum excited. Jackson played a track from Twentysomething and said that this wasn't the sort of repertoire he would expect from someone of his age. 'My older brother led the way for me,' Cullum explained. 'He started to listen to Iron Maiden and so did I. He started to listen to Oscar Peterson and so did I. We liked people who could play fast, that was important to us when we were 10 or 11 years old. We found that the jazz guys could play faster than anyone else.'

Cullum mentioned the CD he had recorded himself for a few hundred pounds to sell at his early gigs, and he said he was now daunted by being on the same label as Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, 'these other-worldly mythical creatures'. Then he explained how this came to be. 'I believe that it was Parkinson who brought me to the attention of the people at Universal Classics and Jazz,' he said. 'He was having dinner after a Diana Krall show with people from Universal and Diana Krall and Natalie Cole and they were saying how there were no male jazz singers any more and he said, "Well, there is one - you should check him out."' Parkinson had been playing a previous album by Cullum on his Radio 2 show. Pointless Nostalgic, which combined 'It Ain't Necessarily So' with the Radiohead

cover, was a more simple affair than the string adornments of Twentysomething, and was released on the specialist jazz label Candid Records. It displayed many of Cullum's talents, but you wouldn't be able to find it in your local Asda.

After the interview Cullum was driven back from Nottingham to his flat in Paddington. Jo Hart, his regional publicist, made the journey with him, and told him what time he had to be up for various future engagements. She believed that Cullum would talk to 90 radio stations before they were done, and she had the list in her bag: Lincs AM, Magic AM, Minster FM, Ridings, Viking, Century 105, Revolution, the Real Radio Group, Saga, Capital, Capital Gold, GWR, GMR, Heart, Hallam FM, Aire FM, Clyde FM and Forth FM. On the journey back, Cullum talked about next weekend's trip to France to play at a wealthy man's birthday party ('I'll do my old function set - Sinatra, "Ain't No Sunshine"...'), and about his least glamorous gigs: a table-tennis club reunion in Wootton Bassett and a Marks & Spencer womenswear department in Croydon. For most of the journey he listened to his iPod (Bob Dylan, Lucinda Williams, Eddie Izzard and his own songs) and he played guitar: 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', 'The Girl From Ipanema', 'You've Got A Friend'.

The following week he was shooting the video for 'All At Sea' at a marina in Essex. The morning consisted of Cullum walking around by the shore, and in the afternoon he performed live with his trio in an old boathouse as fake mist and artificial light streamed in around them. Cullum seemed entirely comfortable with proceedings, though he said afterwards he felt like 'a right idiot jumping around in a smoke machine with people throwing water - like J-Lo'.

Marc Connor, Cullum's manager, hung around on the fringes. An amiable, stocky young man with sprouts of light brown hair and a passion for extravagant shirts, Connor used to look after Cullum's PR when he was at Candid Records. 'We sold him as a major star from the beginning, even though no one outside the jazz world knew who he was,' he says. 'It was all hyperbole! But we were quite credible, so when we said he was going to be the next big thing people would take notice. We did lots of nonsense - we called him the saviour of jazz, the Beckham of jazz. We basically said you can have Pop Idol, which is all manufactured, and all those bands that won't be around in a few months, or you can have Jamie, who has boy-band looks but is the real thing and has all these screaming teenage girls coming to his jazz gigs. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, because once we said that, they did.'

Cullum had been playing for five years before he was officially 'launched' in October at Café de Paris. Sony and Warner Music sent some of their top people, but Connor says they went with Universal because they were able to offer 'global prioritisation', a situation that equates with a considerable marketing spend in the United States. 'Very important,' he continues. 'We're living at a time when the biggest music-buying demographic is 25- to 35-year-olds, and they're not buying Limp Bizkit. They're buying Norah Jones and Coldplay and David Gray.'

The record deal established a potentially lucrative licensing arrangement with Candid Records, and a healthy arrangement for Cullum, although he is yet to see much of it. 'Everyone thinks he's minted,' his manager says. 'The deal is worth more than a £1m, but it's not £1m in Jamie Cullum's pocket. It's a three-album deal, and the sum includes recording costs and producers' costs and lawyers'

costs. The fact remains that most projects released on major labels fail. So the key thing is to create a credible career for him so that whether his record succeeds or fails, he will always earn a living.'

