

All e on Stori

HE'S GONE PLATINUM,
LAUNCHED A UNIVERSITY
SCHOLARSHIP
AND HAS HIS OWN
PUBLISHING IMPRINT.
GRIME SUPERSTAR
STORMZY IS THE
VOICE OF NOW, FINDS
TSHEPO MOKOENA.
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JACK DAVISON
STYLING BY NELL KALONJI

OPPOSITE: JACKET, £2,170,
LOUIS VUITTON. POLONECK, £1,060,
LORO PIANA. HAIR: MARK MACIVER.
GROOMING: MARKI OHASHI.
SET DESIGN: ALICE KIRKPATRICK

It's a sticky late-summer afternoon, and grime artist Michael Omari – known to most as Stormzy – has just spotted American rapper Eve across the room of the Notting Hill members' club in which we're having lunch. "Is that...?" he begins, before answering his own question. His face breaks into a grin as he turns his attention back to the tricky business of folding his audaciously long legs under a dining table nestled just a bit too close to his seat.

Three years ago it would have been highly unlikely that Stormzy would be casually approached by a Grammy Award-winning star in a restaurant, and even less likely that she would have recognised him (although, at 6ft 5in, he's certainly hard to miss). But when Eve clocks him, she gets up and walks over to congratulate him on "the Cambridge thing. We're all clapping for you," she says, warmly, before making her exit.

"The Cambridge thing", if you're not already aware, is the scholarship Stormzy announced in August, which will cover the tuition fees for two black undergraduates attending Cambridge University. It's just the latest facet to an astronomically successful 18 months for the 25-year-old from South Norwood, which have included his debut album, *Gang Signs & Prayer*, breaking first-week album-streaming records and a move into publishing with the launch of his own Penguin imprint, #Merky Books (his first book, *Rise Up*, is out on November 1). Yes, he's most famous for being the exceptionally tall Londoner who blasted grime into the mainstream, but his ambition – and influence – extend well beyond music.

On appearance alone, he's impressive – though he screws up his face at the idea. "Firstly, I'm not a model," he says. Part of his charm rests in his blend of good looks and absolute nonchalance about them. His deep-brown skin glows with the radiance you'd expect from a 10-step blend of toners, essences and at least one hefty acid, while his relationship with 24-year-old Radio 1 presenter and woman of the moment Maya Jama is the physical manifestation of #couplegoals. For the generation coming of age now, there is the most aspirational of all partnerships. Meanwhile, his fan base is fizzing with anticipation for his follow-up album to *Gang Signs* (there is no release date as yet). Safe to say, Stormzy's got more than enough to pat himself on the back about.

But he isn't one to brag. In person, he's a tad reticent about our lunch today, sitting back and calmly explaining: "When interviews go into print, a lot of times people will paraphrase me, or they'll pick the most corny thing I've said and blow it up." He chuckles drily while laying out how, "I can talk about some positive things that I'm doing, and they'll make it sound like I'm trying to run for mayor or something."

Mostly, though, he starts off wary because "interviews and photoshoots and editorials and that" distract from his work as a musician. Soon, once he's settled in, it becomes clear that as much as he can enjoy being the centre of attention, the press cycle can feel like a distraction. Ambition, not a thirst for exposure, propels him from one goal to the next. It's the same drive that rests behind his ascent from underground MC to crossover sensation (via half a billion global streams, more than 250 million YouTube views and three top-10, platinum singles) to a global Brit, BET, GQ and Mobo award-winning star, all while staying true to the kid from Croydon.

He talks in an almost constant flow, words streaming out of him at such a pace that his double cheeseburger and chips go cold (though he makes quick work of some crispy squid). We're chatting about how he made his mark as an independent artist, self-releasing his Brit Award-winning, platinum album on his #Merky Records label. Its name derives from a slang term – loose translation: "disgustingly good" – that Stormzy belted out on breakthrough 2015 hit *Know Me From*. It's since become his personal slogan, like a stamp pressed onto everything from his businesses to his Instagram captions to the Penguin imprint. Look closely and you'll even see it on the zip pull of his personalised, grey Adidas tracksuit.

