

MUSIC

It was the year the boy next door learnt to roar. Ed Sheeran, that superstar in a flannel shirt, left The Rolling Stones and U2 coughing on fumes as his Divide tour soared to a record-shattering gross of £378m. George Ezra graduated from floppy-haired debutant to bona fide superstar, his "Shotgun" single becoming the most-streamed rock song on Spotify in the UK.

And as 2018 ended, a new contender looked set to emerge in the Elton John-championed Newcastle troubadour Sam Fender. He was winner of both the Brits Critics' Choice Award and the BBC Sound Of prize – reliable barometers of talent poised for stardom (previous Sound Of picks include Adele and Sam Smith).

Yet he will face stern competition. Kindred strummers Dermot Kennedy and Lewis Capaldi are also tipped to break big, each bringing their own blend of soulful lyrics and sensitive falsettos.

None of these artists are soundalikes – but they do have a great deal in common, not least the old-fashioned art of standing alone on stage with a guitar and crooning.

Image-wise, all could have dropped from the same production line. With his tatty T-shirts and high-street jeans, Sheeran has pioneered the lad-from-up-the-road look. In the past 12 months, however, he was pushed hard by 25-year-old Ezra and his gap-year backpacker chic. Twenty-two-year-old Capaldi, who has just wrapped a sold-out tour, looks as if he has tumbled out of a student bar on two-for-one night.

Duncan Haskell, editor of *Songwriting* magazine, says: "We want to believe in what musicians of all genres are writing about, and maybe that's easier if they look a little less glamorous."

What this new batch of bloke emoters lacks is the traditional whiff of brimstone. These stars are down-to-earth, devoid of guitar music's untrammelled rawness. They are strikingly desexualised. "Nice" is the new rock'n'roll.

"The boy with the guitar has always been there, but Ed has probably blazed a trail," says Amy Wadge, the Wales-based songwriter who co-authored some of Sheeran's biggest hits, including the 2014 number one "Thinking Out Loud". "Because of the internet, the easiest way to deliver a song is to sit in front of a webcam with just a guitar and a voice. It's connecting with people. "Back in the day, pop stars were presented in a certain way. That has changed with reality TV. People want to see someone they feel they know."

Ezra has been honest that, had he started out in the 80s or 90s, he is unlikely to have had a shot at fame. He simply can't pull off the detached cool that was once *de rigueur*. "It wouldn't work for me," he told me in April, as his second LP, *Staying at Tamara's*, was beginning its conquest of the charts: "There was a point on the first record when it started to do well and I thought, 'Maybe I'll have to adopt a persona.' In fact, I've never had to.

The rise and rise of the scruffy superstar

With a new wave of guitar-toting troubadours set to break big this year, **Ed Power** explores how the boy next door conquered pop



"I have the luxury to admit: 'I don't party... here's my record.' Twenty years ago, I would have been ironically cool for admitting that, or you wouldn't have gone near me."

Commercially, the boys of strummer have gone where few singer-songwriters have ventured before. Sheeran's *Divide* tour holds the record for the highest-grossing run of dates in a calendar year. The 2017 album moved 672,000 units in its first seven days in the UK – the third-highest total in chart history and extraordinary in this age of flat-lined record sales. That same week, he had 16 tracks in the singles top 20 and nine in the top 10.

Ezra, meanwhile, clocked up the fastest-selling long player of 2018 with *Staying at Tamara's*.

Reality TV changed everything. People want to see someone they feel they know

Even "lesser" boy troubadours have enjoyed a blockbuster rise. James Bay's debut album, *Chaos and the Calm*, debuted at number one. And despite a zero-star review from *NME* – prompting his dad to ring up to complain – Tom Odell's first record likewise topped the charts.

Fender has already racked up 1.2 million streams with his Tom Petty-esque rocker "Poundshop Kardashians", despite still being relatively unknown.

Understandably, none of these new singer-songwriters are keen to be pitched as a "Son of Sheeran". At the same time, they don't want to be construed as taking potshots at him. That's another way in which the present crop stand apart: they are unfailingly polite and don't do feuds.

"[The Sheeran comparison] is a funny one," says Kennedy, the Dublin singer-songwriter short-listed for this year's BBC Sound Of. "I don't know if I should ever receive it as a negative thing, as he's massively successful."

One unavoidable fact is that all of these artists are male. Where is the female Ed Sheeran? Why not Georgina Ezra? What does it say about the record industry – and the music-streaming public – that we can take these sloppy-grinned troubadours to our hearts while finding no room for the female equivalent?

Adele is, for instance, every bit as much a phenomenon



as Sheeran, yet she fits into the pre-existing tradition of gale-force soul belters. She doesn't get to rip up the manual and write her own rules. It would be unthinkable that she could go on stage looking as if she'd just tumbled out of bed, as Sheeran did on the *Divide* tour. Compare also the buzz around Fender with the lack of excitement over female-fronted Wolf Alice winning the Mercury Prize for the year's best album.

Wadge recalls her own years as a struggling singer-songwriter and how her gender subtly became an issue. She was asked to lie about her age – "I was 25 for a very long time" – and to keep the

fact that she was married secret. "I always felt that there was room for only a few females," she says. "My contemporaries were people like KT Tunstall, who was definitely better than me. There was an element of, 'Why would we need you? We already have a girl with a guitar.'"

Contrast how Sheeran parlayed YouTube popularity into a global following with the fate of Dodie Clark. She, too, started out posting heartfelt songs online. Despite her considerable live following, she has been categorised not as a songwriter but as a social media star – a novelty act. "I'm a woman and a 'YouTube star' in quotations," she told me earlier this year. "Being taken seriously is very difficult."

It's not just gender: almost without exception, these young male songwriters are white and middle class. So, too, are their audiences. Michael Kiwanuka, one of the few non-white songwriters to break through, found the situation so confounding that in 2016 he even released a single titled "Black Man in a White World". "The fact that no black people were coming to my gigs made me realise we're more segregated than we think," he said at the time.

One thing is clear, however: bumblingly real earnestness has acquired a cachet. Or at least it has if you're a personable chap in his twenties. "There is a level of expectation that if you are going to sing about something, it should be something that matters," says Wadge. "We see everything up close and personal. There's no mystique any more."

THE INDEPENDENT



Clockwise from main: Dermot Kennedy (and above), Lewis Capaldi, Sam Fender