



Blazer: Lambretta
 Shirt: Brutus
 Trousers: Jenny Schwarz
 Shoes: Oliver Spencer
 Watch: Storm
 Glasses: Kirk Originals
 Chain: Artist's own

LABRINTH

IDOL joins Team Labrinth at Hoxton Street Studios. In the (rare) event that you are not aware of Labrinth by now, he is a singer-songwriter-producer extraordinaire – a triple threat, who first found fame working with Tinie Tempah on smash-hit tracks like 'Pass Out' and 'Frisky'. The last 12 months couldn't have gone better for him. He has featured on a number one track which he penned and produced, performed to a huge crowd at Glastonbury and signed with Simon Cowell.

In person, Labrinth is every bit as impressive. Hailing from Hackney, at 22 he has achieved more than any aspiring musician could dream of. Yet he is without affectation. Natural and smiley, he tells me that he has been in the studio every morning from 7.30 am and has already had one other photoshoot today – and has another after us. His team are visibly baffled at his boundless energy, explaining that they, unlike Labrinth, need to get some sleep. His real name is Timothy McKenzie, but everyone calls him 'Lab'. The focus and determination is obvious – Labrinth is a man on a mission. And a highly intelligent one at that. When discussing his musical intentions, he has wisdom and insight well beyond his years.

On set with our photographer Elliot Morgan – who coincidentally shot the single cover for 'Earthquake' – Labrinth is relaxed, chatty and undeniably stylish. He clearly loves fashion and is mesmerized by the rubber t-shirt pulled by our stylist. Labrinth is unafraid to take risks in choosing what to wear. In front of the camera he launches into handstands and acrobatic moves, demonstrating his (very) fit physique. The most memorable thing about Labrinth, however, is how he has his head screwed very firmly on – clearly a testament to the tight-knit team he has had around him since his early teens and whom he later thanks in his interview with me... ►

You first came to everyone's attention when you produced and featured on Tinie Tempah's 'Pass Out' and 'Frisky'. How did that collaboration come about?

Tinie found me through hearing an album I produced called 'ADHD' for an artist called Master Shortie, and he really loved the stuff on it – very eclectic, kind of left. He found me through my publisher and was like, "I need to work with this guy". The first time he ever came in, he jumped on 'Pass Out'.

You produced the single 'Pass Out'. Had you come up with the beat for it already when Tinie Tempah came on board?

Yeah, I make all the tracks myself, so he came when I had an idea. He wanted something different, crazy – and that's what I live on. So he heard it. I played 'Pass Out', and he left the room. I thought he didn't like the track, personally. But he was thinking up lyrics and a chorus and was outside going crazy. He came back in with an idea, and it all went off from there. We actually made three tracks in that session. 'Pass Out', 'Frisky' and 'Wonderman' – all in that one day. It was a very intense crazy session.

The sound on those Tinie tracks is very distinct. Did you work together on creating that sound for him, or was that what you had in mind for him as a producer?

Not for him. What I saw in urban and grime music... artists were creative and individual in the way they approached records and they were different. It was like they had the knowhow but not the mechanics in music. They didn't understand what they were doing. They were just having fun with their sound, whereas I have the formula. I understand the way it works. I could mix it with things and really translate to a wider audience, which is hip-hop, trance, jungle – all these sounds. And they're UK sounds. English people... when we make commercial music, we make a second-hand version of what Americans already have. I felt like, "Why don't we make our own swagger music?" That's what 'Pass Out' was.

Your vocals featured on 'Pass Out'. Was your ultimate ambition to be a solo artist, or were you happy producing and writing first and foremost?

I think I had the ability to be a solo artist. I didn't know when it was going to come. I sang on the chorus of 'Pass Out' just as a guide. It wasn't like I was going to be an artist on the record! But Tinie really liked what he heard. It just ended up working, and we just left it on there. That was the first mainstream video I did.

What made you focus on being Labrinth, the artist?

Well after that, it just got crazy. Labels were coming at me from all over the place. They knew about me originally as a producer, but they didn't see me as an artist. After that, I had insane amounts of offers from every label you could think of. Everybody throwing Dom Pérignon at me – it was crazy. In the midst of that I was about to sign to a major label, and Simon Cowell called us to work with a few of the artists off 'The X Factor'. His second in command heard my music and was like, "You're an artist, man – look at the way you dress, look at the way you sing.. What's going on?" I was like, "I'm about to sign to someone" And he was like, "But you haven't signed yet?" And then I signed to Syco! ►

Jacket & shirt: Ozwald Boateng
Tie: Marwood

**“THEY KNEW
ABOUT ME
ORIGINALLY AS A
PRODUCER,
BUT THEY DIDN'T
SEE ME AS AN
ARTIST,**



Suit: Paul & Joe
T-Shirt: Nyla Boutique
Watch: Old England
Glasses: Kirk Originals

As a musician who is fully involved in the entire creative process, were you nervous about signing to a label like Syco where the other artists are more manufactured?

