

Simple Ambitions

"That was the tea arriving", he says, leaning into my microphone as he pours us both a cuppa in The Village's downstairs bar. "Got to keep it civilised, you know?"

Ciaran McFeely, Simple Kid, or just plain 'Simp' to his growing and vocal fan base, sports the flowing locks and wild, unkempt beard of a Corkonian Devendra Banhart. At the start of a UK tour to promote his second full-length Simple Kid release, simply entitled SK2, 'The Kid' is preternaturally friendly and self-possessed. Simp's eclectic combination of down-home song craft "with a Talking Heads twist", and at times radically modern production, has been compared to artists as diverse as Neil Young, Beck, and even late-era Beatles. His music is self-recorded, self-mixed and self-produced, and performed with an unpretentious experimental enthusiasm. Lyrically, Simp is leagues ahead of his peers; songs like 'Serotonin', 'Average Man' and 'The Commuter' stand out as philosophical reflections on modern anomie. The night before our interview, The Village shook to an all too brief set, near hits from the first two Simple Kid albums intercut with a VJ'd duet with Kermit the Frog (It's Not Easy Being Green) and a musical eulogy to British wrestling legend, Big Daddy. Simple Kid is not your average rock star.

Analogue: Your band 'The Young Offenders' landed a major label deal from Sony when you were just 17, and made a stab at the UK market, what happened?

Simple Kid: I'm not sure if it's the same these days, but back in them old days, they'd basically throw shit-loads of money at the wall and they'd give you half a year to become an international success. We didn't. We did quite well for a month, that kind of classic English

NME thing, and then we started to fizzle, and they made a decision. It's weird, you're too young to really understand it. You get pumped through this gun, you believe that you're gonna do this thing, and then, literally a couple of months later, you're signing on the dole in your glitter tops and skinny jeans.

A: Do you think the music industry is suffering because there's a high expectation on bands to perform so well, so quickly?

SK: I've had mixed feelings over the years. If you got me on a bad year, I'd say it's all terrible, but then I think, you're trying to do something that's the best job in the world, and if it doesn't work out for you, you can't go 'It's so unfair!'. The reason it's unfair is because everyone's trying to do it, and it's the highest prize. I'm really easy going about it these days. I played three days ago to about a hundred people who were looking at me like I was fucking insane; it was horrible at the time, but afterwards I was like, 'Well you know, that's the way it goes'. I don't have any overview of the music industry any more, I've given up trying to predict what's going on.

A: Did it save you from becoming Bono?

SK: I don't think I was ever in any danger of that. It probably saved me from becoming something far more ludicrous. My dad's always told me he's really glad that I didn't make it when I was seventeen. I'd love to have been an idiotic popstar when I was that age. I think that's what you're meant to be. I'm too old now to really go off the handle, but I'd love to have about ten rehabs, nine wives and seven kids behind me. Regrets, I've had a few ...

A: For the first album, 'SK1', you released a couple of tracks with Fierce Panda, and then signed with 2M and later Vector. The new

album is credited to Country Gentleman Recordings ...

SK: It's my thing, it's basically me and two mates. I've tried it major label, I've tried it indie label. The indie label basically went under. Just as we were getting to the point where we possibly could have had a hit, suddenly there was no money and it all folded. So I'm just trying it another way, and I'll probably just screw it up myself this time, but at least I can only give out to myself.

A: But you are being published by Sony, is there any pressure from them?

SK: They have absolutely no interest in me, which is kind of great. You know, they just stick the label on and they're probably not even aware that it's out there. I'm totally under their radar which is good 'cause I can't bear them. My A&R man's name is 'Flash', and I just thought, "OK, that's enough, I don't want to meet him." This is a classic kind of thing, he hasn't even met me. He's like, "Oh yeah yeah", and signs the thing. If I ever had a hit, he'd be like "Let's go to dinner", and I'd be like "No, let's fucking suck my dick".

A: You took a break between the first and second Simple Kid albums. Was that basically due to the label folding?

SK: It was a really weird time. The first album took a while to get into people's heads; it wasn't a big sensation, it was more of a word of mouth thing. It was this horrible summer where internally everything was going tits up, but the kids were just getting into it. But, instead of it being bigger and better, a load of my musicians [from Simple Kid's backing band] had to leave because I couldn't afford to pay them. So you're thinking, "This is great, this is great, it's really happening", and the press is saying, "This is really happening" ... but then you come back and there's clearly less going on. It was just the awful internal explosion of everything. I think at the end of it, I just said, "Ah fuck that for a while, enough". I was exhausted as well so I sat on my ass for two years. As you can probably tell from last night's show, I quite enjoy just fucking going with it, and it gets harder to go with it the bigger you get, you know? So I think I'm kind of quite happy just chirping along like this ... it's hard to show racist album covers when there's press people there [Simple Kid's stage show includes a slide show of the worlds worst album covers – they're hilarious, but hardly racist]

