

GROWING PAYNE

ONE DIRECTION GRADUATE LIAM PAYNE HAS ACHIEVED THE IMPOSSIBLE: TURNING VIRAL FAME INTO AN ENDURING CAREER. SURE, HE'S TALENTED, HARD WORKING AND EXTREMELY AMICABLE. BUT THE TRUE SECRET TO HIS SUCCESS? BEING WILLING TO EMBRACE THE UNKNOWN

BY SCOTT HENDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG WILLIAMS

Delivered with a hint of defiance, it's a sentiment that applies whether you happen to be a popstar or a product manager.

"I've got a lot of things wrong in my time, but they were also the moments that I've learned the most about myself," Payne adds. "The moments to do with fear, patience, intelligence, all those different things."

The truth is, Payne has lived his life in fast forward, cramming youthful missteps, naïve blunders and redemptive wisdom into one dizzying decade in the crucible of pop-culture stardom, a vortex that generally chews up and spits out young men. Instead he's emerged, if not fully formed, then certainly as a man acutely aware of who he is. He's as unsure as the rest of us what happens next – there aren't many five-year plans in pop stardom – but you'd be hard-pressed to find a guy more ready to seize his potential and make his mark. And that's an enviable position to be in, whatever direction you want life to take you.

BOY BAND BLUES

At the height of their success, One Direction achieved the impossible, inducing Sixties-style hysteria in an era deemed too atomised for such levels of superstardom. A five-piece boy band, manufactured on TV's *X-Factor* by none other than Simon Cowell, with universal appeal. The mop-top haircuts, cheesy grins and wholesome values echoed boy bands of decades past, with an updated millennial twist.

To fully grasp the band's gigantic pop-cultural footprint consider this: One Direction are the only band in history to have their first four albums debut at Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, a feat not even The Beatles managed in their heyday.

"It literally was the perfect storm," remembers Payne. "There were so many scenarios that had to fall into line for that to happen. It's not something that can easily be recreated or probably ever will be because of the way the Internet was kicking off, the way *The X Factor* kicked off. I just think it was just dumb luck.">

When we arrive in springtime London to meet with singer Liam Payne, he's at the centre of a heaving team of staff, fussing around a small hotel room in the heart of the city. It's a small whirlwind overlooking a comparatively peaceful Hyde Park.

Amongst all the drama, Payne remains unruffled. He's alert, aware of every person and conversation in the room, yet oddly at ease with the lunacy ensuing, greeting me with a traditional British bro-shake.

His calm under pressure is perhaps a product of his adolescent stint as one-fifth of the world's biggest boy band, One Direction, an experience in which an ability to find your equilibrium amid chaos was an essential survival skill.

What's immediately apparent is that Payne is a surprisingly self-aware and largely egoless 25-year-old, no mean feat for a man who's helped sell over 50 million albums in the past decade.

"You're kind of known sometimes as, 'the guy from that band', which is not really where you want to be at a certain point," Payne says within minutes of our first meeting. It's a refreshing show of vulnerability so early on, setting the tone for a poignant, sometimes emotionally raw two-day encounter with the star. "If you are what you think you are, then you don't have to fucking prove anything."



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"I REALLY STRUGGLE TO SAY NO BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE TO LET PEOPLE DOWN"

Prior to meeting Payne I'd been given strict instructions not to ask any One Direction-related questions. As it turns out Payne freely offers up details of his decade in the eye of the boyband storm. Indeed, he's happy to share, almost as a cautionary tale.

"It's difficult when you have the level of fame that we had in the band," he says. "There have been a lot of people in trouble with mental health that aren't really getting the help that they need and I think that's a bit of a problem in our industry. It's the same shit that happens to everyone, that's been happening since the 70's. You know what the traps are and if you are lucky enough, like me, to be able to get out of that scenario and back into a sense of normality, then you know it's a bit different."

Payne was only 14 when One Direction blew up. Forced to grow and mature under the magnifying glass of the global media, his adolescence quickly became click-bait fodder and, despite the companionship of fellow band members, he remembers his 1D days as a lonely time, punctuated by alcohol abuse.

