



Young, Will (b. 1979)

by Linda Rapp

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Will Young in the video for his hit song "Jealousy" (YouTube video still).

The first winner of Britain's *Pop Idol* talent show, Will Young has gone on to achieve great success as a recording artist. His turns in acting have also been well received by both the public and the critics. Young has used his celebrity to advocate for causes including help for people living with HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic violence, youth at risk, and people suffering from depression.

Young is a fraternal twin, born ten minutes before his brother, Rupert, on January 20, 1979, in Berkshire, England. The family was prosperous, and Young was able to go to boarding school from the age of nine. He subsequently enrolled at Wellington College and later continued his education at Exeter University, where he studied politics but also participated in theater productions, both as an actor and a script writer.

After his graduation from Exeter, Young opted to take his studies in a different direction, entering the Arts Educational School at Chiswick, to which he won a scholarship in 2001. He embarked on a course of study of musical theater, but while in his first year there he also applied to be a contestant on the ITV television show *Pop Idol*, a competition for aspiring musicians.

It was not Young's first attempt at pursuing a musical career: two years before, he had taken part in a contest on the television show *This Morning* to choose members for a new boy band.

Although Young's studies were in political science, his heart was in music. "I clearly remember getting to [Exeter] University and thinking 'How will I get into the music business?'" he recalled to Craig McLean of the *Sunday Telegraph*. "I didn't think I would get my foot in the door, unless it was a competition. You know: gay, not very cool, politics student, middle class, dresses badly, doesn't play instruments, doesn't write [songs]. But I just wanted to sing."

Young reached the finals but was dismissed by a judging panel that included Simon Cowell.

Cowell—known for being unsparing of contestants' feelings—was also a judge on *Pop Idol*. When Cowell evaluated one of Young's performances on that show as "distinctly average," the singer responded with politeness rather than anger in his own defense, causing the judge, who appeared to have anticipated a different reaction, to acknowledge Young as a "true gent."

In the *Pop Idol* contest Cowell conspicuously supported another participant, Gareth Gates, the eventual runner-up. The recording contract for the winner, written before the final results were in, required the performance and promotion of two songs far better suited to Gates than to Young, whose more nuanced performances were not the typical material of recordings and videos consumed by the age-mates of the then seventeen-year-old Gates.

"I grant you that Gareth was always far more likely to win," Young told Nick Duerden of the London *Independent*. "He looks like a pop idol, whereas I'm this gay, middle class, bumbling fool. But people voted for me, so what can I say?"

The people spoke decisively, giving Young a margin of some 500,000 votes, a result to which both he and the judges reacted with great surprise. The tabloid press, which had anointed Gates before the fact, and the bookies, who backed him as a sure winner, were proven wrong.

After the final show, Young told Duerden, the press tried to portray him and Gates as having an ongoing rivalry: "The media seems intent on creating a division between Gareth and myself, but there simply isn't one."

Young also noted to McLean that "the winner of *Pop Idol* was meant to get a Pepsi sponsorship deal and a hair wax deal. Gareth got both of them, not me" after Young's manager, Simon Fuller—who would also have benefited from these ventures—advised him to forgo them in order to be taken more seriously in his career as a musical artist.

Young's route to victory on *Pop Idol* would also lead to his coming out publicly as a gay man. He had let his family and friends know of his sexual orientation when he was twenty, and he had received their support, although, as he revealed later, his father struggled with the issue.

"It was hard for him when I first came out and he was very honest about it," Young wrote in an article for *The Observer*. "I think he struggled for a while, probably feeling a little bit ashamed and then guilty for feeling ashamed." Describing his father as a "generous man and a bit of a quiet anarchist on the side," he praised him for his openness and ability to grow.

The producers of *Pop Idol* were also aware of Young's sexual orientation, but the general public was not. When Young emerged as a serious contender—if still an underdog—a tabloid publication threatened to out him.

"They had kindly told us [before proceeding], but it was upsetting," Young stated to McLean. "It was something that could prevent the audience from just focusing on the singing."

In a strategy session, he continued, a representative of the production team "said, 'Well, you could lie.' And I said, 'I'm not gonna do that.'"

The tabloid did not pursue the story, allowing Young to come out on his own terms, shortly after winning the contest. In an interview published in *The News of the World* on March 10, 2002, Young declared, "I feel it's time to tell my fans I'm gay," adding, "For me it's normal and nothing to be ashamed about. I'm gay, and I'm comfortable with that."

At the time of the announcement Young was riding a crest of success: his first release—a double A-side of "Anything Is Possible," which had been written specifically for the eventual winner—whoever that might turn out to be—as a follow-up to the show, and "Evergreen"—had shot to the top of the charts and set a record as the best selling debut to date, with sales of 1.4 million copies in a week.

While Young relished the response to "Evergreen," he acknowledged to Teddy Jamieson of the *Glasgow Herald* that it "wasn't my kind of song, and you want to sing songs you have a personal investment in. . . . [but] I don't discredit it for what it did. It's so linked to the show, and that's why I think it's a great thing—if I hear it, it reminds me of that winning show, and that's what the song's about. . . . whereas," he continued, "'Leave Right Now' has a moment attached to it, and that's the moment where it's like, 'Okay, maybe he'll stick around.'"

"Sticking around" proved to be a significant understatement, as Young produced a series of hit albums, beginning with *From Now On* (2002), played to sold-out audiences on tours, and evolved a distinctive personal style.

