



IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHNNY TOMLINSON // PROFOUND SOUND 2020

Olivia: can you tell me a little bit more about what you're doing for Profound Sound? How did the idea formulate?

Johnny: So last year I did a duo with a percussionist, called Kris Wright, one of the things we were playing were these kinda unplanned things, surprising things. Where the music exists but the composition is like controlled by the performer, so last year, it was quite a simple set up but it gave some amazing results. You threw a ping pong ball and you didn't know where it was gonna go, or when that happened.

... This whole thing came from an idea at a theatre company in East London which I'm part of, we do a lot of work with autism, and we build installations and theatrical experiences. I've been there 10 years. We're always looking to refine and see what other things we can explore, and that was an idea that came through that. We did a show at the Barbican in December where we had this wooden box with a wireless receiver in the bottom, so it was basically like a magic box where you drop a ping pong ball into it and it made crazy sounds... so it was really cool. Then that brought us onto the idea of like, well what if we had more and then if we did have more what would it sound like? ... So, with this piece, I've kinda struggled a bit to work out what it actually is...

O: I guess Profound Sound in a way can help you do that, as you're essentially allowed to do anything which is improvised, to do what you wish with a space.

J: I think for me it was more like trying to work out what it is, and then that defines what to make. Cause I think I was coming from a few different places, where people can do stuff, and then it's like well why, that's cool they do that, but then it's like, well how do they do that and why do they do that? And then what does that sound like and how do I do that? I've been in a few different worlds thinking about it...

O: I guess you want purpose for it?

J: Yeah cause otherwise it's just kinda a cool thing, but I want something with a bit more weight. So, we were talking about spaces and went to look at customs house. Then it all fell into place, just the bricks, and the bareness of it made it.

O: It's become a music space, we've had such variation of stuff happening there. It's totally multi-functional.

J: I love the idea of this, the function of a customs house- you've got the big windows there, and the history of a train station which it isn't anymore, it's got this nice permanent transience to it. Its purpose is it be permanent but for things to come and go all the time. Seeing that space definitely focused the idea of it. I've also got containers, couple of big glass brewing things, tins of tea and sweets, glass jars and carafes.

O: Where did you collect this stuff from?

J: Just charity shops man.

O: Did you actively seek out to get those things?

J: Once the Customs House thing was there, there was a problem with the trays and yeah they're cool and they do the job but it's just cause it's what I had. I then went to the charity shops looking for something but didn't know what. And then I thought marbles would be cool... and then in the bottom of my desk, I've got some old coins from all around the world, that are now useless, they work really well. Some with holes in, some with mad pictures on.

... you can drop these coins into the things and they fire different triggers, so overall it's about kinda creating something that is nice to be in, something quite enveloping, something quite containing, but then within that there's way for it to be a bit more nuanced. There's like shorter sounds you get from other reactions, and then I've got sounds which I've collected from around and about. I've collected words, the hustle and bustle from various places around the world. When I travel I generally collect sounds from my iPhone... a minute of walking down a highstreet, or like being in a particular place which has a particular sound. I grab it and texture it as a compositional tool. So it's kinda like nothing but everything at the same time, quite engaging but it's not intrusive, it can feel quite alien but very familiar. If nothing else, it's a fun thing to do.

O: And it's like an experiment for yourself?

J: Yeah I've had it set up at home for a bit, been having a few people play it and seeing what they think. And there's some string, some violins, some cello's and stuff. There was a cello sound and somebody said it sounds like a boat. It's great to see what other people get from it, and I guess that's the idea of it.

O: Because you're doing it from 11-5, its completely drop-in, will you engage with the people that come in?

J: I think both, I think there's something nice about not giving any guidance and seeing what people do, but then obviously I can understand that a bit of instruction can actually be quite freeing. If you know what to do you can really get into it. I'm not really planning either way on that, I'm just going to see how it goes. Planning to get the piano involved that's in customs house too!

O: Going from this then, has what you're wanting to do in your musical career changed recently?

J: Possibly, for a couple of years I've actually been thinking about what I can do that's not in music, do I actually want to be a gardener for example?

O: I really crave doing a physical job at times.

J: I think it's a grass is greener thing, and also I've been in Folkestone 5 years and I don't work here, and for a few years, it was cool as I was travelling a lot more, but now I'm kinda here a bit more... I wanna be *here* a bit more.

O: You feel more at home then?

J: I'm aware of how long I spend on the motorway and the train, and I realised it's not that it's getting me down exactly, but it's definitely making me re-evaluate what I'm doing. I've just started teaching yoga here in Folkestone, for the hotpod group. This has opened up a new thing outside of music, but also deepened my thing within the music as well, I guess cause I work as a musician like jobbing, it's not always about creative endeavours.

