**TOR MILLER**

**BIOGRAPHY 2016**

There are any number of singers who can turn in a pitch-perfect performance, who can hold a note, shape a phrase, and project their voices to the back of the hall. Talent shows across the globe are full of them, singing for their supper, hoping for that lucky break. And then there is that select type of vocalist who can take a song to the next level, burrow deep beneath its skin, and pin you to your seat as they do so. Anyone lucky enough to hear the demo version of Tor Miller’s song Headlights 18 months ago would have instantly added the name of the 20-year-old native New Yorker to the latter list. Who was this musician singing – in a sandpapered voice rich with vibrato and hoarse with emotion – as if his life depended on it, hurling himself off the precipice, wrestling the song to the floor, as the piano pounded and the melody, as it hit the final chorus, slipped its moorings and soared skywards? And how come, so few singers do this? Occupy a song, tear the lyric from their chest, sing with such passion and recklessness that they seem to be locked in mortal combat with the darkest corners of their heart and their soul.

As Tor tells it, it took a major upheaval in his life to kick-start his conviction and self-belief, and turn him from someone who would “sing around the house all the time” into an artist on a mission. When he was 12, his parents moved from Manhattan out to New Jersey and, six months later, Tor enrolled in a new school near his new home. It was those six months, and the two years that followed, that would shape him both as a singer and as a writer. Put simply, he channeled his grief for his old life, and his alienation from his new one, into music. But first, that six-month period when, Tor says, each weekday he and his mother would do “a 90-minute commute. She would drop me off and I’d sit for about half an hour, waiting for school to open, listening to the music she had given me – Ziggy Stardust, Elton John’s greatest hits, Fleetwood Mac – on my iPod. I listened to those records pretty much nonstop, up and back. And that was the point when I started writing my own songs.”

As is so often the case, a great teacher proved another catalyst. “I had this piano teacher at the new school who would just let me play what I wanted to, so I’d play him these songs and sing along really quietly, and one lesson he said: ‘You have a really good voice. Next week, instead of just working on the piano part, we’ll learn the vocal as well. And the week after, we can try writing something.’ So it really all just sort of happened that way, and it was all thanks to that one teacher.”

The music lessons aside, Tor’s new school was, for a long time, not a place he was happy to attend. “I was a complete outcast; I didn’t talk to anyone for about two years. But I was getting confident in lessons, and wrote my first couple of songs, so I decided to perform at the eighth-grade talent show – and remember, at that point, no one had really ever heard me even speak. I was so mad to have had to move schools and leave all my friends, so I didn’t participate in anything. But I got up there and performed a cover version, and a song I had just written, and immediately after, people suddenly wanted to talk to me, I got all this attention – especially from girls! And it propelled me to keep going, and I started booking shows, open-mic nights in places such as The Stone Pony in Asbury Park. I worked at that, and then I went to high school, and joined the jazz band there, and some of the guys in that joined my band, and we just carried on playing shows. But it all came from that one performance in eighth grade.”

The songs “began to pour out, most of them about isolation and loneliness,” Tor says with a wry laugh. “I felt that I’d been taken out of the city and away from a life I loved, and thrown out on a horse farm in New Jersey. I had no idea what to do with myself, I was really angsty. And here, suddenly, was something I liked – and I didn’t like anything at the time.”

The bug had bitten him and, when he took up a place studying music at NYU, Tor dove right in. “The moment when it felt properly real was in my first semester at college, when I was writing all these songs. I was a bit of a madman during that period. I’d stay up super late, I’d show up late to class, I was writing and working, working and writing, and there was nothing else I wanted to do. So I guess that’s the moment when it got serious for me, when it was real and I knew it was what I had to be doing. And I was absolutely miserable at the time! But it’s an incredibly intoxicating state to be in. I’ll never forget that time.”

Glassnote Records – home to artists such as Mumford & Sons, Phoenix, Childish Gambino and Chvrches – picked up on the excitement that was rapidly building around Tor, and last year, he signed to the label.

Glassnote did what so many labels no longer see the benefit in doing, they saw the potential and they allowed it to develop. Simple, huh? Simple but so often disregarded to make use of early buzz and ride it until that buzz falls flat. Tor had always foreseen his songs having an element of grandeur about them, but never had the means to turn that vision into a reality.

“I always imagine these lush, arranged songs that were big band sounding. When I was recording these insular solo songs, there were certain elements missing, but time has allowed me to make them sound how I wanted them to. I am so proud of the album.”

The record label didn’t just throw him in a studio with session musicians to find this bigger sound, aware that that will always lose a sense of life and magic, but they gave Tor and his songs the space to breathe and let him go about finding a band himself, touring it, re-shaping the songs, touring them again, and then heading into the studio to see if an album was ready.

The dynamic though had changed. Listen back to the latest incarnation of that unmastered debut record and it’s come along way from Tor’s first iPhone demos. There is very much a band feel to them, and what they have lost in intimacy they have gained in scale. “I understand that fronting a band brings with it much more energy. Sitting behind a piano gets a bit boring for me, and for the audience. The live show now has variety, like the record does. It has to have an ebb and flow to keep it interesting. It’s different but it’s hugely gratifying to hear what we’ve created over time.”

“It’s difficult to articulate what I wanted, but I feel like we’ve done a great job. To have these songs and the ideas that I couldn’t pull off alone down and off my chest is great.”

It’s an album that, as Tor suggests, has plenty of ebb and flow. There’s bold and grandiose (Surrender), there’s pop with a range of colour (Carter & Cash, Always), and there’s hushed and beautiful (Baby Blue). Schizophrenic? Not so much, Tor has managed to commit to that sense of vastness, but kept a sonic thread throughout that keeps it from being a mish-mash of ideas. It goes for the jugular, grapples with it, and ultimately wins.

Like many great albums do, the album closes on a beauty, and Tor’s current favourite called Stampede. “It’s the book-end. I wanted Stampede to end on a ‘what the hell happened there?!’ moment. It’s expansive. I wanted it to sound like Bruce Springsteen covering Purple Rain (which he recently did, weirdly enough). I can hear it on the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury as the weekend closes. It’s a song I’m hugely proud of.”

Ambitious, then, but not misplaced. The ongoing glut of actually *very good* singer-songwriters will never become a fallow stable, but Tor has leap-frogged that pen and positioned himself comfortably on the outside, looking above and beyond its obvious limitations. His music has soul, and his performance has a range, depth and scale.

There’s a key moment in prior single “Midnight” when, with the backing vocals rising to a tumult behind him, Tor sings “Calling out, calling out for something true.” The most thrilling thing about Tor Miller – with the advantage of time – is that he might well have found it.