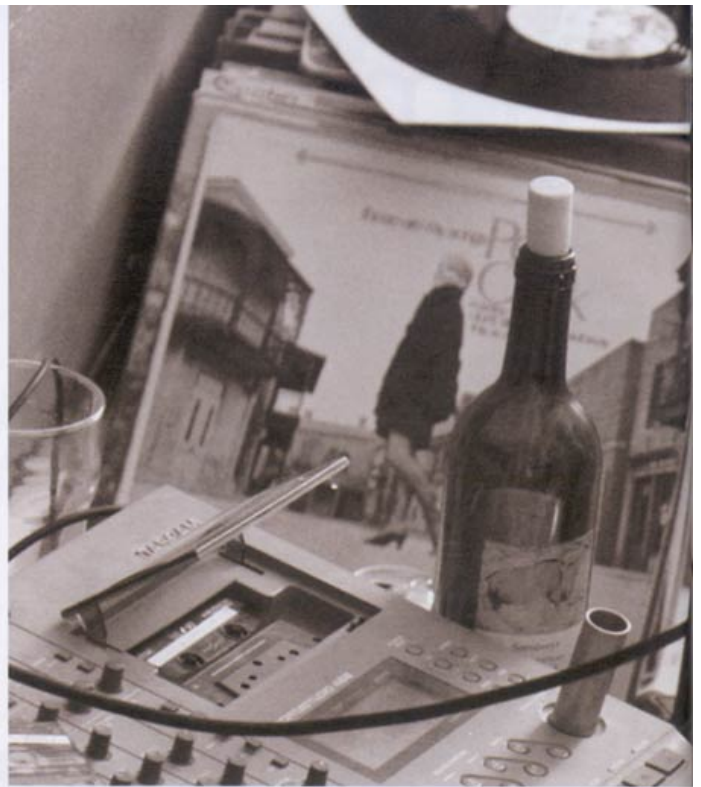
A: You VJ during your shows, which is very unusual for a small act ...

SK: I never realised it's VJing. Is it? I suppose it is technically speaking, yeah. That's so cool, I'm a VJ! Nice one. Yeah, it's just a way of keeping myself entertained really. I find it quite difficult to stick with an acoustic guitar act for an hour and a half, especially if everyone's pissed up. You feel a bit ashamed coming out and trying to get 'em to calm down. I've kind of got enough material now that if it's a really mellow audience, I can go that way, and if it's just like last night was, clearly a riot, basically go with it.

A: You have this famous story that they always ask you about in all your interviews - your travels in the States, the Simple Kid moniker and so on ...

SK: Yeah I mean, I used to do all this crap when I was first coming out. That idea about this hobo calling me Simple Kid was nonsense obviously; every person I'd tell it to knew that it was, but they'd print it anyway. But the American journey was true. I'm really glad that I did that more than most things, because it came after 'The Young Offenders' and it was a very confusing melt down. I was completely unprepared to go off to America, so therefore it was great, because it was unplanned. It was really amazing, kind of mind-opening ...

A: Did you have any hairy times travelling without a lot of money in places like San Francisco where there's a large homeless population?



SK: I basically could get a hostel about once a week for an evening. There was a car park I used to sleep in, in San Francisco, in the Castro area which is the gay area, which I always figured might be a bit more friendly, and there were no problems. It was uncomfortable obviously, but I was only twenty-three and elated at the fact that I wasn't sitting in my bed at home. I did meet the hobo that I kind of turned into a lie. I did actually meet this guy in Santa Cruz, who was one of the most fascinating guys that I've ever met in my life. I was sitting around with him for the afternoon, and you couldn't say a word; it was his show! He used to laugh at me, 'cause he had me pegged. He was like, "Oh you're just this ..." [he almost says Simple Kid]. He was a proper homeless guy, and he knew I was just this summer person who was there from my own choice. In a friendly way, he used to completely take the piss out of me and cut me down to size. If I said anything, he'd have like a million more facts, and he'd be like 'Oh really, oh really, oh da da da da.' Ah, he's just my hero. Never even found out his name or anything ... I'm not sure if he had a name. Over there, there's no welfare so if you slip, if you don't fit a certain demographic, or you have a bit of bad luck, there you are. It's not a nice thing but, what can you do, I dunno. Maybe I *can* be Bono, and we can save these people!

A: You've got a hugely varied sound, on both your Simple Kid releases, from psychedelic prog, to funky electronica, to acoustic, all these different influences. How do you balance such a variety of sounds on an album?

