

A Leading Light

Merseyside Americana singer-songwriter Robert Vincent tells us about his gradual but steady rise to the top of the genre

Profile by Neil Crossley

12 When someone of the stature of 'Whispering' Bob Harris starts telling anyone who'll listen that you're "the real deal" and your music is "absolutely magnetic" then it's safe to assume you're doing something right. Such is the case with Robert Vincent, a singer-songwriter who spans country, folk, blues and rock and who has steadily built a reputation as a sublimely talented singer-songwriter.

Despite releasing his third album just weeks before the first lockdown, the Ethan Johns-produced long player went on to receive widespread critical acclaim. Vincent spent lockdown recording three stripped-



down EPs and was surprised when his burgeoning fanbase came forward to offer financial support following a number of intimate live online performances. Then, on 28 January 2021, he was awarded both Artist of The Year and Album of the Year at this year's Americana Music Association UK Awards. It's all a fitting testament to an artist who has diligently and steadfastly honed his craft.

Atlantic Crossing

Vincent was born in Crosby, a genteel coastal town seven miles north of Liverpool. The family later moved to Liverpool, and it's a city that Vincent is proud to still call home. From an early age he was fascinated with the power of words, and growing up on Merseyside instilled in him a love of the storytelling tradition. "I always wrote words," he says, "I'm always in that world." His interest in roots, country and blues music was first piqued after hearing his father playing the albums of Emmylou Harris, Charlie Rich and Waylon Jennings. Pink Floyd too were a profound influence on him, due to his older brother playing their albums relentlessly in the room they shared.

After leaving school and a taking up a succession of soul-destroying jobs to make ends meet, he began to gain a foothold on the Liverpool grassroots scene. One album in particular had a major impact on his future direction: the 2007 Grammy-winning album *Raising Sand*, a T Bone Burnett-produced collaboration between bluegrass/country artist Alison Krauss and Led Zeppelin frontman Robert Plant.

"That album gave me a lot of inspiration," says Vincent, speaking to *The Musician* by phone from his home near Sefton Park in Liverpool. "But it was a bit kind of odd to do that style of Americana in Liverpool at that time, because it was coming off this wave of Bandwagon club nights with bands like The Coral and The Zutons."

Despite such misgivings he followed his instincts, released a string of singles and EPs, slowly built up his fanbase, and began touring extensively. In 2013, Vincent released his debut album *Life In Easy Steps*, a collection of songs with a defiant country feel that highlighted his strengths as a songwriter, and yielded favourable reviews. But it was his 2017 album *I'll Make The Most Of My Sins* that really made people sit up and take notice.

Sense Of Space

Opening with a 40-second slice of ambient music, the album kicks into life with *So In Love*, a strident, weighty anthem, with an infectious Southern swamp rock groove. By contrast, the rest of the album is a far more intimate, acoustic affair, featuring piano, strings and howling pedal steel, with Vincent's gravel-tinged voice drawing comparisons to Richard Hawley. Contemporary sounds sit alongside classic country-style tracks such as *All For You*. Sonically, there's a real purity to Vincent's music, heightened by his strong awareness of the use of space.

"Roger Waters was a great believer in space and not being scared of it," says Vincent. "It's those moments – if you've just said a line, you don't want something else to then counteract what you've said. I feel sometimes the weight of the line or the weight of the melody is enough, and then that person's got two or three seconds to let that sink in before they hear the next thing. Sometimes, that is the most important thing – less is more – all those great sayings that people have come out with in the past."

The album received glowing reviews. "A young man filled with dreams, regret and shocking talent, giving his all," concluded *Mojo* magazine in its 4/5 review. The real breakthrough though came when Vincent and his band performed [a searing version of *So In Love*](#) on the revamped *Old Grey Whistle Test* in 2018. The performance

established him as a leading light of UK Americana and catapulted the album to No.1 in the iTunes Country Chart.

That performance also highlighted the talents of his band, whose subtle nuances elevate the songs to real heights. Another major asset is singer-songwriter Anna Corcoran, whose rich textured voice blends seamlessly with Vincent's. "We've been singing together probably for about 12 years now," says Vincent. "And Anna's been like a real constant throughout all of the recordings. And again, that initial thing of the Robert Plant and Alison Krauss vibe. There's a song from there we did called *Killing The Blues* – whenever we're together we'll do that in the set, 'cos it just suits us so well."

Organic Approach

Corcoran and the rest of the band – Adrian Gautrey (guitar/vocals), Danny Williams (bass), Robbie Taylor (mandolin, fiddle, banjo) and Jim Kimberly (drums, ➔

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Photo: Mike Walker

Robert Vincent
with drummer Jim
Kimberley and bassist
Danny Williams

percussion) – were integral to the recording of Vincent’s third album, *In This Town You’re Owned*, released in early 2020 and recorded at Rockfield Studios in Monmouthshire with legendary producer and musician Ethan Johns at the helm.

Johns had been Vincent’s dream producer of choice ever since he could remember, having been bowled over by his work on Whiskeytown’s *Pneumonia*, Ryan Adams’ *Gold* and Ray La Montagne’s *Trouble*. “I kept seeing his name coming up but absolutely loving everything that he did,” recalls Vincent. Johns is renowned for his organic approach to recording, which was evident from the first day that Vincent and his band set their gear up at Rockfield.

