



Ed Sheeran "I have to know both sides of an argument"

Ed Sheeran might just be the most unlikely defender of Irish musical heritage. But when it came to his latest record, 'I was angling for this to be a trad album,' he tells **Shilpa Ganatra**

'Trad should be at the forefront of pop culture'

Shaggy-haired and casually dressed as ever, Ed Sheeran is grinning ear to ear when we meet in a London hotel. We'd like to believe it's because of our radiant company, but it turns out he's just been given a present of a suave Saint Laurent jacket by his record company.

"I wore it for a *GQ* cover shoot and I liked it so much, but I'd never spend that kind of money on a jacket for myself," he says. "So they've just surprised me with it."

This, from a man who *Forbes* estimated to be worth €33 million in 2016—a year he spent travelling rather than working. But that's Ed Sheeran all over: through his meteoric rise to become one of this generation's defining artists, it's not him that's changed as much as everything around him. Sheeran's performances still involve just him, a guitar and loops, even though his venues have progressed from the dive bars of 2008 to capacity runs at Wembley Stadium and Madison Square Gardens. There's still no pop-star shine to his appearance; in fact, he's moved to wearing his glasses more frequently. And while his squad now includes James Blunt, Taylor Swift and Niall Horan ("He lives really close to me. He's in Nashville to record but we've been emailing"), the apple of his eye is a childhood friend.

If anything, his changing fortune is apparent in his disposition: he's happy. Which is fantastic news, especially when your first two albums, which earned 92 (yes, 92) platinum discs between them, are centred around broken hearts and wild nights.

"It's quite weird being in a good place when you write an album because, for one, you struggle to find inspiration, and two, once you find it, it's completely out of your comfort zone," he says, sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

"The only things I can write about are being in love, friends and family, career, or the place I grew up. That makes the album feel pretty reflective."

Stocktake
So while third album *÷* (*Divide*) continues his tradition of mathematical titles, lyrically it's a stocktake, looking as much to where he came from as the

record-breaking, award-winning place he is now.

It makes *Eraser*—a rousing celebration of his achievements—a smart album opener, and *Castle on the Hill* an appropriate lead track as it's "a love song to Suffolk", his home before leaving for London aged 16.

There's a strong presence of his much-reported Irish background on the album too, so our attention quickly turns to *Galway Girl*, a céilí-inspired tale of a "Galway girl and the perfect night", with added musicality from Belfast-based Beoga.

So who is she? "It was based on the fiddle player in Beoga, Niamh [Dunne]. She's married to an Irishman, a friend of mine," he explains, emphasising the last point. "I had the band in my house for an extra day so I was like, 'what can I write about? She plays the fiddle in an Irish band... right, cool, let's write a song about that.' She inspired the first line but the rest of the song isn't about anyone, I just made up a story. I was looking for a line that wasn't *Galway Girl* because of the Steve Earle song, but the more and more I sung it, the more I thought, f*ck it, there's just going to be a new *Galway Girl*. And it means I can sing both live."

The nod to Ireland doesn't end there. In the album's deluxe version, we'll also hear *Nancy Mulligan*, a quintessential trad song about his Wexford-based grandparents' marriage despite their Catholic-Protestant divide. Even more trad songs were recorded, but they didn't make the final cut.

"I was angling for this to be a



trad album. I've always wanted to make one, and I recorded about six or seven songs for this. But it only ended up being two of them.

"I grew up on Planxty and The Chieftains, and I really like Irish music. I don't think enough people use it in pop music. For some reason, it's considered twee and old, but it's such exciting, youthful music, it should be at the forefront of pop culture. Hopefully, if these songs are successful, more people will do a bit more like it."

Lead the flock

Here's hoping, especially as there's no arguing with Sheeran's ability to lead the flock. An Ivor Novello Award winner in his own right, his sound has spread through the songs he's penned for others, including One Direction, Justin Bieber and Robbie Williams, plus forthcoming tracks for Jess Glynne and James Blunt (that song being the first time Sheeran took on solo producer duties).

Even on social media, he's a major influencer: a plain

I grew up on Planxty and The Chieftains, and I really like Irish music. I don't think enough people use it in pop music

album-blue Instagram post received 230,000 likes, a feat that trumps Justin Bieber's memorable "Hi" tweet (60,000 retweets). So, given the state of play in 2017, his absence of political commentary is noted.

The issue is partly addressed in the unassuming gem *What Do I Know?* in which he spreads the good word of "love and understanding, positivity". Is that all he'll be saying on the subject?

"Maybe not for the rest of my life. For me to make an educated comment on situations in the world, I have to know both sides of an argument," he says. "But I spend most of my life in other

countries, not reading or watching the news. So I don't feel like I, as a 26-year-old man, can make an informed judgment.

"My own view is that we shouldn't put up barriers, we shouldn't hate each other, we should all try to understand each other and get along. Which is a wet way of saying a political statement, but it's all I can justify saying at the moment."

Warming up

Looking ahead, there's his upcoming "warm-up" tour, if two 3Arena shows can be deemed as such. While demand for tickets was so frenzied that tickets were being resold for €1,000 despite Sheeran partnering with Twickets to resell tickets at face value, he says he'll be back soon. "The big tour will be next year. These are the warm-up shows because I want the main shows to be so good, just the best show you've ever seen."

He has his sights on broader ambitions too: after a cameo in *Bridget Jones's Baby*, he's looking to expand.

"I want to do one film. I want to write a rom-com, star in it and do a soundtrack for it that would be released as an album. I've always wanted to do something like how Eminem did *8 Mile*, but not a serious film—I'd rather do a *Notting Hill*, *Love Actually*, *About A Boy* type film.

"I've been speaking to some people about it but it's still about 10 years away. I want to start putting together a story now because I don't know what the hell the story would be."

■ = is out now

A SONG BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Galway Girl isn't the only title to be used in two different popular songs. You might also get these very different tunes mixed up...

Brown Sugar

As well as one of The Rolling Stones defining hits, *Brown Sugar* is the title track from the debut album that introduced D'Angelo to the world.

Burn the Witch

On discovering the title, we hoped Radiohead's song, found in their



latest album *A Moon Shaped Pool*, was a cover of The Queens of the Stone Age classic. Now, it's an indie favourite in its own right.

Take a Chance on Me

Ignoring the worldwide hit by ABBA, the late, great JLS (left) poached the title for their feelgood midtempo number. It did well at the time, but is no match for the original.

Cannonball

Both The Breeders and Ed's hero

Damien Rice had their biggest hits with *Cannonball*. One is a fragile, expressive number, the other a perfect quiet-loud-quiet dynamic suitable for only the sweatiest of moshpits. Guess who did which.

Closer

In addition to being a number one hit single by The Chainsmokers, *Closer* is also a dark burst of emotion from Nine Inch Nails, with a NSFW video and even more explicit lyrics. Confuse them at your peril.