

Eighteen months since the release of his debut album, Stormzy can look back on a period in which his career and his life have been transformed. He was already soaring before *Gang Signs and Prayer* hit the airwaves and the streaming services, but the stellar success of that LP - as its name suggests, a vivid and thrilling journey through soul, gospel and grime - elevated him to an entirely new level of fame. The boy from Croydon, born to Ghanaian parents, is now a chart-topping artist with awards galore: one Ivor Novello, two Brits, and six MOBO Awards. Once the underdog, how has Michael Omari adjusted to being the frontrunner?

“As much as I’m the frontrunner, there are still so many underdog elements to what I do”, he points out. “The perfect way to put it is like: Wireless (Festival). I’m a headline act. You’ve got J.Cole, DJ Khaled, myself, Drake, whoever was going to be there that weekend. As much as I’m a headline act...whoever was coming that weekend, I doubt they was expecting me to have the set of the weekend. Not to say that I’m the self-proclaimed set of the weekend, but as in it wouldn’t have been a thought that “ah yeah, Stormzy’s gonna fuckin’ win”, like, because of the stature of artist I’m next to, you get what I mean? So in that sense I still feel like an underdog, but I’m very aware of the fact that I’m a frontrunner. I’m someone who always feels like I’ve got something to prove.”

Proving himself, apparently, isn’t just about being an artist - it’s about remaining clear about who and what he represents, even as he enters unprecedented territory for a black British MC. “In this country”, he notes, “(black people) are not really used to having superstars. You get what I mean? Like, an actual superstar that’s black. Not to say I’m, the first rap superstar, like, Tinie or Dizzee, but you know what I mean - (not one) with as much love from the community...I feel like our relationship with stardom is a bit warped. Like we’ve always been used to the artist going through the motions and then disappearing, not being tangible.”

Staying in touch with his roots might seem easier said than done: after all, he’s not seeing so many gang signs these days, and from the looks of his rapidly-expanding fanbase, most of his prayers have been answered. How will he continue to connect with his audience, even as he grows away from them? It’s a challenge he’s considered deeply, and feels ready to meet. “There’s always a duty to keep it real and keep it original and stick to where you come from”, he observes, “but I think there’s also a duty - that no-one talks about - to also talk about, ‘a’ight, that’s great, but I’m *here* now. I live *here*.’ He gestures around him at his spacious apartment, overlooking a west London waterfront. “I walk out there, it’s not dangerous; I’ve got underground parking...this is me today,” he asserts, with a statement of intent as bold as “First Things First”, the opening track of his debut LP. “I am Stormzy today, and I’m definitely not still in the hood, I’m in a totally different financial position, but these are the facts of the matter.”

There’s one theme to which Stormzy keeps returning: that of authenticity, which will be a guiding theme of his new album. “If you’re scared of your truth”, he explains, “that’s when people don’t know where you’re coming from. And I’m not scared of my truth, at all.” He places his fist firmly into his palm for emphasis. “I think that’s one thing with me, for the rest of my career. From *GSAP*, to whatever album’s gonna be my last one, the bottom line will be that: he was a bad boy. Not in the sense of being streetwise, but that he was true to himself and he was unapologetic.”

Stormzy's rare blend of swagger, soulfulness and storytelling are reminiscent in several ways of Jay-Z, and so it is unsurprising to hear that he has learned much from the Brooklyn-born legend. "He taught me a lesson for the rest of my musical career, that I will never forget", he recalls. "See with 4:44, he's past the age of prime rapper, everyone from his era's gone, he's running round with all these new kids - not even the new kids, the *new* new kids...when I heard about (4:44), I'm not gonna lie, I thought: how is Jay-Z gonna drop an album today? And I'm a Jigga fan, but I was like 'what do you have to say?'. And all he did was talk from his point of view. That's all he could do. He didn't try and act like, 'yeah, I'm in the club with Lil' Pump, yeah, I'm still trapping on the block'". That's what I took from it. All he could talk about was his beef with the owner of Spotify. All he could talk about was his relationship with Beyonce, with his child, with his mum...kicking knowledge from that space of being a billionaire...you can't knock it, because it's the truth. And that's why that album resonated."

It's a sign of Stormzy's ambition that when he talks of his peers and greatest inspirations, he most often mentions musicians with a globe-spanning appeal. One of those is Ed Sheeran, with whom he quickly struck up a close friendship, and whom he joined on stage at the Brits for a raucous remix of Sheeran's all-conquering hit, "Shape Of You". He seems in equal parts amused by and grateful for the strength of their bond. "It's so crazy because, firstly, Ed Sheeran is white and ginger. He's the total opposite of me, already. So even for me to be able to take his career and relate it to mine - some people are like, 'why aren't you looking at Dizzee Rascal, or Skepta, or any other prominent black artist?' But with Ed, the reason I got so close to him was because I saw someone who was probably the only person I wanted to be like, in terms of the stature of what he does. The number of records he's sold, the number one records he has, the stadiums he sells out. Just the sheer weight of his success: the Grammys that he's won, the Brit awards that he's won."

