

Kojey Radical

Katie Beswick.

‘I remember we was so broke,’ Kojey Radical says, in his gravelly, amused London accent, bending his tall frame back against the small chair in his hotel room. ‘We split a £3 pizza. A £3 Italian pizza we split between like, five people, because we had no money.’ He is telling me about a time back in the day, as he worked on the visual concept for the track ‘Bamboo’ with the Northampton creative duo The Rest (now best known for their collaborations with Slowthai). This was one of the many moments in his career when failure and success rubbed up tight against each other — when Kojey sat in what seemed like defeat yet might have been the verge of global mega-success.

We’re meeting over video call as part of the promotion for his newly released album, *Reason to Smile*. According to almost everyone, Kojey is (once again) on the cusp of greatness — which presumably means he is about to break out in a big way on the commercial mainstream. This, as Kojey’s later puts it, is not his first rodeo. The promises of something better than what he has right now have long been dangled, realised to a certain extent, sometimes, and then snatched away only to resurface just when he thought it was all over.

_ Rewind _

‘I started my music journey with the thought in my mind I was already a failure,’ he says. Kojey studied at the London College of Fashion and wrote a book in his final year. ‘And I had an idea, for a soundtrack to accompany this book. And I decided ok, I want to do this. So,

I've gone to my lecturers, I was studying Illustration and Creative Direction at the time, and I've gone to them, and I said "I've made some music, and I'm gonna hand it in, and you're gonna mark it, like illustration and art." And they said, "We're not, and you will fail if you do that."

He did it anyway, and presumed he'd failed his degree. Deflated, but not deterred, Kojey posted the EP that came from that final project, *Dear Daisy*, on SoundCloud, where it quickly gained traction, and big enough audience that the feelings of failure started to recede. "Virality was a lot smaller back then, it took a lot less to go viral, you know? So, I'm enjoying the fruits of that labour, and the summer comes to a close and my boy gives me a call and he's like, "Are you going to the end of year show?"

Kojey wasn't planning on doing so, what with having failed the course, but the friend convinced him it might be fun. 'I quickly put on a jumper, some jeans. Everyone else was dressed to the nines — I didn't get the memo. So, I go, and my lecturer's there. She comes up to me smiling, all, "Oh so glad to see you, you did so well." I said, "What you mean did so well? What you talking about?" She said, "Check the results". So, I checked them, and I've ended up getting a first. I finished top six, I can't remember if it was in my class or the university overall, but I did really well. And then life began.'

-Pull Up/Fast-forward-

Life, as it turns out was getting fired from a series of retail jobs while making the video for 'Bamboo'. 'We put that into the universe, and it gets pied. Nobody wants it, nobody likes it. It's, "We like the beat but we don't like the lyrics," or, "We don't like that we don't get it", And then, my friend, who's passed now, he saw the video and he said, "You've gotta talk to my mate Charlie. And Charlie sees it and he goes, "This is incredible!" And he more or less

signs me as a director on the spot.” A corporate gig quickly followed, and a life-changing tour supporting Young Fathers.

Although Kojey had barely any music to his name, he threw himself into the tour, inspired by Fathers’ ethos, and particularly their driving notion: that all music which finds a popular audience is pop music. “It forced me to never consider changing for a mass audience, it’s just do what you wanna do, consistently.”

He left the tour focussed and determined, ready to share a burning rage with the world. The political tracks he wrote in this period saw him labelled as a socially conscious, spoken-word rapper. ‘But that wasn’t really me,’ he explains. ‘I mean I came from spoken word, which was conscious, but that’s not my personality trait. I’m a normal person, you know what I’m saying?’

Then, all of a sudden...

“The industry starts fucking with me a little bit more. I’m on the hot four twenty-whatever-the-fuck, BBC list or whatever. Radio was starting to support. But I’m inexperienced and have a severe lack of music. I’m getting all this attention and this love, and I can’t reciprocate it. You get this rush of oh it’s there, he’s there, Kojey’s right there, he’s on the cusp of whatever the fuck. But I weren’t ready so it went away.’

Undeterred, Kojey plugged away, soon returning with *23 Winters*. Gigs all over the world. Another tipping point for success. And then... “People started dropping off, I started battling with mental health and anxiety. Life on the outside’s going amazing but I’m slowly fizzing out. I’d made *In God’s Body* by that point, and I was about to drop it, and the manager I had at the time left. They took me to a cafe and talked me through plans for the next five months and ended the meeting with, ‘I quit’. They ended the meeting so I could do it by myself. And then, erm, my best friend I was speaking about earlier – the one who helped

me put the Bamboo video out — he died. And I was like. “I’m done. I’m done with music.” I was ready to quit.’

But he didn’t.

There was collaboration with Hito Steyerl on the visual art project Power Plants, eventually shown at the 2019 Venice Biennale. *Cashmere Tears* followed. And just as *that* was about to explode... the pandemic happened.

_Pause-

At his mother’s house, early-pandemic, Kojey was surrounded by his belongings — the bags and clothes and shoes — all of them now devoid of any meaning. “And...I get kinda stopped in my tracks you know? I sold the biggest shows I’d ever had. My career, my tour, was sold out. Music was bubbling. And everything stopped and I realised I hadn’t really sorted my life out. Things had been moving really fast since 2014. So I had to figure out what I was going to do. And it sort of led me to *Reason to Smile*. Here we are today.”

Reason to Smile, he tells me, is a homecoming, infused with his mother’s voice and the sense of returning to himself, at last.

“With this album... one of the things that was happening for me, in my life, was becoming a dad, and in the process of being a new father you’re trying to figure out where you fit into the whole dynamic you know? You’re kind of useless. Apart from like just being there for the mother of your child. But what is required from you, is you’re just there. Whether you are there to be a punching bag, or just be an ear. You’re trying to figure out how important you are in this process while watching the mother of your child being the most important part of this dynamic. And then I’m writing this album, and I just end up writing what I’m going through, what I’m thinking.”

He played the album to a friend, who suggested the obvious missing feature was his mother. “So, I took her to the studio. She came with four pages of words written down, and I took it off her, I took the pages off her, I was like “fuck that” and we sat down and just spoke. And we cut it up and put it down together. But it kind of ended up making sense because my mum’s voice, I say, always reminds me of being home. Even if it’s being in your room as a teenager not wanting to speak to no one, but still knowing the sound of what it’s like for your name to be called from downstairs. Do you know what I’m saying? Certain things take you right back there. Things now are moving so fast, you kind of need those reminders of home.”

I tell him it feels like he is really on the cusp of mega-success this time, and he laughs, waving a hand dismissively at the screen. That doesn’t bother him.

‘It’s one of these cliché things, but people say to me, “Your music saved my life.” I’m realising that there’s certain songs that came to me at times in my life, and they became the most important songs to me. And the more music I put in the world, the more I have the chance of being that for someone else.’ He leans forward, ‘I was speaking to someone yesterday who was saying they wanted to sing along to ‘Can’t Go Back’, but she was not able because she was crying so much. Her brother had just killed himself, and she was listening to that track every day because it was one of her brother’s favourite songs...For my music to be that involved in anybody’s life is crazy to me.’

We’re silent for a little while, as Kojey contemplates the journey.

‘I’m just grateful in the end, because what started out as an experiment has ended up being... my life.’