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of Age

**Harry  
Styles**



# Harry Styles' New Direction

*By  
Cameron  
Crowe*

A year in the life of the singer as he leaves behind his boy-band past, heads to Jamaica and comes of age

*Photographs by*  
THEO WENNER

*January 2016.* There's a bench at the top of Primrose Hill, in London, that looks out over the skyline of the city. If you'd passed by it one winter night, you might have seen him sitting there. A lanky guy in a wool hat, overcoat and jogging pants, hands thrust deep into his pockets. Harry Styles had a lot on his mind. He had spent five years as the buoyant fan favorite in One Direction; now, an uncertain future stretched out in front of him. The band had announced an indefinite hiatus. The white noise of adulation was gone, replaced by the hushed sound of the city below. ♦ The fame visited upon Harry Styles in his years with

**RIDE WITH ME**  
Styles in London  
in February.





One D was a special kind of mania. With a self-effacing smile, a hint of darkness and the hair invariably described as “tousled,” he became a canvas onto which millions of fans pitched their hopes and dreams. Hell, when he pulled over to the side of the 101 freeway in L.A. and discreetly threw up, the spot became a fan shrine. It’s said the puke was even sold on eBay like pieces of the Berlin Wall. Paul McCartney has interviewed *him*. Then there was the unauthorized fan-fiction series featuring a punky, sexed-up version of “Harry Styles.” A billion readers followed his virtual exploits. (“Didn’t read it,” comments the nonfiction Styles, “but I hope he gets more than me.”)

But at the height of One D-mania, Styles took a step back. For many, 2016 was a year of lost musical heroes and a toxic new world order. For Styles, it was a search for a new identity that began on that bench overlooking London. *What would a solo*

He’s full of stories about the two-month recording session last fall at Geejam, a studio and compound built into a mountain-side near Port Antonio, a remote section of Jamaica. Drake and Rihanna have recorded there, and it’s where Styles produced the bulk of his new LP, which is due out May 12th. As we weave through traffic today, *the album no one has heard* is burning a hole in his iPhone.

We arrive at a crowded diner, and Styles cuts through the room holding a black notebook jammed with papers and artifacts from his album, looking like a college student searching for a quiet place to study. He’s here to do something he hasn’t done much of in his young career: an extended one-on-one interview. Often in the past there was another One D member to vector questions into a charmingly evasive display of band camaraderie. Today, Styles is a game but careful custodian of his words,

As one of the most well-known 23-year-olds in the world, Styles himself is still largely unknown. Behind the effervescent stage persona, there is more lore than fact. He likes it that way. “With an artist like Prince,” he says, “all you wanted to do was *know more*. And that mystery – it’s why those people are so magical! Like, fuck, I don’t know what Prince eats for breakfast. That mystery...it’s just what I like.”

Styles pauses, savoring the idea of the *unknown*. He looks at my digital recorder like a barely invited guest. “More than ‘do you keep a mystery alive?’ – it’s not that. I like to separate my personal life and work. It helps, I think, for me to compartmentalize. It’s not about trying to make my career longer, like I’m trying to be this ‘mysterious character,’ because I’m not. When I go home, I feel like the same person I was at school. You can’t expect to keep that if you show everything. There’s the work and the personal stuff, and going between the two is my favorite shit. It’s amazing to me.”

Soon, we head to the Beachwood Canyon studio of Jeff Bhasker. As we arrive, Styles bounds up the steps to the studio, passing a bored pool cleaner. “How are ya,” he announces, unpacking a seriously cheerful smile. The pool cleaner looks perplexed, not quite sharing Styles’ existential joy.

Inside, the band awaits. Styles opens his notebook and heads for the piano. He wants to finish a song he’d started earlier that day. It’s obvious that the band has a well-worn frat-house dynamic, sort of like the Beatles in *Help!*, as directed by Judd Apatow. Styles is, to all, “H.” Pomegranate-scented candles flicker around the room. Bhasker enters, with guru-length hair, multicolored shirt, red socks and sandals. He was initially busy raising a new baby with his partner, the singer and songwriter Lykke Li, so he guided Styles to two of his producer-player protégés, Alex Salibian and Tyler Johnson, as well as engineer and bassist Ryan Nasci. The band began to form. The final piece of the puzzle was Mitch Rowland, Styles’ guitarist, who had worked in a pizza joint until two weeks into the sessions. “Being around musicians like this had a big effect on me,” Styles says. “Not being able to pass an instrument without sitting down and playing it?” He shakes his head. It was Styles’ first full immersion into the land of musos, and he clearly can’t get enough.

