

great things, small package

It's a dazzlingly bright Spring afternoon when TREVOR RAGGATT arrives at the BBC Club West One in the heart of central London for a chat with Bristol-born, Cardiff-based songstress Amy Wadge. The sight of the 'Wadgemobile' sensibly parked outside of the building finally dispels those irrational worries that he's got the wrong time, the wrong day or worse... that they've got the wrong reporter!

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Inside, the diminutive singer sits in a secluded corner of the bar with a couple of friends and husband, Alan, providing moral support. When I introduce myself, press pack clutched sweatily in hand and thank her for taking the time out to talk to me, she's genuine and warmly grateful that I've bothered to come. It's quickly apparent that this is going to be one of those easy interviews where there's no such thing as an awkward silence. As pre-showcase nerves set in, our conversation flits between fretting – "what if no-one shows up?" "There's twenty minutes to go, free sarnies and a bar... they'll show up!" – to the BBC's convenient proximity to shoe fetish appeasement on Oxford Street and the tax deductible nature of 'stage clothes'.

She needn't have worried. Five minutes from showtime and the room is buzzing with anticipation. Better still, the selection of songs from her new album *No Sudden Moves* easily convinces the roomful of jaded radio professionals, eliciting enthusiastic applause and no small number of whoops and whistles. Eyes that had been casually darting around are suddenly divided between rapt attention to the stage and earnest study of the promo lit. Amy closes with her thoughtful, moving rendition of the Manic Street Preachers' *A Design For Life*, and the spell is complete. A short while later, the room is worked, the right people are schmoozed, a live session on

Mariella Frostrup's show is booked and we find a quiet corner for our chat.

"These are very weird things to do," she laughs. "I've got nicely used to doing my kind of gigs where I don't worry about what I say and what I do. In these circumstances you know you've just got to get the songs out and not do a hell of a lot of talking. You're just trying to let them know exactly what you're about in twenty minutes, which is really hard. I much prefer to do it in an hour and a half."

Still, the BBC seems convinced and the album is picking up plaudits elsewhere too. "At the moment it's early days, but so far so good! I prefer to listen to people who actually listen to music. Of course, music reviewers are really important and it's lovely when you do get good reviews but there are always bad ones as well. So, for me, if people who are genuine music fans write a review or come to a gig and say 'Oh I love the album!', those are the things I really love to hear. But basically I'm just pleased it's out there at last. It's been a long time and a bit of a struggle."

When I mention that, to me, the album sounds really organic, like a good recording of a band on top of their form, her eyes light up. "Well, that's the best compliment I could possibly have. That's all I ever wanted it to sound like. On my first album, WOJ, I gave everything to the producer and said 'do whatever'; but it didn't really work for me. This time, I have a band that knows me really well, knows every single one of my flaws... and the best thing about it was exactly what you just said. I wanted to hear my band being recorded really well, particularly my drummer Aled [Richards, formally of *Catatonia*], and just do that sort of album. Just sit down and go for it.

"Despite having no money, we were able to create the greatest things that I'm really proud of! Things like the strings on the album. In a million years, I couldn't

afford a string orchestra, so it's just one guy; on *Shattered* he plays around twenty-five violins – multi-tracked. He's got nine different violins and violas so they're quite different and it sounds like a bunch of players. Also, I'm really pleased that some of the vocals literally were first takes; we tried recording them again and thought they were shit – particularly *Fairweather Friend*. I just sat down and recorded it for everyone to listen to and that take just stayed, which I like."

Having read some of Amy's blogs on the recording process, it all sounded rather idyllic – a house in the middle of nowhere where you just go to create. However, life's not always like that. "Idyllic?" she booms. "Yeah, on paper! In reality, I had to remortgage my house and get some financial backing from someone, but then it was the most amazing period of my life doing it! I lived up in Anglesey with [producers] Henry Priestman and Guy Batson for about six months, off and on, and we recorded there and a place called Bryn Derwyn. We finished the album in Real World [Peter Gabriel's studio complex near Bath] at the end of last year; we had about three months off because we ran out of cash! But there were loads of things I still wanted to do so we got some more money and went in and finished it off in Real World. So it wasn't straightforward by any means, but I wouldn't have changed any of it because it was the best year I've ever had, to be honest!"

The album's undisputed centrepiece is that stunning cover of *A Design For Life*, but it's been a controversial choice. One Manics fan commented on iTunes that pressing CDs of it would be a criminal waste of natural resources. "Well, first off I did it at the Corn Exchange in Cardiff during soundcheck – a couple of guys were there and they went 'oh my god, that's brilliant! You've got to do it tonight!'



so I did! It was a long time ago, I was supporting Eric Bibb and it was one of those moments. My Mum and Dad were there and they said it was the first time they thought, 'shit, everyone's gone quiet!'. It was amazing because, of course, it's an anthem and means a lot to people. I kept doing it at gigs and people were saying 'you have to do it, you have to record and release it', so I did and it goes down a bomb at gigs. The slagging off on iTunes thing? I expected it. It's literally 50/50. I either should be killed for doing it or it's the best thing they've ever heard. But the Manics really like it; Nicky Wire rang up to say so when I did it on Phil Jupitus' radio show. That's the only thing I would have worried about. I'm not doing it to get my 'big break', I just genuinely love the song."

