A List

Sam Fender talks Boris Johnson, 'White Privilege' and his idol Bruce Springsteen

The BBC Sound of 2019 talks to Sara Feigin about making it big in America and why he's had death threats from the alt-right

By Sara Feigin • New York • 1 November 2019

Sam Fender - In pictures

10 images

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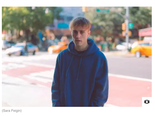
Sam Fender has had a busy year - the North Shields born singer/songwriter won the 2019 Brits Critics' Choice Award and his debut full-length album, Hypersonic Missiles, debuted at number one on the UK charts.

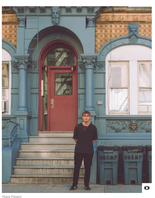
In its first week on sale, his record became the fastest selling vinyl album of 2019. This year has also seen the 25-year-old begin to build a profile in the US, with appearances on The Tonight Show and Late Night With Seth Meyers (his idol Bruce Springsteen is already a fan) and a sell-out show at the Bowery Ballroom.



(Sara Feigin)

I meet him for a walk in Tompkins Square Park and every time he spots something typically New York, whether it's a yellow cab or a fire escape, he comments that New York City is his favorite city in the world - well, after Newcastle. When I comment that the city smells like hot garbage in the summer he says, "That's part of it's charm, mate," with a signature grin.

While his lyrics deal with intense topics, from white privilege to suicide, in person he's cheerful and cracks plenty of jokes.



(Sara Feigin)

You're a big fan of Bruce Springsteen, and his guitarist Steve Van Zandt was in the crowd at your Bowery Show. Did you know he was there?

I invited him, we're buddies. He did a show in Newcastle and I got invited by a friend who was connected to him - it was the most magical moment ever. I just sat and asked him loads of fanboy questions about Bruce. He's absolutely pissed him off.

In past interviews, you've talked about getting recognised, especially in your hometown. Is it a welcome relief to tour in the US and have relative anonymity?

Nobody knows us here, and we're selling out arenas in England. No one bothers us around the park, whereas at home, even in London now, I get stopped all the time - I cannot go anywhere. We just suddenly got massive, which has sent our puny little brains into interstellar levels of euphoria.

(Sara Feigin)

What was the mind-set behind 'White Privilege'? Were you worried about a backlash?

There's hate joints with blonde wigs on top of them running both the most powerful countries in the world. What scares me so much is just that with Boris Johnson and Trump, pretty much everything that comes out of their mouths is a lie. In my songs, I don't want to beat around the bush. I think that a lot of my favorite lyricists don't f***ing shroud things in metaphor.

I just think my favorite artists and writers, their writing is very much a matter of fact. Like Alex Turner, John Cooper Clarke and Bruce Springsteen. That bluntness connects with people, because people don't have to sit and think it out.

Were you surprised by the reaction to 'White Privilege' and did you expect it?

I got five thousand death threats off the alt-right online. Like, "you f***ing race traitor."

The song is about what's going on in the UK, but it's resonating with Americans, too...

The world's in a very, very, very, very worrying place. I want to be a dad but I don't know if that is would be selfish to have kids in this time. Because I still have kids in ten years time, by that point, if we haven't done anything about the climate, according to Greta Thunberg, the climate will be f***ed. And Brexit [is happening], so you can't move through the borders freely.

(Sara Feigin)

Has this song caused more political conversations between you and your fans?

I'm not going to pretend to be politically eloquent, because I'm not. I'm just a kid from the north-east of England. I just wrote some songs about what I thought at the time. Or what my characters thought at the time - a lot of my songs are based on characters that I wrote. So sometimes the opinions are not always mine, they're just opinions.

Have you always written songs in character?

Most of my songs are not about me, they're about a character. 'Hypersonic Missiles' isn't about me, neither is 'Two People.' 'The Borders' is the only one that's kind of remotely personal. It's loosely based on things that happened when I was a kid. Most of it is inspired by things that happened in my life or things that I've seen, but a lot of it is fictional.

(Sara Feigin)

You're recording your next album in New York City at the Electric Lady recording studio. Why did you pick that specific studio?

Well, it's Jimi Hendrix's studio. We did the first record in our studio, which was probably the ten millionth studio built by an artist, and now we're going to go down to test one over.

Your song 'Dead Boys' is about the male suicide epidemic in the UK and you wrote it after a friend of yours took his own life. Was it hard for you to write such a personal song?

I've only just started to figure out how to properly talk about my feelings. For years, I used to just punch walls and break my hands, which wasn't a good thing to do, because now I play guitar for a living. I punched a wall once and struggled to play a gig, and I just thought 'I can't do this anymore. I have to talk about my feelings.'

(Sara Feigin)

Have you had any male fans say that the song helped them open up?

There was a fan who was on his way to kill himself. He was driving his car and he was planning to run his car off the road. I was on BBC 6 Live talking to Nihal, and I'd spoken to him about 'Dead Boys,' and how suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK.

The guy coincidentally was listening to the radio show and pulled his car over and cried for three hours. Then he turned around and went back home to his wife and said, 'I need help. I need to get help.' Just talking about suicide and having a guy hear people talking about it on the radio, that was enough to be the catalyst that changed his life.

He sent us an email six months after the interview, saying, 'That saved my life.' Then he came to the gig and I met him. Nihal did an interview with the three of us.

(Sara Feigin)

What did it feel like to hear his story and know you and your music helped him in such an intense way?

I'm never going to overestimate the clout of my job. I'm not a therapist or a doctor. Singers/songwriters are primarily entertainers. We're here to entertain people, make people's day a little bit better, be the song at your wedding, or be the song at your funeral, be the song at your birthday party - that's all we do. The real heroes are the doctors, nurses, paramedics and the police.

But sometimes a song connects with somebody in a way that it actually belters their mental health, which is just insane. So that was probably one of the most humbling experiences of my life. For just one moment, my job carried a little bit more weight and had a bit more clout. It's quite terrifying, because it made me realise, 'Oh, I've got a bit of a responsibility here.'

Sam Fender

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