"When you're doing hundreds and hundreds of [concerts] and it's the same 22 songs at the same time every single day, even if you're not happy, you've got to go out there," he says. "It's almost like putting the Disney costume on before you step up on stage and underneath the Disney costume I was pissed quite a lot of the time because there was no other way to get your head around what was going on. I mean it was fun. We had an absolute blast but there were certain parts of it

where it just got a little bit toxic."

It's the only time in my two days with Payne that the mood darkens. The sentiment echoes around the empty room for a moment, Payne's eyes glazing over as he's transported back to those riotous days. Did he ever feel in control during those times? "No. Never."

"I still struggle with it now," he adds. "I really struggle to say no because I don't like to let people down. It's in my nature."

If there's anything Payne hopes his fans take away from his time in fame's spin cycle, it's to embrace your past for what it is and grow from it. That way, at least, you ensure the only direction in which you can head is forward.

PAYNE AND GAIN

As if to remind us that we are in fact in the UK, on my second day with Payne the spring weather gives way to frosty winds and constant light drizzle. It doesn't seem to bother anyone in Payne's camp. Today is the singer's turn in front of the camera and he wears the dreary London day as well as his perfectly-tailored suit.

After much negotiation, we manage to get onto the rooftop of The Beaumont Hotel, giving Payne a chance to survey his turf. It's the most at ease I've seen him in our time together, the rain seemingly washing away the last traces of his boyish nervousness.

For all his self-discovery and reflection, Payne seems to have found solace from the trials of pop stardom

in fitness. He's energetic and you get the sense his next workout is never far from his mind. Even as we shoot on The Beaumont's suddenly wet rooftop, he jumps at the chance to squeeze in a few triceps dips on a flimsy railing. It's an odd look, the former boy-band star dressed in a beautifully tailored Hugo Boss suit, the contrast perhaps symbolic of the crossroads Payne now finds himself at.

The less than optimal workout gear notwithstanding, Payne credits his newfound fondness for fitness for keeping him on the straight and narrow.

"For me, working out was one of the things that I really wanted to tick off the list 'cause I always saw myself as that sort of sporty active person and I actually wasn't," he says. "I was smoking tons of cigarettes and drinking alcohol. It was the complete opposite but in

my head I was still a 14 year-old cross country runner who was fucking on top of the table."

And although it seems Payne may have simply traded one addiction for another, there's no denying the positive effects his commitment to movement has had on him.

"I run every morning at the moment," he says, showing off pictures from this morning's run on his phone. "I've been getting up and doing a before sunrise sort of thing, whereas before I would have been out of bed at 11 and smoking cigarettes."

Surprisingly for a man of his age, Payne's workout motivation remains relatively pure, free of any vanity and at odds with the current gym-bro culture.

"I think it's just having a gentler approach to things and not thinking that everything has to be brawn, muscle and testosterone," he

says. "Man, just fucking be a man about it but do it gently."

At the same time his fitness journey isn't solely about pursuing emotional growth. Payne is keen to increase his strength, offering inspiration to fellow "lanky lads".

"My biggest problem training wise has always been trying to bulk up," he says. "Bulking up is super hard and my metabolism is just so quick and I'm always on the go, so fitting food in has always been quite hard."

Currently eating over 12,000 kJ a day in pursuit of size, no doubt spurred on by his latest workout partner, Mark Wahlberg, Payne needs to maintain this high-energy intake and a systematic recovery plan to sustain his vigorous >



“THE MOMENT YOU PUT YOUR BODY THROUGH STRESS EVERYTHING FALLS INTO PLACE”



training schedule. And it doesn't come easy. "I have ice baths every single day," he says. "It's a fucking mission to get yourself in and out."

Hard as it may be, fitness has become Payne's sanctuary, the therapy that keeps his mind in the right place. "The moment you have that little bit of time to yourself where you put your body through a bit of stress, it's like everything just starts to fall into place."