His next album, *Friday's Child* (2003), was another top seller and included the haunting "Leave Right Now," which won the Ivor Novello Award for Best Song Musically and Lyrically in 2004.

Young called his next album, *Keep On* (2005), "more personal than the last one in every single way," not least because he co-wrote more than half of the songs, moving to become a creator as well as a performer of music.

Young continued his success with the album *Let It Go* (2008), which went to number two on the U. K. charts. He subsequently earned a top ranking with *Echoes* (2011), which includes the hit song "Jealousy."

He stated to Byrony Gordon of London's *Daily Telegraph* that he enjoys "the idea of bringing sexuality into a song in a subtle way, and slightly turning it on its head a bit," citing the video for "Jealousy," in which, dressed as a gymnast, he observes another male gymnast practicing a routine with a woman and then watches both walk away.

"I like the idea of giving the audience the option to make up its mind as to what is going on," he said.

Young has produced dramatized videos of his songs—some, like "Come On," which dramatizes an affecting and, ultimately, uplifting story; others, such as "Jealousy," artistic, nuanced, and thought-provoking; and still others, including "Leave Right Now," not necessarily susceptible to easy interpretation but at once touching and funny.

Videos of concert and acoustic versions of the same songs allow listeners to experience the music in a completely different way.

Reviewing a 2009 London concert, Lisa Verrico stated that Young "almost fools you into thinking that he's playing an intimate set at a bar, rather than a 4,000-seater venue," further observing that "his sweetly soulful vocals" drew cheers and that "[h]is cover of 'Light My Fire' was surprisingly seductive and the inventive ad-libbing showed how far he had come from *Pop Idol*."

Young told Lucy Cavendish of *The Times* of London in 2011 that he saw the success of "Leave Right Now" in 2003 as a turning point in his career: "I think that song brought me a different audience. It's what really sent my career into orbit. Up until then I was wondering which direction I was going in, and then . . . that song, although I didn't like it at first. . . . It was cross-generational."

By breaking out of the "pop idol" image Young, who consistently acknowledges his gratitude to the show that launched his career, has established himself as a serious vocal artist.

Young has also pursued an acting career, appearing in the 2005 BBC film *Mrs. Henderson Presents* (directed by Stephen Frears) and on stage in a 2007 production of Sir Noël Coward's *The Vortex*.

"It was a gamble rather than logical casting by the director, Jo Combes" to choose Young, wrote Lynne Walker in *The Independent* of Young's role in *The Vortex*. But, she allowed, "In many ways Young is perfect for the part of Nicky Lancaster, the spoilt, heroin-shooting boy, emotionally adrift from his resigned father and flighty mother, and weary of the nebulous life he's drowning in. . . . His slightly fey mannerisms convey just about enough of the complex sexuality of his latently homosexual role. . . ."

Young subsequently appeared in a television movie adaptation of Agatha Christie's *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (2010, directed by Tom Shankland) and the British series *Bedlam* (2011), a supernatural drama set in an apartment building that was once a mental hospital.

Young has used his celebrity to support worthy causes dear to his heart. Of particular interest to him is

helping people suffering from depression since his twin brother, Rupert, has long been subject to it and made at least one suicide attempt because of that condition, which was exacerbated by an addiction to alcohol.

Young acknowledged to Paul English of the *Daily Record* in 2008 that he too was "prone to bouts of mild depression" but, after three years of therapy, had "ways to get over it." His revelation of a susceptibility to depression comes as no surprise to fans of his music, since his performances frequently convey a melancholic affect.

Young also works with organizations that aid persons with learning disabilities and women and children who are victims of domestic violence.

Young has become increasingly vocal in his support for glbtq rights. While the reception of the public to his coming out was generally positive, he stated to Cavendish, "I have had homophobic remarks shouted at me, and although I have grown accustomed to it, it can still be quite frightening."

He is particularly concerned about the effect that such experiences could have on glbtq youth, and he hopes that his cross-generational appeal may ease the way for some young people. He commented to Ros Wynne-Jones of *The Mirror* in 2004, "Maybe it helps gay teenagers if their mums fancy me? They can think, well, I could bring Will Young home and mum would probably thank me."

He hopes for a more hospitable environment for glbtq youth in the wider society as well. He declared to Cavendish, "I am incensed about the way people use the word gay to mean something awful. School kids do it all the time. 'That's so gay.' I really want teachers to be aware of this and to point out the negative connotations" of such hurtful comments.

Although Young is guarded about his personal life, in his 2009 article for *The Observer* (where he was described as "single" after he and his boyfriend of several years had ended their relationship), he revealed that he had a difficult time accepting his homosexuality and did not have his first reciprocated relationship until he was 25.

"When I met my first boyfriend, Aaron, I'd already become known from *Pop Idol*," he revealed. "You have to deal with all the normal stuff in relationships and then there's the media attention on top of that. He was getting grief and it was tough." His relationship with his ex-boyfriend Connor was also affected by the glare of publicity, although, Young added, "I think it's a cop-out to blame fame for making relationships hard. Relationships are difficult full stop."

After acknowledging the difficulties he has had in his relationships, Young concluded: "I've had a wonderful time in my relationships, really; done amazing things. And as much as you go through a grieving process after a relationship ends, you know that eventually you'll want that again."

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