Styles starts singing some freshly written lyrics. It’s a new song called “I Don’t Want to Be the One You’re Waiting On.” His voice sounds warm, burnished and intimate, not unlike early Rod Stewart. The song is quickly finished, and the band assembles for a playback of the album.

“EVERY DECISION I’VE MADE SINCE 16 WAS made in a democracy. I felt it was time to make a decision – and I shouldn’t rely on others.”

*Harry Styles sound like?* A plan came into focus. A song cycle about women and relationships. Ten songs. More of a rock sound. A bold single-color cover to match the working title: *Pink*. (He quotes the Clash’s Paul Simonon: “Pink is the only true rock & roll colour.”) Many of the details would change over the coming year – including the title, which would end up as *Harry Styles* – but one word stuck in his head.

“HONEST,” HE SAYS, A year later, driving through midcity Los Angeles in a dusty black Range Rover. He’s lived here off and on for the past few years, always returning to London. Styles’ car stereo pumps a mix of country and obscure classic rock. “I didn’t want to write ‘stories,’” he says. “I wanted to write *my* stories, things that happened to me. The number-one thing was I wanted to be honest. I hadn’t done that before.” There isn’t a yellow light he doesn’t run as he speaks excitedly about the band he’s put together under the tutelage of producer Jeff Bhasker (The Rolling Stones, Kanye West, “Uptown Funk”).

Contributing editor CAMERON CROWE wrote about Glenn Frey in January 2016.

sometimes silently consulting the tablecloth before answering. But as he recounts the events leading up to his year out of the spotlight, the layers begin to slip away.

It was in a London studio in late 2014 that Styles first brought up the idea of One Direction taking a break. “I didn’t want to exhaust our fan base,” he explains. “If you’re shortsighted, you can think, ‘Let’s just keep touring,’ but we all thought too much of the group than to let that happen. You realize you’re exhausted and you don’t want to drain people’s belief in you.”

After much discussion, the band mutually agreed to a hiatus, which was announced in August 2015 (Zayn Malik had abruptly left One D several months earlier). Fans were traumatized by the band’s decision, but were let down easy with a series of final bows, including a tour that ran through October. Styles remains a One D advocate: “I love the band, and would never rule out anything in the future. The band changed my life, gave me everything.”

Still, a solo career was calling. “I wanted to step up. There were songs I wanted to write and record, and not just have it be ‘Here’s a demo I wrote.’ Every decision I’ve made since I was 16 was made in a democracy. I felt like it was time to make a decision about the future...and maybe I shouldn’t rely on others.”

## OPEN DOOR

“I would never rule out anything in the future,” Styles says of One D.







"Mind if I play it loud?" asks Bhasker. It's a rhetorical question. Nasci cranks "Sign of the Times," the first single, to a seismic level. The song began as a seven-minute voice note on Styles' phone, and ended up as a sweeping piano ballad, as well as a kind of call to arms. "Most of the stuff that hurts me about what's going on at the moment is not politics, it's fundamentals," Styles says. "Equal rights. For everyone, all races, sexes, everything... 'Sign of the Times' came from 'This isn't the first time we've been in a hard time, and it's not going to be the last time.' The song is written from a point of view as if a mother was giving birth to a child and there's a complication. The mother is told, 'The child is fine, but you're not going to make it.' The mother has five minutes to tell the child, 'Go forth and conquer.'" The track was a breakthrough for both the artist and the band. "Harry really led the charge with that one, and the rest of the album," says Bhasker.

"I wish the album could be called *Sign of*

then. I wanted to do something that sounds like me. I just keep pushing forward."

"It's different from what you'd expect," Bhasker says. "It made me realize the Harry [in One D] was kind of the digitized Harry. Almost like a character. I don't think people know a lot of the sides of him that are on this album. You put it on and people are like, 'This is Harry Styles?'"

Styles is aware that his largest audience so far has been young – often teenage – women. Asked if he spends pressure-filled evenings worried about proving credibility to an older crowd, Styles grows animated. "Who's to say that young girls who like pop music – short for popular, right? – have worse musical taste than a 30-year-old hipster guy? That's not up to you to say. Music is something that's always changing. There's no goal posts. Young girls like the Beatles. You gonna tell me they're not serious? How can you say young girls don't get it? They're our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of

himself, and checks Twitter infrequently. "I'll tell you about Twitter," he continues, discussing the volley of tweets, some good, some cynical, that met his endorsement of the Women's March on Washington earlier this year. "It's the most incredible way to communicate closely with people, but not as well as in person." When the location of his London home was published a few years ago, he was rattled. His friend James Corden offered him a motto coined by British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli: "Never complain, never explain."

I mention a few of the verbal Molotov cocktails Zayn Malik has tossed at the band in recent interviews. Here's one: "[One D is] not music that I would listen to. If I was sat at a dinner date with a girl, I would play some cool shit, you know what I mean? I want to make music that I think is cool shit. I don't think that's too much to ask for."

Styles adjusts himself in his chair. "I think it's a shame he felt that way," he says, threading the needle of diplomacy, "but I never wish anything but luck to anyone doing what they love. If you're not enjoying something and need to do something else, you absolutely should do that. I'm glad he's doing what he likes, and good luck to him."

Perched on his head are the same-style white sunglasses made famous by Kurt Cobain, but the similarities end right there. Styles, born two months before Cobain exited Earth, doesn't feel tied to any particular genre or era. In the car, he'll just as easily crank up the country music of Keith Whitley as the esoteric blues-and-soul of Shuggie Otis. He even bought a carrot cake to present to Stevie Nicks at a Fleetwood Mac concert. ("Piped her name onto it. She loved it. Glad she liked carrot cake.")

This much is clear: The classic role of tortured artist is not one he'll be playing. "People romanticize places they can't get to themselves," he says. "That's why it's fascinating when people go dark – when Van Gogh cuts off his ear. You romanticize those people, sometimes out of proportion. It's the same with music. You want a piece of that darkness, to feel their pain but also to step back into your own [safer] life. I can't say I had that. I had a really nice upbringing. I feel very lucky. I had a great family and always felt loved. There's nothing worse than an inauthentic tortured person. 'They took my allowance away, so I did heroin.' It's like – that's not how it works. I don't even remember what the question was."

Styles wanders into the Country Store next door. It's a store he knows well. Inspecting the shelves, he asks if I've had British rice pudding. He finds a can that looks ancient. He collects a roll of Rowntrees Fruit Pastilles ("since 1881"), Lindor Swiss chocolates ("irresistibly smooth") and a jar of Branston Pickles. "There's only two shops in L.A. that stock all the British

## "WHO'S TO SAY YOUNG GIRLS HAVE WORSE taste than a 30-year-old hipster? Girls like the Beatles. You gonna tell me they're not serious?"

*the Times*," Styles declares.

"I don't know," says Bhasker. "I mean, it has been used."

They debate for a bit. Nasci plays more tracks. The songs range from full-on rock ("Kiwi") to intricate psychedelic pop ("Meet Me in the Hallway") to the outright confessional ("Ever Since New York," a desperate meditation on loss and longing). The lyrics are full of details and references – secrets whispered between friends, doomed declarations of love, empty swimming pools – sure to set fans scrambling for the facts behind the mystery.

"Of course I'm nervous," Styles admits, jingling his keys. "I mean, I've never done this before. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I'm happy I found this band and these musicians, where you can be vulnerable enough to put yourself out there. I'm still learning... but it's my favorite lesson."

The album is a distinct departure from the dance pop that permeates the airwaves. "A lot of my influences, and the stuff that I love, is older," he says. "So the thing I didn't want to do was, I didn't want to put out my first album and be like, 'He's tried to re-create the Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, Nineties.' Loads of amazing music was written then, but I'm not saying I wish I lived back

keep the world going. Teenage-girl fans – they don't lie. If they like you, they're *there*. They don't act 'too cool.' They like you, and they tell you. Which is *sick*."

STYLES DRIVES TO A QUIET dinner spot in Laurel Canyon, at the foot of Lookout Mountain Avenue, onetime home to many of his Seventies songwriting heroes. He used to have a place around the corner. As the later tours of One Direction grew larger, longer and more frenetic, he offers with irony, "It was *very* rock & roll." He's not a heavy drinker, he says, maybe some tequila on ice or wine with friends after a show, but by the band's last tour there wasn't much time even for that. John Lennon once told *ROLLING STONE* that behind the curtain, the Beatles' tours were like Fellini's *Satyricon*. Styles counters that the One D tours were more like "a Wes Anderson movie. Cut. Cut. New location. Quick cut. New location. Cut. Cut. Show. Shower. Hard cut. Sleep."