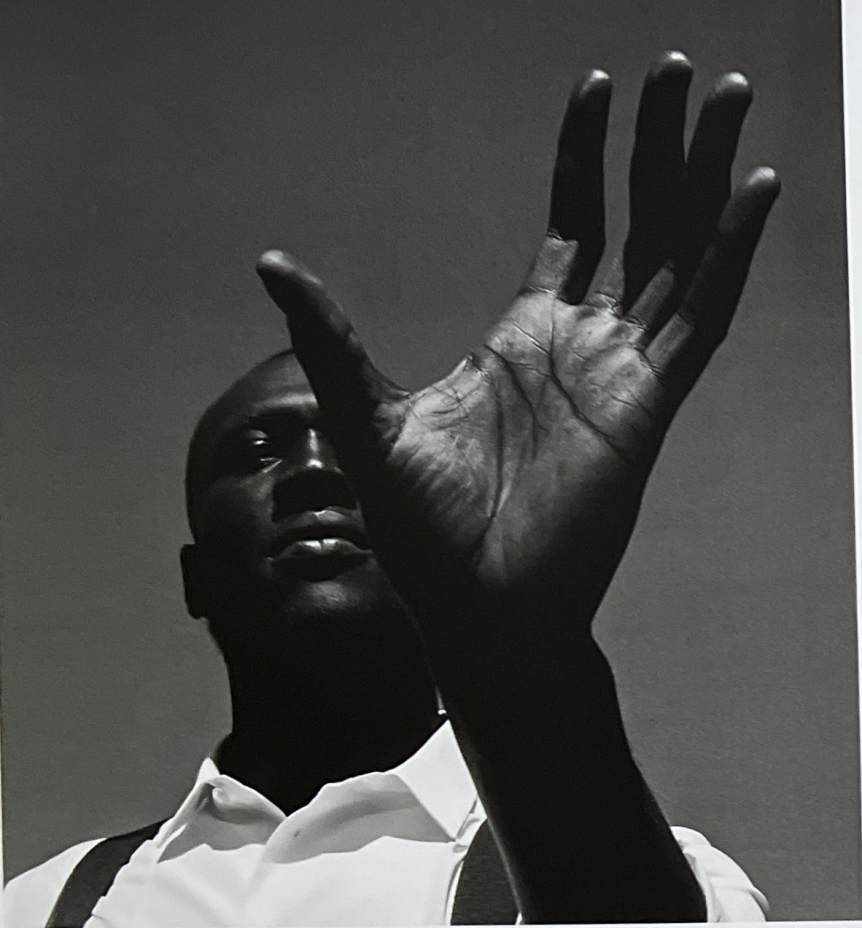
"Last year, my ambition for 2018 was that Merky needs to be this engine that's moving," he says, pushing his hands forward like a car in motion. "It needs to be this incredible, moving engine that's putting on events, that's linking up with brands, really making its mark on the world." Starting off without a major label just made sense for a young black artist in his position, he says. "My whole thing is, 'What's the most progressive, intelligent thing to do?' I feel like in our generation, we did the whole DIY, 'getting your friend to be your manager' thing out of necessity. We didn't do that for cool points." It paid off: in January he announced a deal between #Merky Records and Atlantic Records, a subsidiary of one of the three remaining major label conglomerates.

Being an all-round pop-culture figure wasn't always the goal. As a child, living with his mother and three siblings, he showed a flair for poetry. "When I was young, I very much knew I could go to Oxford or Cambridge," he says, with an aside that he doesn't mean to come across as arrogant. His early music touches on his secondary-school years, selling marijuana, having to defend himself on street corners. He bristles at the >



ALEXANDER McQUEEN.
POLONECK, £1,000. HERMES.
OPPOSITE: JACKET, £2,170.
LOUIS VUITTON. POLONECK,
£1,060. LORO PIANA





Stormzy picks up his smartphone, motioning opening angry DM after DM. "The whole backlash – 'You're racist; what about white people?' – was so strange," he begins, his words slowing. "It almost felt like an episode of *Black Mirror*. It was very bizarre." He pauses, one of few moments of quiet as he steamrolls through his thoughts. "It was pretty upsetting as well. We've been working on this for a year and a half, all excited. All this build-up and then – what?! I wasn't expecting that. In the first message I saw, this guy was like: 'You stupid c**t, you racist.'"