"It's gut-wrenching because it's about the suffering of the valleys' people. I'd love to ask James and Nicky what it means to them. Everyone's always... *[goes into drunken footie fan mode]* 'waaah, we only want to get drunk... aaaaay!' – but they don't know what they're singing. What they're singing is so sad, those words just make me choke, so I just wanted to try and do it in a way that brought that out."

Conversation then drifts, as it often does in such situations, onto the trials and tribulations of being an independent artist, something that must have plusses and minuses? "Yeah, it does. I mean, I don't know if anyone really sits down and says 'oh, I'm only going the indie route', because if the right deal came along then of course you'd go for it. But I've always felt it would be better for it to happen now,

with my album finished and representing me how I want to be rather than going in and getting manufactured the hell out of.

"My record company and my manager are the same person, so he hasn't got any problem with someone coming along and saying 'here's loads of cash!'. They've stuck by me and I've been able to create a great album. But the whole thing with majors at the moment is just crazy. Until you've already got somewhere they don't sign you...so that's what we're trying to do. And if we don't get somewhere, I've still got a great life and a great career...we'll see what happens!"

It's clear that music is Amy's passion, something she just has to do. "Yeah, I always say – and it's really true – it's the reason I get up in the morning. Any time where music's been missing from

my life, it's never worked for me. Even if I didn't do it for a career, I'd be playing music anyway. I just love it and it really dominates my life. Sometimes I wish it didn't, but it does. I can't give it up 'cos it won't give me up."

From the very first song on her astonishing debut EP, *The Famous Hour*, Wadge has distinguished herself as a songwriter of depth, one who is able to mine deep, rich seams of emotion. Her inspiration? Life, in all its glories and disappointments. Amy explains: "I've always treated songwriting like a diary thing. Some songs will never see the light of day, where I just needed to write something about a specific thing. It might be too personal, but everything is always about my life or something in my life. It's actually much harder to write when I'm really happy – and I'm pretty happy these days! Happily married and stuff so I just tend to borrow other peoples' misery."

A huge grin starts to creep across her face; "if one of my friends is going through something horrid I'll think *great!* I'm sorry you're having a hard time, but thank you for the material!" she laughs.

Of course, that rather begs the question whether she sometimes finds it a little too weird to expose these things in such a public setting? "Yeah, no doubt about it. Sometimes you wonder at a show, do you tell everyone what it's really about? But most of the time I don't actually say. There are certain songs that are about specific things – *Play It Again* is about a friend of mine who died – so those things I definitely say, but you can make your own mind up about what a song's about. Sometimes that's half the fun!"

As well as producing songs for herself, Amy's talents have been increasingly procured for other projects. I wonder whether she finds writing with or for other people much different from doing it alone, provoking yet another hearty laugh. "Silly as it sounds, it's a lot less of a burden. When I write a song for myself, it's got to be better than my last song. But when you write with somebody else there's less of that because you're just

sharing something. It can be incredibly exciting. And you can also write a song for somebody that'll mean something to them personally but doesn't make you feel that you've got to give everything to it. I know that sounds weird, but you can talk to them about what they want to write about and then you can create something for them – which is empowering and exciting."

So is this likely to be a twin-track career? "Definitely! I think it's just sensible really 'cos I'm a woman so I'll probably want to have a baby at some time, and maybe I'll need a few months off...whatever. Basically, I just think that it's good to have another string to your bow. I've started do some



plays Myfanwy in *Little Britain*, is playing the lead. They're doing a two-week run and they're using me, Cerys [*Matthews, also formerly of Catatonia*] and Jem for the musical backdrop. I'm going to launch it as well for them. It's just really flattering. That's a lovely bonus about living in Wales for me – that I can get asked to do these things. I'm really excited 'cos I trained as an actor so it's like I'm kinda keeping my hand in."

So is she tempted to jump up on stage and steal the show? The answer is an emphatic "hell no! HELL NO!! My husband's an actor. One actor in the house is more than enough!" Once again she dissolves into laughter; "Funny, I don't miss it at all!"

As we're wrapping up, I reflect on the fruitful and varied career she's already had – a busy touring schedule, reality TV, two consecutive Welsh Music Awards, accompanying the Welsh national rugby team as a cultural ambassador...did a little girl from Bristol ever imagine doing all that? "Never in a million years! Even if it all ended right now I could still look back and go 'Jeeesus! Look what I've done!'"

"You know, I always say that the megastardom thing is a total lottery, but what we've hopefully been doing is building something that is sustainable for a

very long time – maybe until the day I die! I'd love to get a career that's maybe a bit more controllable, where I can say I pretty much know what I'm going to earn every day...to make a sustained living out of music would be brilliant!"

A month later and I'm watching Amy sing her heart out to a rapt and jam-packed audience at one of London's foremost rock clubs. All attention is focused on the tiny powerhouse commanding the stage and the thought occurs that if passion, talent and dedication are any indication for a successful future, then Amy's dream just might come true. ■

No Sudden Moves is out now on Manhatan. For live dates, check www.amywadge.com.

writing for the theatre and I really enjoy it. The more things I can do that I'm not at the centre of...well, that's great!"

"It can all get a bit self-centred," she says with another huge laugh. "You know, it's all about you all the time, so it's kinda nice to do something for somebody else, maybe give them a song and hope that'll help them get somewhere."

I ask about the *Educating Rita* project she's become involved in lately, a version set not in Liverpool as is traditional but in her hometown of Cardiff. "It's really weird, it's only just sort of happened. I wrote some music for a play called *The Butterfly* that was on at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, so I presume it stemmed from that. Ruth Jones, who

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