

Interview with Jon Austin

Interview by Barnaby Weir

Why don't you smoke?

I don't smoke because I'm the vocalist in a band and I think it really damages your vocal chords, and I guess I really noticed when they passed that law about no more smoking in bars. I woke up and I could breathe really easy and my contacts weren't damaged, and I didn't stink. So all those reasons are reasons why I don't smoke to begin with.

Do you think the attitude towards smoking has changed over the last decade?

I actually really think that it has, I think we've grown more conscious about our health but I still walk down the streets and I see younger kids smoking, there seems to be less awareness about the side effects of smoking.

How do you think the attitude has changed?

I guess media has played a big role in normalising it. I guess through the media smoking has become a reality, it's through the Internet, it's almost global peer pressure. Kids see their heroes on the silver screen puffing away and I guess it makes it a lot more accessible and acceptable. You can get them from any diary and a lot of places don't really have a lot of qualms in giving younger people cigarettes. Cigarettes have become a lot more accessible to younger and younger kids.

What is your first memory of smoking?

I used to have an uncle that was quite a heavy smoker and to be honest, back in the day, I used to think he was really cool, he was the only one in the family who smoked and it was almost a bit of a status thing, the dark horse of the family. I thought he was really cool but as I grew older and I saw that his fingernails were yellow and his breath always stunk and his clothes always smelt bad, and he couldn't run or anything. I started having more and more trouble thinking about what I thought was cool about it in the first place.

Is there anything in particular that you remember about him smoking?

It was more having to give the obligatory hugs and everything and him telling you stories and getting close and you'd just smell it on his clothes and it wasn't a pleasant smell at all, it was like a really musty horrible smell. Especially for a kid who is used to fresh air and everything, and then to have to smell that from an early age, you could tell that it wasn't a very healthy smell.

Did you try smoking when you were younger?

To be honest I caved to the peer pressure. I tried it a few times in school but I found that it just wasn't for me. I didn't understand what the benefits were and it's an expensive habit to have. And again the older kids at school that were doing it just looked unhealthy and their hair stunk and they'd never have any money in their pockets and I just found myself unable to think of any benefits of doing it. You are pretty much just paying for lung cancer and that really put me off. I think from a smoker's point of view peer pressure does play a big part but all of those reasons are very superficial and I guess again you are going to have to ask yourself, 'Do you want to be affiliated with people that are effectively getting you to hurt yourself just to be a part of their group?'

Do you think smoking is still seen as cool?

I think smoking for a lot of people is definitely seen as a status thing rather than an actual enjoyment thing. I think a lot of kids don't smoke for them, they smoke for other people, and it was the same for me. I was smoking for someone else, for my peers and for the people that I looked up to because they did it. If you take a step back and look at it, to see who you are actually smoking for, it gets old pretty fast.

When did you decide that smoking wasn't for you?

I started getting quite heavily into music and also my eyes started to deteriorate and I had to wear contacts. Those two factors together, I mean smoke just really dried out my contacts and made them feel really horrible and grainy, as well as the fact that I found that with singing I'd wake up in the morning and have a raspy voice and it wasn't conducive to what I really wanted to do in life. So I guess I made a conscious decision that if I was going to put my best foot forward in life then smoking wasn't going to be a part of it.

What would you say to a teenager who's in that position and may start smoking?

I'd say largely the same thing that I said before, take a step back and see who you are actually smoking for and weigh up the benefits, I think you'll come to the conclusion that there aren't really any benefits from smoking. And I think that any non-smoker will agree with me that kissing a smoker isn't a pleasant experience. It's really hard to see any pros when it comes to cigarettes.

What do you think is the worst thing about smoking?

Aside from the obvious paying for death, kissing smokers is one of the most horrible things in the world, knowing those lips have been wrapped around a cigarette. It's really disgusting.

How do you think smoking affects your ability to perform?

I guess the time that it was most noticeable was the first show we played once they prohibited smoking in bars. I woke up and my clothes didn't smell, my hair didn't stink,

my contacts felt fine and weren't all dried out and my voice felt great, it didn't feel like I had swallowed a bucket full of sand, it was great. It is so damaging as an entertainer to play in smoky bars. It just decreases your shelf life as an artist.

What would be your key message about smoking?

In my experience as a performer and growing up in New Zealand I haven't seen a single benefit of smoking, all it does really is damage the people around you and yourself. I guess getting ahead in life depends on you being the best you can be and smoking really doesn't play a part in that.