No, not at all. I knew I was going to be the odd one out. Every other label was signing urban artists. I don't wanna just call myself an 'urban artist', but at the time I was seen as an 'urban artist'. I really felt that I would end up just being pushed to the back because there were so many in every other label. So I thought, "Why not go for a label where you're definitely going to be getting different attention?" I felt like that was the perfect place. Also, who doesn't want to sign to Simon Cowell and have the ability to almost work with anyone you want to? Of course they don't produce my music or write my songs, so I knew I was going to be fine.

Do you work closely with Simon?

We have chats every once in a while. I go and have a little meeting with him every month. We have good chats about how I can develop and take things to another level.

Is he scary?

Not at all. He's a good guy.

How did it feel when your first solo single 'Let the Sunshine' reached number three in the charts?

It felt good. It felt like things were moving, stepping up. It felt like Labrinth was starting to begin. I was still nervous like, "Oh my God! Can I do this?" When you start, you're always nervous. I call it the Year 7 period. You're at school, you have that big backpack that doesn't fit you, and you're just nervous. But as you take more steps forward into the business, it becomes easier to deal with what's around you. And I'm ready to play in the playground, man!

You wrote, composed and produced single 'Earthquake' yourself. Is it liberating or nerve-wracking to have that amount of creative control?

It makes me feel free. It is stressful at the same time. It's just time. There's no time to do anything. To have to be the producer, the writer and the artist at the same time is stressful. But at the same time, it makes me feel like I'm whole-heartedly being myself. That's what I feel like I'm doing in my album.

Has it taken you a lot longer to put together your album because of that?

What took me a bit longer was to find out who I am. To be an artist you've got to know who you are, what you're presenting. Even though I don't like to put it this way, every artist is a brand really. If you're presenting a brand to a person, any brand you can think of out there has an integrity. And I was like, "What do people come to Labrinth for?" I had to work that out while making this album. It's just been growing and organically coming together which is healthy.

What is your song-writing process?

If I'm writing a song, it's always about the title first - title, then the melody. I like to have a strong melody and then fit the lyrics to the melody. In terms of making a beat, it's like styling someone. It's almost from the basics and foundations of what you know and trying to twist them as much as possible. That's what I try and do with every song I make. ►

Like a Labyrinth?

Yeah man, basically, that's exactly it!

What can the IDOL readers expect from the album?

Surprises. Loads of surprises. Maybe things that you hate and things that you love, all at the same time.

Have you collaborated on many tracks?

Yes, with a few artists. Really cool artists. Some that are coming up right now, that are doing insane things in the business and are going to do amazing things next year. Then some that are already established.

How do you split your time between your career as a solo artist and writing and producing for other people?

Prioritizing is the hardest thing, especially being a 22-year-old who wants to have fun. I always have to learn to be professional and just prioritize my time. My manager is very good at that. He's my mentor and has been supporting me since I was 15. His name is Marc Williams. We have a label together. To do all these things you need a strong team. My team is like a family. I've known all of them for years, and they're going to take me to where I need to go. I'm very, very secure.

You made a deal to create your own imprint label within Syco named Odd Child Recordings. Can you explain what an imprint label is, and why did you decide to do it?

It's a joint venture. So I sign artists, and Simon Cowell's label has all the facilities I need to take that artist to where they need to go - some of the things I wouldn't necessarily have if I had my own label without Syco. But I have full creative control. I make all the decisions in terms of releasing the tracks. Our first artist, Etta Bond, is on a record called 'Forgiveness' with Wretch 32.

'TO BE AN ARTIST YOU'VE GOT TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE,

Did you discover Etta?

I've known her since I was 17. Before things kicked off we were working together. I always thought she was amazing, and I felt she needed her moment. She has a lovely voice. When you meet an artist that doesn't need one drop of auto-tune on their vocal then you know they are special.

Your headline tour starts February 23rd. Are you excited?

Do you know what? I can't believe it! When you're sitting in your room, and you're watching MTV and watching all these artists do amazing things, to be one of them sends me over the moon. I can't believe I'm on my own tour. I'm really excited.

You're one of nine very musical siblings. Are any of them going to be joining you on tour?

You never know. My brothers and sisters are as busy as me. One plays for Tinie Tempah, two of them are singing for and playing with Wretch 32, everyone plays and everyone's busy. Maybe I can pull some of them on stage if they have the time.

Who were your musical inspirations growing up?

I wouldn't say single people, but I would say sounds. I was listening to gospel, country (because my mum loves country), funk. All these sounds but mainly gospel... I didn't know about Prince for ages or James Brown when I was younger. When I heard all these sounds, it was like I'd already experienced them in church.

Who are your IDOLs?

IDOL magazine is my idol! No, I'm terrible. My idols... Marc Williams who played an instrumental part in my career and has done amazing things for me. Mum has always got to be your idol because my mum found my manager for me. Whenever I need advice, I'm on the phone to my mum. She's a very special woman. If I had to say someone famous, I'd have to say Quincy Jones - the things he has done for music is amazing. There's too many, man! I've got loads. I respect people like Simon Cowell, Richard Branson - amazing entrepreneurs who take their business to the next level. And finally, Ray Charles - as a business man, he did amazing things. ♦

Interview by Holly Rubenstein

Photography by Elliot Morgan

Styling by Theodore Adolph-Regisford

Makeup by Analisa Sarno

Styling Assistants: Carly Floretine, Sara McAlpine, Steven White, Lauren Speakman