SK: I just write as much as I can, it's all set up at home. I'll go home in about a week, and I'll have a couple of days off. I'll hopefully spend one day doing absolutely nothing, but the next day, I'll literally wander into the next room and I'll press a couple of buttons on and we're off, we're recording. So it's something that'll come or it won't. By the time it comes to album time, it's never finished usually, but there's enough stuff; some of it's trying to actually do something genuine, some of it's just completely pissing around. For the last album, I wanted to go reasonably serious, so I've got a funny feeling I'm just gonna go off the rails for the next one, just have the stupidest album of all time. I've got the feeling it's gonna be more idiotic, do you know? Either that or else I'll go the other way ... make a Radiohead album or something!

A: Who's been an influence on your home low-fi, remix production style?



SK: It's hard to know. I'm always aware that when I was growing up I was into artists where quality wasn't necessarily a major concern. I mean I loved Nirvana and The Smashing Pumpkins when I was a teenager, but I also loved Alice Donut and stuff where the quality was so low that you could barely hear anything ... Sonic Youth bootlegs where you couldn't actually hear anything, but you'd convince yourself that you loved it. These days, there are people like Jeffrey Lewis; you can tell he just recorded it wherever he recorded it, and put it up on the net. Some of my favourite music is Daniel Johnson and all that kind of stuff. It's just the freedom basically, not having anyone around going "Woah, you know if we don't rerecord it, we won't be in the top ten!", so you just go with it. One day if I got an opportunity with a really good producer, say a Squarepusher-type character, I'd quite like to do something a different way, where I'm not in control, to see what it's like. We'll see, if someone offers!

A: You've a strong online fanbase, who remix your work and are hugely enthusiastic about your career. How do you feel about the use of new technology and the web as a promotional tool?

SK: I wasn't one of the first people to do it, but it just seems a really obvious thing to do. I used to feel that it'd be fun if we got people to do this. Ultimately, I want to base something on bluetooth, where if you come to a gig with your phone, and I've got wireless or Bluetooth and I've got a big screen, there's going to be something happening. It's got to be done, you know? I quite like the idea of people heckling me behind my back. It'll come up on the screen, "You are a tosser", or whatever they want to say. Yeah, it is a promotional tool, but I think my instinct is to do it because it's really fun, and let's see what happens.

A: There's a video a girl did for Serotonin, that's up on YouTube ...

SK: Yeah I saw that, 'cause I look every now and again to see what's there. It was really sweet, but I've no idea what it meant ... very dreamscapery. That means a lot more to me than an REM slot ... for some person to actually choose to use my work for their end of year project, I think it's great

A: How do you feel about mashups and the culture of appropriating stuff without necessarily reimbursing the original artists?

SK: I think the people who are giving out about it are utter wankers. They'll do interviews about how their music is about breaking away

from the man, but then they're really unhappy that they're not making money. I think it's great. I mean we were always doing cassette tapes when I was growing up and it's the same thing.

A: How do you feel about piracy in general?

SK: I've absolutely no kind of worry about it. I think it's a classic evolution thing; it's happening and if rock and roll implodes and ends, good, you know? The top end of music is getting so safe and middle class, and just horrible and boring and tedious. The fact is that the top bands are all imitations of bands twenty years ago, imitations of their parents' generation, and that's the most exciting thing that's going on ... it deserves to go down the pan. Something will always come along. You'll always have something exciting, and the fact that we can't predict it, and that it's all not the way that it used to be is a good thing. That's the idea. It's what punk was. People will look back on this. ... when the *something* comes out at the end, people will look back and go, "It was really exciting, I was there"

A: Is it possible to make a living doing what you're doing at the level that you doing it, where you have some exposure but you're self-releasing and producing?

SK: Just about. I can definitely survive until the summer. You're just praying that another little thing happens. It's not the safest feeling but, you know, whatever. Again if everything goes tits up, if you're really up against the wall, you can always go and get a job again. Just do it, get annoyed enough with working every day that I sort it out and pull my finger out. You can live, I wouldn't say entirely comfortably, but you can do it if you want to do it. It's a choice.

A: Any plans for the next CD. Funky and crazy?

SK: Maybe not funky, I'm a bit old for the funk. I'm molding it in my head a bit. I was home for a day on this tour and I was just sorting through tapes and stuff, and I think I kind of know what I'm gonna roughly head for. Whether I do it or not, we'll see when I start to actually sit down and knock it into shape. I'm not gonna tell you any more about it, in case it goes the other way, or I jinx it ... but I think I'm gonna go popstastic, or my version of popstastic, whatever that is ... we'll see.

Simple Kid's Album, SK2, is available in many good record shops.

Gareth Stack