Finding a table, Styles leans forward and discusses his social-media presence, or lack thereof. Styles and his phone have a bittersweet, mature relationship – they spend a lot of time apart. He doesn't Google





snacks. This area's kind of potluck," he says, spreading the collection on the counter.

The clerk rings up the snacks. In the most careful, deferential way, the young worker asks the question. "Would you... happen to be... Harry Styles?"

"Yep."

"Could I get a selfie?" Styles obliges, and leans over the counter. Click. We exit into the Laurel Canyon evening.

"Hey," shouts a grizzled-looking dude on the bench outside the store. "Do you know who you look like?"

Styles turns, expecting more of the same, but this particular night denizen is on a different track.

"River Phoenix," the man announces, a little sadly. "You ever heard of him? If he hadn't have passed, I would have said that was you. Talented guy."

"Yes, he was," agrees Styles, who is in many ways the generational opposite of Phoenix. "Yes, he was."

They share a silent moment, before Styles walks to his car. He hands me the bag filled with English snacks. "This is for you," he says. "This was my youth...."

HARRY EDWARD STYLES WAS BORN IN Worcestershire, England, in true classic-rock form, on a Tuesday Afternoon. The family moved to Cheshire, a quiet spot in

Northern England, when he was a baby. His older sister, Gemma, was the studious one. ("She was always smarter than me, and I was always jealous of that.")

His father, Desmond, worked in finance. He was a fan of the Rolling Stones, Fleetwood Mac, a lot of Queen, and Pink Floyd. Young Harry toddled around to *The Dark Side of the Moon*. "I couldn't really get it," he says, "but I just remember being like – *this is really fucking cool*. Then my mom would always have Shania Twain, and Savage Garden, Norah Jones going on. I had a great childhood. I'll admit it."

But in fact, all was not perfection, scored to a cool, retro soundtrack. When Harry was seven, his parents explained to him that Des would be moving out. Asked about that moment today, Styles stares straight ahead. "I don't remember," he says. "Honestly, when you're that young, you can kind of block it out.... I can't say that I remember the exact thing. I didn't realize that was the case until just now. Yeah, I mean, I was seven. It's one of those things. Feeling supported and loved by my parents never changed."

His eyes moisten a little, but unlike the young man who wept over an early bout with Internet criticism, a powerful moment in the early One Direction documentary *A Year in the Making*, Styles tonight knocks back the sentiment. Styles is still close with his father, and served as best man to his mom when she remarried a few years ago.

#### STADIUM KILLER

With One D at Milwaukee's Miller Park in 2015

"Since I've been 10," he reflects, "it's kind of felt like – protect Mom at all costs.... My mom is very strong. She has the greatest heart. [Her house in Cheshire] is where I want to go when

I want to spend some time."

In his early teens, Styles joined some school friends as the singer in a mostly-covers band, White Eskimo. "We wrote a couple of songs," he remembers. "One was called 'Gone in a Week.' It was about luggage. 'I'll be gone in a week or two/Trying to find myself someplace new/I don't need any jackets or shoes/The only luggage I need is you.'" He laughs. "I was like, 'Sick.'"

It was his mother who suggested he try out for the U.K. singing competition *The X Factor* to compete in the solo "Boy" category. Styles sang Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely." The unforgiving reaction from one of the judges, Louis Walsh, is now infamous. Watching the video today is to watch young Harry's cheery disposition take a hot bullet.

"In that instant," he says, "you're in the whirlwind. You don't really know what's happening; you're just a kid on the show. You don't even know you're good at anything. I'd gone because my mum told me I



was good from singing in the car...but your mum tells you things to make you feel good, so you take it with a pinch of salt. I didn't really know what I was expecting when I went on there."

Styles didn't advance in the competition, but Simon Cowell, the show's creator, sensed a crowd favorite. He put Styles together with four others who'd failed to advance in the same category, and united the members of One D in a musical shotgun marriage. The marriage worked. And worked. And worked.