“Sonically, he’d find the right positions for everybody, but he does that in such a way that you don’t even realise that he’s done it. So everyone’s doing their thing without even knowing, and then before you know it after

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a few hours it’s just feeling and sounding great. It was just such a lovely experience. He has this way of making people feel comfortable with what they’re doing and bringing the best out in the song, and also capturing a fantastic song. Also, we’ve got to give a shout-out to his engineer Don Monks, who’s just a sonic genius as well. Between the two of them you can’t really go wrong. I think between him and Don, it’s the way that they hear a room.”

Vincent and his band recorded live onto sixteen track tape. When Johns suggested contributing some parts himself, Vincent was happy to comply. “He’s a fantastic musician too, so he’ll come in and he’ll sit in and go, ‘how about if I do something like this?’. And I’ll

go, ‘Right, yeah man. I’ve waited 20 years for you to come and sit in on one of my songs, so yeah, you just crack on (laughs).’”

Universal Themes

Lyrically, the latest album is driven by political events of the last few years. And while [tracks such as *This Town*](#) reference Liverpool, universal themes pervade.

“*In This Town You’re Owned* was to me about the political things that have been going on the last four or five years, whether that be Trump in America or Brexit over here,” explains Vincent. It just felt like we were being owned or controlled by something, whether it be the tabloid press or whether it be social media, and that was what scared me about what I could see going on around me”

“In Liverpool, you can’t go into a pub or a cafe without having some kind of political discussion... but what was different about it was the anger attached to it, the unrest



Vincent feels that he owes a great deal to his home city's long tradition of storytelling

Photo: Jonathan Stewart. © MU

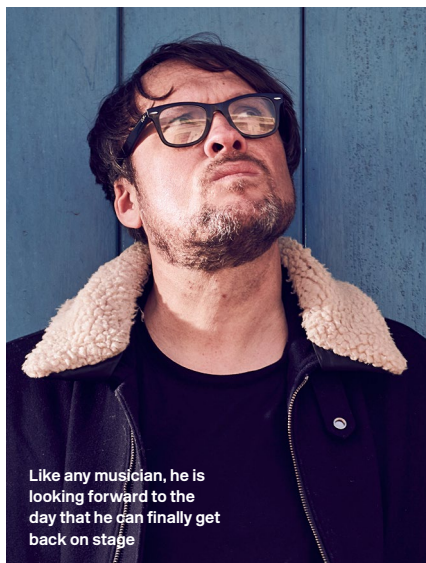
Online Action

Like many musicians, Robert Vincent took to doing online concerts when the pandemic shut down live work. He was surprised by the response. "Very quickly, within one or two shows of me doing that, people – especially American people who were tuning in – were asking if they could tip and donate. Even if they're just sending you the price of a pint or a coffee, or going to your shop and buying merch, just sending you a donation or a tip. So it kind of kept me moving forward, it kept a little bit of money coming in."

"At first I didn't know how to feel about it really. But it became something people wanted to do. I really got this feeling that people wanted to help. Regardless of anything, they believed in you enough as a musician that they wanted to try and help you through what was going on. And that in itself is such an amazing feeling, you know."

He also released three EPs, *Home 1, 2 and 3*, each featuring tracks from his three albums respectively, plus a cover version from an artist that inspired him at the time of writing each album. *Home 2* features an inspired version of *Four Season's In One Day* by Neil Finn of Crowded House.

"I'm really happy with that track," says Vincent. "I remember being 13 or 14 years old and buying *Woodface* [the third studio album by Crowded House] and being like 'woah, what's this?'. There's a lot of pop sounds on there but also – and he probably wouldn't thank me for it – there's a lot of Americana singer-songwriter vibe going on with what he did. And it was really inspirational to me growing up."



Like any musician, he is looking forward to the day that he can finally get back on stage

Photo: Jonathan Stewart. © MU

fourth album. He has written a lot of new material during the pandemic he says, but as with the songs he brought to Ethan Johns for *In This Town You're Owned* he is not yet entirely sure about them. "I'm a musician so I'm bound to be insecure about every little tiny thing that I do and I am, because I believe that the minute I stop being bothered, that's when I have to pack up and go home."

In August, Vincent will return to the US, this time as guest songwriter at the five-day Buddy Holly Songwriters Retreat in Lubbock Texas. It's the second time he has attended and he is looking forward to the event. Last time, he met Sonny West, who co-wrote *Rave On*, the 1958 hit for Buddy Holly. "He's just such a lovely guy," recalls Vincent. "I think he's about 83, but he seems about 20 years younger. I got to hear, sitting around the campfire, his experiences of meeting Buddy Holly and playing on *Rave On*. I mean there's nothing else that's going to inspire you to write a song more than that."

Like tens of thousands of other musicians right now, Vincent's main objective is to get back on stage. Pencilled tour dates in the UK, US and Europe have already been moved four times, he says. He is hoping that dates he has booked in July will happen.

"I'm just trying to focus on what I can do live as much as possible," he says. "The primary concern for me moving forward is to get out and play to people, because people have been starved of it now for a year. The thirst for live music is going to be so strong." **mu**

attached to it. That's what I felt it created. We live in such a communicative world, but I think we've lost the art of discussion. I think we've lost the art of actually communicating with each other. So a song like *The Kids Don't Dig God Anymore* is not just about religious faith. It's about trying to find another system, trying to find another way of doing things or seeing things. Just embracing things slightly differently. Whatever that may be."

Live Return

As the UK cautiously emerges from lockdown, regains a semblance of normality, and looks to the future, Vincent is looking towards his

For more information on Robert Vincent visit: robertvincentmusic.com