

Rory Hoy

Rory Hoy is 19. He works as a video/DVD technician at the secondary school where as a student he gained C passes at A Level in ICT and Media Studies. He is making a name for himself as an award winning film director and producer, and has recently been signed by recording company in the USA, who are releasing his first CD of dance music, which he describes as “a mixture of Deep House and Trip Hop.”

Rory has autism. His film, ‘Autism and Me’ was conceived, directed and produced entirely by Rory, and is an exploration of autism and how it effects his everyday life, and has influenced his school career. The publication of the film on DVD has led to three major awards, numerous TV appearances and other media coverage. I came across the DVD by chance when I was asked to review it for *Special Children*. It struck me as a unique insight into how autism can be seen as an aspect of life that can be used as a type of creative energy, as long as people have a willingness to understand how people with autism see the world. It has been sold throughout the world and is being used in schools to help students empathise with people with autism.

I met Rory and his parents at a hotel in his hometown of Knaresborough, where we shared an often hilarious 90 minutes, as Rory relaxed into the new experience of being interviewed one on one for a magazine. I have decided to reproduce the interview in full, as it gives a flavour of Rory the aspiring artist, who happens to have autism. I hope that this will inspire other young people with autism and those who live and work with them.

MJ: Do you have a routine, and am I upsetting it?

RH: Kind of, but I can break it today.

MJ: What does it mean to you to be well known, with the awards, TV appearances and other media coverage?

RH: Middle aged mothers stop me in the street. I was hoping for girls my own age to be interested, but this hasn't really taken off yet.

MJ: Where did this all start... putting your creativity into the public arena?

RH: I started making films in 2002, with ‘Uncle Bill’s Happy Days’. This showed Uncle Bill messing about before a wedding started. My friends and family loved it. I made 27 films before the first draft of ‘Autism and Me’ in 2005.

My early films were a bit hit and miss. ‘Timmy Toodles’ was good, and ‘The Timmy Toodles Tribute Show’ using puppets.

I’m basically still a child: 19 going on 13, 14 and 15. I act a lot younger than I am, but I’m actually more mature than some of my peers. I don’t drink or smoke or smoke weed or go to hard-core raves. Basically I chill out and relax in good old Knaresborough.

MJ: The middle-aged mothers thing... that’s an unexpected spin off of fame...

RH: I met Guy Ritchie at the Film For Youth awards ceremony in Belfast. I submitted a five minute version of ‘Autism and Me’ and it won the award,

which was very surprising. I made the film while I was doing Media Studies at school. I got two Cs at A Level.

MJ: That's more than I got.

RH: Not everyone is good at everything. Everyone has their own strengths.

MJ: I've yet to find mine. You did A levels, but what about life early on?

RH: I went to a special school, but I was twice as autistic then. Then I went to St. John's Junior School in Knaresborough, and I still go there every Tuesday to help them out. St. Aidan's Church of England Secondary School in Harrogate is a fantastic school. The staff are fantastic. It's my definition of a brilliant school: good teachers, and friendly. They need to be relaxed and intelligent at the same time. They don't look down on the pupils or treat them like parents or uncles.

MJ: Was there any 'difficult' behaviour, and how did you cope with it?

RH: It depends. Some pupils are quite lazy. I tried to flirt with the crowd but it didn't work because they have totally different lifestyles to me. They are party animals but I'm an oddbod.

MJ: Would you rather be just you and one other person?

RH: Yes, me and one or two other people.

MJ: Many people with autism don't do well at school, or in life. In fact life is one huge struggle. But you seem to be very upbeat. What's your secret?

RH: One word: optimism. You've got to stay optimistic through your entire life. Think happy things and listen to happy music and be optimistic.

MJ: But aren't teenagers naturally on a downer: grungy and miserable?

RH: This is a stereotype. The pessimism is not necessarily typical. This happens because of the programmes they watch and the music they listen to; e.g. Gangsta Rap and ultra violent films. I've never seen an 18 film. I prefer comedies.

MJ: Are you an eccentric person?

RH: Yes. I'm pleased to be eccentric. I love Tom Baker, who is thought by many people to be the greatest Dr. Who. He's eccentric. And Spike Milligan. I've always been influenced by eccentric people, like Monty Python. The Beatles are eccentric.

MJ: Have you met other people who are autistic?

RH: I have. I have some very good friends who are autistic, like my friend Jenny. She's better at socialising than me. Paul's a big train enthusiast, like I was, but I'm more an enthusiast than an obsessive.

MJ: What makes them function in life, and become independent?

RH: I try and imitate non-autistic people and how they work.

MJ: Have you got any role models?

RH: My Dad. And Uncle Bobby's a bit of a role model. He's my oldest living relative.

MJ: What do you think about the media portrayal of people with autism?

RH: They should portray people with autism as being like me. I want to be a role model for autistic children. We are not all Dustin Hoffmans from 'Rainman'. The media should show our accomplishments. I was shocked to

hear that most people with autism or Asperger syndrome don't get married. This is rubbish.

MJ: If I were to sum you up in one word, that word would be 'positive'. Have you always been positive?

RH: Occasionally the negative Rory pops up, usually when I watch the N-E-W-S. It's very downbeat. When you see another person depressed, you get depressed. I'm anti censorship in films; e.g. the edited Tom and Jerry. I don't like news and swearing. The news I have a phobia of.