**Y**OU WONDER HOW A young musician might find his way here, to these lofty peaks, with his head still attached to his shoulders. No sex tapes, no *TMZ* meltdowns, no tell-all books written by the rehab nanny? In a world where one messy scandal can get you five seasons of a hit reality show...how did Harry Styles slip through the juggernaut?

"Family," answers Ben Winston. "It comes from his mom, Anne. She brought him and his sister up incredibly well. Harry would choose boring over exciting.... There is more chance of me going to Mars next week than there is of Harry having some sort of addiction."

We're in Television City, Hollywood. Winston, 35, the Emmy-winning executive producer of *The Late Late Show With James Corden*, abandons his desk and retreats to a nearby sofa to discuss his good friend. More than a friend, Styles became an unlikely family member - after he became perhaps the world's most surprising houseguest.

Their friendship was forged in the early stages of One D's success, when the band debuted on *The X Factor*. Winston, then a filmmaker and production partner with Corden, asked for a meeting, and instantly hit it off with the group. He became a friendly mentor to Styles, though the friendship was soon tested. Styles had just moved out of his family home in Cheshire, an inconvenient three hours north of London. He found a home he liked near the Winstons in Hampstead Heath. The new house needed two weeks of work. Styles asked if he could briefly move in with Winston and his wife, Meredith. "She agreed," Winston says, "but only for two weeks."

Styles parked his mattress in the Winstons' attic. "Two weeks later and he hadn't bought his house yet," continues Winston. "It wasn't going through. Then he said, 'I'm going to stay until Christmas, if you don't mind.' Then Christmas came, and..."

For the next 20 months, one of the most desired stars on the planet slept on a small



#### GROWN UP ALL RIGHT

(1) Styles in Jamaica. He recorded much of his album there, turning the studio complex into a Caribbean version of Big Pink. (2) At age three. (3) With Taylor Swift in Central Park, 2012. (4) One Direction in 2010.

mattress in an attic. The only other bit of house-dressing was the acoustic guitar that would rattle into the Winstons' bedroom. While fans gathered at the empty house where he didn't live, Styles lived incognito with a couple 12 years his senior. The Winstons' Orthodox Jewish lifestyle, with a strong family emphasis, helped keep him sane.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CAL AURAND; COURTESY OF HARRY STYLES; DAVID KRIEGER/BAUER-GRIFIN/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; SIMON HARRIS/SH PHOTOGRAPHY/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES



"Those 20 months were when they went from being on a reality show, *X Factor*, to being the biggest-selling artists in the world," recalls Winston. "That period of time, he was living with us in the most mundane suburban situation. No one ever found out, really. Even when we went out for a meal, it's such a sweet family neighborhood, no one dreamed it was actually him. But he made our house a home. And when he moved out, we were gutted."

Styles jauntily appears at the *Late Late* office. He's clearly a regular visitor, and he and Winston have a brotherly shorthand.

"Leaving Saturday?" asks Winston.

"Yeah, gotta buy a cactus for my friend's birthday," says Styles.

"My dad might be on your flight," says Winston.

"The 8:50? That'd be sick."

Winston continues the tales from the attic. "So we had this joke. Meri and I would like to see the girls that you would come back with to the house. That was al-

him with a face that says: *My kids love this guy!* I ask Styles what he hears most from the parents of young fans. "They say, 'I see your cardboard face every fucking day.'" He laughs. "I think they want me to apologize."

The subject today is relationships. While Styles says he still feels like a newcomer to all that, a handful of love affairs have deeply affected him. The images and stolen moments tumble extravagantly through the new songs: *And promises are broken like a stitch is... I got splinters in my knuckles crawling 'cross the floor/Couldn't take you home to mother in a skirt that short/But I think that's what I like about it... I see you gave him my old T-shirt, more of what was once mine...* That black notebook, you sense, is filled with this stuff.

"My first proper girlfriend," he remembers, "used to have one of those laughs. There was also a little bit of mystery with her because she didn't go to our school. I just worshipped the ground she walked on. And she knew, probably to a fault, a little.

He returns a couple of minutes later. "Thought I'd let you stew for a while," he says, laughing, then takes a gulp of green juice. He was surprised, he says, when photos from Central Park rocketed around the world. "When I see photos from that day," he says, "I think: Relationships are hard, at any age. And adding in that you don't really understand exactly how it works when you're 18, trying to navigate all that stuff didn't make it easier. I mean, you're a little bit awkward to begin with. You're on a date with someone you really like. It should be that simple, right? It was a learning experience for sure. But at the heart of it – I just wanted it to be a normal date."

He's well aware that at least two of Swift's songs – "Out of the Woods" and "Style" – are considered to be about their romance. ("You've got that long hair slicked back, white T-shirt," she sang in "Style.") "I mean, I don't know if they're about me or not..." he says, attempting gallant discretion, "but the issue is, she's so good, they're bloody everywhere." He smiles. "I write from my experiences; everyone does that. I'm lucky if everything [we went through] helped create those songs. That's what hits your heart. That's the stuff that's hardest to say, and it's the stuff I talk least about. That's the part that's about the two people. I'm never going to tell anybody everything." (Fans wondered whether "Perfect," a song Styles co-wrote for One Direction, might have been about Swift: "And if you like cameras flashing every time we go out/And if you're looking for someone to write your breakup songs about/Baby, I'm perfect.")

Was he able to tell her that he admired the songs? "Yes and no," he says after a long pause. "She doesn't need me to tell her they're great. They're great songs... It's the most amazing unspoken dialogue ever."

Is there anything he'd want to say to Swift today? "Maybe this is where you write down that I left!" He laughs, and looks off. "I don't know," he finally says. "Certain things don't work out. There's a lot of things that can be right, and it's still wrong. In writing songs about stuff like that, I like tipping a hat to the *time together*. You're celebrating the fact it was powerful and made you feel something, rather than 'this didn't work out, and that's bad.' And if you run into that person, maybe it's awkward, maybe you have to get drunk... but you shared something. Meeting someone new, sharing those experiences, it's the best shit ever. So thank you."

He notes a more recent relationship, possibly over now, but significant for the past few years. (Styles has often been spotted with Kendall Jenner, but he won't confirm that's who he's talking about.) "She's a huge part of the album," says Styles. "Sometimes you want to tip the hat, and [Cont. on 80]

## STYLES IS AWARE AT LEAST TWO OF SWIFT'S songs are presumed to be about him. "She's so good, [those songs are] bloody everywhere."

ways what we enjoyed, because we'd be in bed like an old couple. We'd have our spot cream on our faces and the door would go off. The stairwell was right outside our door, so we'd wait to see if Harry was coming home alone or with people."

"I was alone," notes Styles. "I was scared of Meri."

"He wasn't always alone," corrects Winston, "but it was exciting seeing the array of *A-listers* that would come up and sleep in the attic. Or he'd come and lounge with us. We'd never discuss business. He would act as if he hadn't come back from playing to 80,000 people three nights in a row in Rio de Janeiro."

**L**ET'S GO TO THE BEACH," says Styles, pulling the Range Rover onto a fog-soaked Pacific Coast Highway. Last night was his tequila-fueled birthday party, filled with friends and karaoke and a surprise drop-in from Adele. He's now officially 23. "And not too hung over," he notes.

Styles finds a spot at a sushi place up the coast. As he passes through the busy dining room, a businessman turns, recognizing

That was a tough one. I was 15.

"She used to live an hour and a half away on the train, and I worked in a bakery for three years. I'd finish on Saturdays at 4:30 and it was a 4:42 train, and if I missed it there wasn't one for another hour or two. So I'd finish and sprint to the train station. Spent 70 percent of my wages on train tickets. Later, I'd remember her perfume. Little things. I smell that perfume all the time. I'll be in a lift or a reception and say to someone, 'Alien, right?' And sometimes they're impressed and sometimes they're a little creeped out. 'Stop smelling me.'"

If Styles hadn't yet adapted to global social-media attention, he was tested in 2012, when he met Taylor Swift at an awards show. Their second date, a walk in Central Park, was caught by paparazzi. Suddenly the couple were global news. They broke up the next month, reportedly after a rocky Caribbean vacation; the romance was said to have ended with at least one broken heart.

The relationship is a subject he's famously avoided discussing. "I gotta pee first. This might be a long one," he says. He rises to head to the bathroom, then adds, "Actually, you can say, 'He went for a pee and *never came back*.'"



# BACKSTAGE PASS

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TO CHECK IT OUT.