... I'm trying to get to the essence of things. I spent a long time trying to make things hard / complicated, I studied jazz at music college. In many ways, the essence, it's kinda hiding behind complexity, if you're doing something incredibly hard, and if you're really stretching yourself, it prevents you in having the time to scrutinise what you're actually doing. There's something quite escapist but in a negative way. In this case, because you're having to do something simple, yet you're having to do it really well, otherwise it's really obvious.

... I think simple things are incredibly 'profound' almost more so. And going back to the piece, I was questioning, is this just bollocks? Is it art for art's sake, is that a good thing or a bad thing in this case. But this is the fine line that you walk all the time, and I think that's why there's a fine line cause I really had to believe in it and understand it, and because it was a simple idea it made it more difficult because I had the time to scrutinise what it was.

O: Does it have to be scrutinised at all do you think?

J: I think for me it does, but I'm not like that in everything, for instance last year, we thought let's just bring ourselves, and we'll do what we do, and I think that's a bit different. Whereas this time, I'm doing something new for myself, and even though it's less perhaps technically difficult, it's much more difficult in other ways. It's something exciting to explore.

O: What's the most important part of it all for you?

J: I like being on stage, everything has pros and cons to it all. I'm going on tour next month, I don't have a passion for programming synths and creating sounds, but I can do it and I love that by doing it, it gets you onto the stage in going to gigs, and having

a nice time. I think that's definitely a thing in the fact that I notice still how much I want to do that, I don't think oh god I've gotta go on tour, I'm always like wicked! But then there's in terms of the self- fulfilment and the nourishment, it's definitely the more local & smaller- the things that I can feel connected to every part of, from the conception to the performance- that's what I get the most from.

O: If you feel grounded from the point of home, everything can fall into place?

J: And yeah music is a funny one, I read this book where this guy was talking about intrinsic and extrinsic values right and the idea is that you have intrinsic values because it's something you love doing, such as swimming, playing football, playing the piano- but you're only doing it because you love doing it. Then there's the extrinsic values which are things you do so you get something else- going to work, putting on an event etc- and so I found that really interesting in coming back to music, and questioning why I do it. The thing with the touring and performing, on paper its wicked, and everyone says its wicked and you've spent so long training as a musician to do it, yet through this, sometimes you forget how wicked it actually is or not.

O: And if you didn't do that tour, you might regret it?

J: Yeah, or you've got to watch someone else do it.

O: I bet there's a lot of FOMO?

J: Massively, and that's a huge problem when other people present themselves to be doing more.

O: So you came to Folkestone 5 years ago?

J: Yeah I was in London for 6 years and then I went away on tour and wasn't renting a place or anything, it was a really intense tour. Came back in 2014, and it was the year all the house prices went nuts in London, and I found myself living in a warehouse in Tottenham without a window, and I was like 30. There was me & loads of other young professionals, and I questioned, why are we all doing this? It was a nice warehouse but I still wanted a window in the bedroom. We're all working 7 days a week and all our money is going towards rent, just why?

... So I put a pin in London and worked out where I could get a place, and came here in 2014 and the weather was nice and straight away I was like I'm coming here...

O: Yeah the move out of London has brought a whole new demographic here. And that's what has helped me not feeling the need to go back, the relationships which I've made here have been so much more accessible.

J: I just moved here by myself and then I only knew one guy who I played football with, and then my mum and dad moved here to retire, so I only knew 3 people at the time. But then you just go to the pub, go to jam sessions, and like within a couple of months, you've got a little group. That's so difficult to do in London, and there came

a point where I asked, is this really what I wanna do? The work can be there, but are there any real connections there?

O: I felt quite anonymous in London.

J: Yeah, that's an important need for people, to be comfortable and happy, and to feel part of something. There is a vibe where you're really working hard but really not quite sure of why or what it's about? That was true for me.

O: Do you think festivals like this are important to the cultural landscape of Folkestone?

J: I think stuff like this and the fringe are genuinely what makes the town stand out to in its size and demographic, and its location. People are doing art for art sake, yet value it as important and they're doing it to a high standard. I think it's important for people to be challenged, I think it's important for people to experience art when its positive, experience art when its negative, and experience it when it's about community.

O: Through the work we do, we always try and be aware of that line too and contain stuff in programmes for anyone to simply come and question something, or to be curious.

J: If you look at places around the world, places with good art scenes, they're places where people are nice & help eachother out.

O: What does 2020 bring for you? Any specific in mind- goals, aspirations?

J: I'm going on tour with Kelis, we're starting rehearsals next week. We got a tour in March and then I've got some cool festivals in the summer. I'm in a new project called Gramn, which is RnB, Hip Hop, and that's really exciting. We're just getting a new booking agent and manager. We've released two singles so far, we're just trying to get a deal for an EP out that we've already made, and that's exciting too because the bulk of the creative work is being done just down the road in my house. Again with that we've got some festivals to do with the live but we've written also just a tonne of music too. So watch this space. There's at least two new EP's released this year.

... And also I'm just trying to have a nice time, and do a bit of swimming in the sea maybe.