Almost any move he makes triggers a reaction. Headlines pick over the banal moments – briefly unfollowing his girlfriend on Instagram; tweeting about *Love Island* – just as they do seismic ones: Stormzy sharing a photo of his front door bashed in by police, who thought he was robbing his own Chelsea flat, or tweeting his disgust at a magazine that used his image for a cover story on his struggles with depression, without his knowledge. As his public profile has grown, he hasn't filtered his behaviour. "I never said I'm a role model; people picked me for that. I've always said I'm a flawed human. I use the C-word way too often, I can be a bit ignorant sometimes. I park on

memory of an interview in which a journalist wanted to focus on how he'd been stabbed. "I was on the roads," he says of street life. "Many things happen. I did this, I did that, I got stabbed a couple of times. But that's a blip in my story."

Here's the long and short of it: he performed well in school, earning six A's at GCSE, and was earmarked by teachers as a skilled linguist. But, feeling uninspired, he literally walked away from his studies in the middle of an AS-Level exam and ended up on an apprentice course, then as project manager at an oil refinery. "I was like, 'Cool, if we're gonna talk about 'You got stabbed?' I also f**king smashed my GCSEs – wanna talk about that? Or let's talk about that time when I flipping got one of the top apprenticeships in the country.' They don't want to go into the detail of that. But why? That's boring, that's boring," he repeats the word four more times, his hands waving with each syllable. "That's not the story."

After Stormzy announced his Cambridge scholarship, people flooded his Instagram with hundreds of messages, outraged that the financial support he is offering is only available to black students. Cambridge has itself said it can't figure out diversity "on its own" after a *Financial Times* investigation revealed that six of the university's colleges admitted only 10 black students between 2012 and 2016. According to Cambridge's overall admissions statistics for 2017, about 15 per cent of black applicants, versus 26 per cent of white applicants, accepted a place they were offered.

double yellows" – he smiles now – "and I don't give a f**k."

At the same time, he comes across as warm, open and generous, and clearly someone who wants to use his influence in places beyond the studio or stage. That presents a duality: he's "honoured to be a voice in my community" on one hand and "just turned 25 and am human" on the other. Referencing the "Theresa May, where's the money for Grenfell?" line he rapped during his emotional Brit Awards 2018 performance, he's "proud to do it and I almost know it's my duty, as a young black man coming where I come from. I want to be that person, but I think that's where a lot of my mental-health problems come from: the flipside of knowing all of that and having the strength and courage [to take a political stand]."

Celebrity inspires waves of both "extreme love and extreme hate", which Stormzy likens to an energy no one was designed to cope with. To keep his head straight, he compartmentalises. "Before, I was Michael who spat and made music. So, all this other Stormzy stuff isn't me. But with the music, Michael and Stormzy have got something in common: me and Michael still love music. There's a certain..." He falters, starting again: "Fame, celebrity, power, influence, they're very daunting things. Every time I talk to young artists, I say, 'You gotta live for something way bigger than celebrity – that's the worst kind of drug. You've gotta live for something more than the Instagram and the flashing lights, otherwise you will lose yourself. That's the only thing that will keep you, you.'" ■



OPPOSITE: DINNER SHIRT, \$680, SAINT LAURENT BY ANTHONY VACCARELLO. BRACES, FROM \$85, BUDD. THIS PAGE: JACKET, \$2,170, TROUSERS, \$740, BOTH LOUIS VUITTON. POLONECK, \$1,060, LORO PIANA SOCKS, £20, BUDD. SHOES, \$635, SALVATORE FERRAGAMO FOR STOCKISTS. ALL PAGES: SEE VOGUE INFORMATION

"YOU'VE GOTTA LIVE FOR SOMETHING WAY BIGGER THAN CELEBRITY – THAT'S THE WORST KIND OF DRUG"