### HARRY STYLES

[Cont. from 27] sometimes you just want to give them the whole cap... and hope they know it's just for them."

**I**N LATE FEBRUARY 2016, STYLES landed a plum part in Christopher Nolan's upcoming World War II epic, *Dunkirk*. In Nolan, Styles found a director equally interested in mystery. "The movie is so ambitious," he says. "Some of the stuff they're doing in this movie is insane. And it was hard, man, physically really tough, but I love acting. I love playing someone else. I'd sleep really well at night, then get up and continue drowning."

When Styles returned to L.A., an idea landed. The idea was: *Get out of Dodge*. Styles called his manager, Jeffrey Azoff, and explained he wanted to finish the album outside London or L.A., a place where the band could focus and coalesce. Four days after returning from the movie, they were on their way to Port Antonio on Jamaica's remote north coast. At Geejam, Styles and his entire band were able to live together, turning the studio compound into something like a Caribbean version of Big Pink. They occupied a two-story villa filled with instruments, hung out at the tree-house-like Bush Bar, and had access to the gorgeous studio on-site. Many mornings began with a swim in the deserted cove just down the hill.

Life in Jamaica was 10 percent beach party and 90 percent musical expedition. It was the perfect rite of passage for a musician looking to explode the past and launch a future. The anxiety of what's next slipped away. Layers of feeling emerged that had never made it past One Direction's group songwriting sessions, often with pop craftsmen who polished the songs after Styles had left. He didn't feel stifled in One D, he says, as much as interrupted. "We were touring all the time," he recalls. "I wrote more as we went, especially on the last two albums." There are songs from that period he loves, he says, like "Olivia" and "Stockholm Syndrome," along with the earlier song "Happily." "But I think it was tough to really delve in and find out who you are as a writer when you're just kind of dipping your toe each time. We didn't get the six months to see what kind of shit you can work with. To have time to live with a song, see what you love as a fan, chip at it, hone it and go for that... it's heaven."

The more vulnerable the song, he learned, the better. "The one subject that hits the hardest is love," he says, "whether it's platonic, romantic, loving it, gaining it, losing it... it always hits you hardest. I don't think people want to hear me talk about going to bars, and how great everything is. The champagne popping... who

wants to hear about it? I don't want to hear my favorite artists talk about all the amazing shit they get to do. I want to hear, 'How did you feel when you were alone in that hotel room, because you chose to be alone?'"

To wind down in Jamaica, Styles and Rowland, the guitarist, began a daily Netflix obsession with sugary romantic comedies. Houseworkers would sometimes leave at night and return the next morning to see Styles blearily removing himself from a long string of rom-coms. He declares himself an expert on Nicholas Sparks, whom he now calls "Nicky Spee." After almost two months, the band left the island with a bounty of songs and stories. Like the time Styles ended up drunk and wet from the ocean, toasting everybody, wearing a dress he'd traded with someone's girlfriend. "I don't remember the toast," he says, "but I remember the feeling."

**C**HRISTMAS 2016. HARRY STYLES was parked outside his childhood home, sitting next to his father. They were listening to his album. After lunch at a pub, they had driven down their old street and landed in front of the family home. Staring out at the house where Styles grew up listening to his father's copy of *The Dark Side of the Moon*, there was much to consider. It was a long way he'd traveled in those fast few years since "Isn't She Lovely." He'd previously played the new album for his mother, on a stool, in the living room, on cheap speakers. She'd cried hearing "Sign of the Times." Now he sat with his father – who liked the new song "Carolina" best – both having come full circle.

Styles is moved as he describes how he felt. We're sitting in Corden's empty office, talking over a few last subjects before he returns to England. "I think, as a parent, especially with the band stuff, it was such a roller coaster," he says. "I feel like they were always thinking, 'OK, this ride could stop at any point and we're going to have to be there when it does.' There was something about playing the album and how happy I was that told them, 'If all I get is to make this music, I'm content. If I'm never on that big ride again, I'm happy and proud of it.'"

"I always said, at the very beginning, all I wanted was to be the granddad with the best stories... and the best shelf of artifacts and bits and trinkets."

Tomorrow night he'll hop a flight back to England. Rehearsals await. Album-cover choices need to be made. He grabs his black notebook and turns back for a moment before disappearing down the hallway, into the future.

"How am I going to be mysterious," he asks, only half-joking, "when I've been this honest with you?"