FIND YOUR BEARINGS

As I accompany Payne to meetings with stylists and photo shoots for German fashion house Hugo Boss it's hard not to reflect on the duality of his circumstances. It's clear Payne is caught somewhere between boy and man. He maintains the youthful energy and humour that endeared him to millions of teenage girls worldwide, yet there's a vulnerability and self-awareness many pop stars could benefit from. The partnership with the fashion giant makes a lot of sense, with Payne looking to solidify himself as a man of style and the brand hoping to appeal to a new generation. In Payne, they've found the perfect bridge between the old and the new.

The singer certainly brings edgy appeal and a generous dollop of street cred to the table.

"I haven't really managed to settle," he says, acknowledging the headlines that accompany his domestic situation with ex-wife Cheryl Cole, as we approach at his mate's photography studio. "Since my breakup and then moving... who the fuck knows? Everything happens five years earlier in my life. I should just blame Brexit. It's fucking Brexit."

"I'm single... with a goal," he continues, as he holds me back from a passing black cab. He has a cheeky look, perhaps hinting at the recent rumours of a romance with supermodel Naomi Campbell, daring me to probe further. I don't.

Instead the talk turns to fatherhood. "People are like, it changes you overnight, but it doesn't," Payne says. "You still wake up as the same person when your baby's born. You have to slowly make changes to become what you think you want to be as a dad."

CLOTHING SUPPLIED BY HUGO



The journey hasn't been without drama. In the week before our meeting, Payne made headlines for apparently abandoning his son Bear's second birthday party, an issue that clearly still pains him.

"They just completely lied about it, which is bullshit," he says. "It is what it is, you just have to put up with it. As long as I can explain to him why and I can give a good enough reason, then that's all right by me."

He shows me a home movie on his busted iPhone of his clearly ecstatic son dancing along to his latest hit, *Familiar*. "The first time he heard it and he went, like, rigid, I was like, 'Oh my God he loves it!'"

Bear wasn't the only one, although Payne isn't in a rush to define himself as a solo artist just yet. Unlike his fellow 1D grads, he's yet to release a full album, instead biding his time to explore his sound and, indeed, himself.

"At the moment, I'm kind of song searching a little bit, which is hard because a lot of songs sound the same to me," Payne says. "I hope to tell more of a story about

myself with the music. I think the first few songs I've done were fun and we were very lucky with the success we had, but it doesn't necessarily paint the right picture of me."

Indeed, Payne is keen to distance himself from the image he initially portrayed following his 1D departure, despite the success he enjoyed. On sales alone, he's the most successful of the One Direction alumni. But he insists that the "Lamborghinis, big houses, flash shit, gold chains" have given way to "pickup trucks, lakes, sunrises".

"It might seem crazy, like a midlife crisis, but I don't give a shit," he says. "That's what I enjoy doing. And then you just kind of have to develop on top of what you like. And I know what I like is getting up and watching the sun come up. And I can do that every single day, free of charge."

He admits that it's a complete transformation. He's not wrong. For a man whose life and career have been shaped by sharp and distinct trajectories, this qualifies as a very clear 180. ■

Favourite exercise
Bench – it's just nice to see the weight go up.

Least favourite exercise

This thing called the Assault Bike. I fully hate the Assault Bike. There's another one called the ski erg. I hate that as well.

Workout Anthem
Giant by Calvin Harris. Just gets you going 'cause you want to be a giant.

Go-to cheat meal
A hefty-arse cheeseburger. We're talking the size of two regular burgers.

Favourite item of clothing
Trackpants.

Go-to karaoke song
I went to karaoke recently and I couldn't pick one. I did do

Michael Jackson's Human Nature, which was quite good. Bold choice.

Last time you cried
Watching a video of Bear the other day in my flat.

Last movie you recommended
Sicario 2. Absolute gem.

Hero/es
I always loved George Michael. He was awesome. He had this stage presence and he was about everything that he was doing. Tom Hardy's a fucking hero. Absolute legend.

Dream collaboration
Diplo or Calvin Harris. I messaged him, he needs to get back to me.

Motto
Just get on with it.