Stormzy also identifies a significant similarity with Sheeran, which is one of the bedrocks of their success; that they are both "men of the people". The 25-year old rapper may no longer be stepping between the street and the sermon, but he's still walking between two worlds: that of the celebrity and of the Everyman. Whilst Dizzee Rascal, to paraphrase the title of his own seminal debut, was the boy in the corner, Stormzy is the boy round the corner. One moment he's making a surprise appearance on Love Island, the UK's hottest reality TV show, or singing "Blinded By Your Grace" at a funeral following a fan's request on Twitter. His desire to stay grounded is evident from his surroundings, which are comfortable, but not ostentatious; this isn't the habitat of a hard-living entertainer, but rather that of an elite athlete obsessively focused on his next race.

Of course, Stormzy is not averse to making political statements: most memorably, he did so during a show-stopping performance at the Brits awards, where he called out the British Prime Minister Theresa May for her handling for the Grenfell Tower fire disaster. Yet now that he has achieved a measure of success, he is very keen not to preach down the mountainside; particularly since it was his community in South London, long before the mainstream noticed him, who did so much to raise him aloft. "There's no way I could be where I'm from, move here, and stand on that balcony and say 'okay guys, put your knives down' - like, it's mad. It's ridiculous. The way I address that on this album - and it's so mad because (my close friend Flipz) said that to me after I played it to him - was from the only way I could talk about it. From the angle of *us*. Because it *is* us. It's not you. It's not, 'yo, you, put your knife down' - because you've got your knife now, (but) I had mine three years ago."

From the outset, Stormzy has always seemed more than a mere MC, or even a musician; witness the short film he starred in to promote *Gang Signs and Prayer*, or his role in the 2016 film *Brotherhood*. His reverence for the written word has also found expression in the creation of Merky Books, the new imprint he has launched in collaboration with Penguin Random House UK. For Stormzy, it was a natural step. "I'm a lover of literature", he says of his new venture. A keen fan of Malorie Blackman growing up, and now of the poet Yrsa Daley-Ward, he saw the need to express this passion; and, in the process, and to create opportunities for writers from his background.

Whilst he looks to elevate those around him, Stormzy has one eye firmly fixed on international stardom - yet the speed of his ascendancy has sometimes startled him. "My first show abroad was in Iceland, in 2015", he recalls. "It was mad...I remember I had no tour manager. Walking through the crowd (to the stage), people are like 'Stormzy! Oh shit! Man's walking through, and people are going nuts!" A main reason for the surge in his popularity are his thrillingly kinetic live performances, which he conducts with all the passion and vigour of a footballer in the knockout stages of the World Cup. One moment, he's crouched low in one corner of the stage, readying himself for an intimate confession; the next, he's springing up and across, as if desperate to pace each patch of the stage. "My body and my mind won't allow me to stay in one place", he reveals, smiling. "My brain is saying, 'don't stop moving. You're not allowed to stop moving. Keep up the energy. You've got to keep going - if you stop, they (the crowd) stop...And it pays off."

It does indeed, with his shows even drawing the praise of one of the world's most famous frontmen. "I did Glastonbury", he says, "and I'll never forget; Chris Martin came up to me afterwards, and he said one thing that he was so surprised by - and I saw it in him, you know when someone's so genuine - he was like, that's phenomenal. What he was so impressed by was that I kept the crowd captivated the whole time. 'We didn't take our eyes off you' he said. 'No-one took their eyes off you.'"

And so, with all eyes on Stormzy, he puts the finishing touches on his second full-length record: yet he seems to be wearing the pressure as lightly as a pair of his much-loved adidas. Having sold out Brixton Academy three times, and toured through dozens of countries, he is already supremely unfazed by the thought of playing the UK's biggest venue. "I'm going to play Wembley Stadium", he says. "One hundred percent. I don't even doubt it." The key to his confidence is simple. "I feel like I've fully found the code for music", he says, "which is truth. It's like, if I hear the riddim and I love it, that's my truth." A perfect example of this, he says, is Prince's *Purple Rain*. "I don't know much of his work, to be honest, but you know when he goes 'I don't want to be your weekend lover'? You see the way he's singing that? That's such a truth that I believe it." With Stormzy apparently having found his winning formula, the watching world should be excited. "Speak your truth", he shrugs. "That's a foolproof plan."