Marc Connor talks of it as a 'project', and one that has a plot. 'The main plot was to try to give everyone the chance to see him play live.' He tells two stories that give him particular pleasure. When Cullum appeared on Friday Night is Music Night and heard the big band strike up, he burst into tears 'because he couldn't believe this was actually happening to him'. The other tale involves Cullum's upcoming three-week engagement at the prestigious Oak Room at the Algonquin Hotel in New York. 'He was booked in there last year on the strength of a couple of early songs,' Connor says. 'After a while the woman who had arranged it, who is called Barbara and who knows the jazz world inside out, began to get a little nervous about whether he could carry it off, and was concerned about the quality of his piano playing. But then she came to see him at Ronnie Scott's and she's so excited that she's telling everyone she knows in the business that they have to come to see him. She wrote a letter to his parents saying that he was the most exciting talent she's seen since she first saw Frank Sinatra.'

Two days after the video shoot, Cullum appeared at the Universal sales conference at the Shaw Theatre in Euston. This was one of the most important events of his career, a chance to sell himself to all those people from the big record chains and supermarkets and media outlets who hadn't yet seen him. Before he went on stage he sat in the hotel next to the theatre and told me about growing up in Wiltshire. He attended a low-key private school, he was quite popular, his dad worked for Ford, and his lack of height has never been a big problem ('as bad as getting a spot - it never drove me to be ambitious like you read about'). He said he was always reasonably good at most things, and found he could pick out most tunes on a piano or guitar with a little application. He was into acid jazz first - Corduroy, Jamiroquai - and then Herbie Hancock, Harry Connick and the great American songbook. At Reading University he read English and film studies, and spent most of his evenings playing and singing with much older musicians in local bars. He liked the money the shows brought, though he never thought it would lead to much beyond girls and getting hammered. As he ran through it all he was just like everyone had said: mature beyond his years, widely read, an engaging and sensible guy. 'I've had such a solid upbringing,' he said.

He spoke about the excitement the news of his big-money signing had generated. 'People need their stars to be stars,' he said. 'If they found out that I got enough to pay off my student loan, and a tiny bit more to buy myself an iPod, and that I'm still a bit short of money now, it's not going to be as spectacular is it? My friends know what's true.' I asked him about the pressure he's under to sell a lot of albums and justify everyone's faith in him. He said he didn't feel this, and the only pressure he put himself under was to improve his piano playing. 'I get so upset sometimes after gigs. I'll always say to the other musicians, "I'm so sorry, I'm going to work on that tomorrow." It's such a fragile thing, music, and I get so depressed sometimes. The problem is, tomorrow comes and there's no time, because of all this promotion.'

He then went off to chat to Elvis Costello, who was also hanging around the hotel

waiting to promote his new album. Costello gave Cullum a tip about his forthcoming appearance at the Royal Festival Hall: don't try to fill the space by waving your arms about too much - just do your regular show.

Cullum's two regular musicians, bass player Geoff Gascoyne and drummer Sebastiaan de Krom, were also waiting to go on stage at the sales conference. Gascoyne first met him three years ago when he was teaching a summer school in Bracknell and Cullum was a student. 'He was always a good singer, but since then he's gained a lot of confidence.' De Krom said, 'He's learning so fast - he takes it up like a sponge. There was a period before the whole circus started when he was practising his piano so much and we were jamming a lot, but now there's hardly time for a proper conversation.'

Gascoyne has detected some jealousy from others in the jazz world about the attention Cullum generates. 'Obviously he's got some way to go as a musician,' Gascoyne continued. 'But we all have.'

At the moment he's just playing to his strengths, and it's very good.'

Half an hour later, the Jamie Cullum Trio were introduced from the side of the stage by Michael Parkinson. 'Occasionally you come across a brand-new staggering talent,' he said. 'About a year ago my producer said to me, "Somebody sent this disc in and I think it's rather good - listen to it." I listened to it and I thought it's not just rather good, it's very, very good indeed. I think he's got a huge, huge career in front of him. Not simply because he is a fine musician and very good singer, but because of the fact that he has this great gift that not a lot of people have - he relates to an audience. He brings them in, they love him, and I think you'll love him, too. Welcome, please, Mr Jamie Cullum!' The audience clapped and a curtain parted to reveal Cullum and Gascoyne and de Krom and a carpet of dry ice. They played 'I Get a Kick Out of You', with the scat and the sniff, and then Cullum said: 'This is a tune I wrote when I was working on a cruise ship - very uncool, I know.'

I was playing "Moon River" to pensioners. I had just split up with my girlfriend and I was really happy about it. This is a song I came up with.'

Once again he played it as if every lonely thought was coming to him fresh. When he was finished he said, 'Thank you very much, have a good day!' Then he looked out into the audience, whose job it now was to make him a star.