MJ: I imagine you are a popular person.

RH: Little kids, teenagers. Everyone likes me.

MJ: Do you find teenage language a bit difficult, e.g. sarcasm? Especially in groups?

RH: I think I understand sarcasm because I watch The Simpsons a lot. It has taught me so much.

RH: My favourite subject is Media Studies. Mr Pocock is the greatest teacher I ever had. We watched loads of videos. He's my idol.

MJ: Have you read 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time'?

RH: I've heard of it, but I read non-fiction. Wacky books mainly. I like graphic novels and early Batman comics. I'm a huge Batman fan. He's a better super hero for me. You can't be Superman, and though Spiderman is a better role model, you can't be him. Batman is more of a detective. I like honesty, not exaggeration.

MJ: Rory, how do you want to be portrayed? As someone who is autistic but has triumphed over his disability?

RH: No. As an artist who is autistic, but who is basically quirky and eccentric. At the moment I'm producing my own music. I get samples together and mess around with them: House, Hip Hop, and Break Beat. Fat Boy Slim, DJ Shadow and a French DJ called DJ Cam have influenced me. I've been working on a few songs in a genre called 'Deep House'. I do this, and 'Trip Hop'. It's kind of French and stoned and seductive music. I do a bit of 'scratching'. I try my best. I'm trying to collaborate with a local band. The response to my music has been good. I did a DJ mix of old and modern House songs and my friends were gobsmacked. My music has been getting rave responses, especially a track called '986', which is my favourite number. It's not quite Electro House. It's basically a hybrid of Deep House, Electro House and Funky House and I see what I come up with.

MJ: I hear what you are saying, but I'm not sure I follow what you mean. I think I know how you must feel sometimes. How about vinyl?

RH: I've been collecting vinyl since 1999. My favourite song is George Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord'. And I like Jimi Hendrix's 'Voodoo Chile' as well.

MJ: What about the future? Would you like to go to University?

RH: I'm not going. I like to work at the school, as a video and DVD technician. I can't handle the crowds.

MJ: So are you going to carry on with your interests, or branch out?

RH: I've made a radio programme for BBC Radio York, about idioms, like 'raining cats and dogs' where people take things literally. It was part of my work experience. I had 'Jive Talking' by the Bee Gees as a backing track. People want me to do a follow up to 'Autism and Me' called 'Autism and Them' where I stop people in the street and ask them what they know about autism. I want to concentrate on my music as well.

Rory talks candidly on the DVD about being unable to cross the road or cope with crowds, and I was curious to find out how someone so self assured about his creativity, and yet so vulnerable in everyday situations, could have functioned in school. The next day we met at Rory's workplace, St. Aidan's Church of England Secondary School in Harrogate. I had a chance to meet Rory's 'idol', the remarkable Media Studies teacher, Tim Pocock. Sarah Fairburn, Head of English, also played an important role in Rory's creative development. She was the first teacher to see 'Autism and Me', and recognised it's potential as a teaching tool.

"I was awestruck when I first saw it. I could not believe that a student had done this for himself. It was so professional. At the time I was working with a group of students who needed motivation to write, and I chose Mark Haddon's 'The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time' as a stimulus for them. I showed the group Rory's DVD and they were very enthusiastic. Over a number of lessons we looked at the novel and watched Rory's DVD, looking at Haddon's style and how he used the main character as his 'voice, and how the author felt an autistic person might think and communicate.

"As part of their research, which included reading 'Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome' by Luke Jackson, the students wanted to talk to Rory. They were fascinated by his film, and particularly his filming techniques, and wanted to know more about him. Rory was able to address the group, who particularly liked his humour.

"One student in particular produced a quite remarkable comparison of Haddon's novel and Rory's film, and I feel that 'Autism and Me' gave the students a much more realistic picture of autism. It made more impact."

Sarah feels strongly that the school's inclusive ethos allowed Rory to develop as an individual and to continue to function within a very large school, both as a student and now as a member of staff. Head Teacher Dennis Richards elaborated on this point: "We have tried to create an atmosphere here where the needs of the individual student take priority over the needs of the establishment. We look closely at students' needs and see how we can support them to help them develop. In Rory's case this was through excellent Teaching Assistant support. Rory and Tim Pocock responded well to each other's sense of fun and eccentricity. Sarah Fairburn became aware of Rory's exceptional talents and was able to use these for Rory's benefit, and for the benefit of all the students.

“Crucially, both senior members of staff, in their own ways, wanted to communicate with Rory and to help him cope with his anxiety.”

Rory recently sent me a copy of his latest CD, and it has just been described by a student at Sheffield University as ‘basically very cool chill out music.’ Rory emailed me asked me to mention that he is Youth Patron of a charity called Resources For Autism. “They have a new initiative called YNOT? And it is especially for young people like me with autism. I’ve made a short film for them which is on their website www.resourcesforautism.org. I do hope you will mention them and my patronage in the article, as it was a real honour for me to be asked.”

Michael Jones
Educational Consultant

‘Autism and Me’ by Rory Hoy, is published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rory’s first album CD, ‘Cosmic Child’, a collection of ambient and chillout breaks, will be released by Howlin’ Records in February 2008. Listen to a preview at www.myspace.com/roryhoy

‘Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome’ by Luke Jackson is also available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers.