

From student to rock star: the rise of a hot, young singing sensation

After cutting a deal with his dad that he'd return to university if his band didn't take off, Jon Austin left his AUT degree and headed out into the big, wide world. One year on DANIEL TREVARTHEN talks to the 48May singer about his success and where he is heading.



48MAY: Jon Austin, Jarrod Brown, Captain Hook and Shannon Brown.

"She cracked me in the face. It was a real good right — a solid right. So in revenge I immortalised her in song."

Vocalist Jon Austin is talking about the story behind 48May's hit song *Fightback*, recent winner of the best indie music video award on Juice TV.

Leaning back in his chair, he's disarmingly relaxed and matter-of-fact about the incident. Clean-cut with jet-black hair, he definitely looks like a lover not a fighter. Although his square jaw does make him look like he could take a punch.

"I like the fact that I can share experiences and viewpoints, say things that normally I wouldn't be able to say, and say them in a way that everyone gets to sing along."

The 21-year-old is honest enough to admit that he was girl-bashed and brazen enough to use it as fuel.

Discretion might be the better part of valour, but revenge is a sweet dish indeed. *Fightback* became a national hit on music TV and radio with its confessional lyrics, sing-along-loudly chorus and '80s metal guitar lead.

48May's producer Greg Haver has worked with Catatonia, the Manic Street Preachers and the Lost Prophets.

The band were fortunate to have him polish the single after he was asked to pick two songs to work on from a round of New Zealand On Air new recording artist grants.

"It was a catchy track and everything, but [Haver] turned it into a polished piece of work."

"He has a real ear for hearing subtle nuances and knowing how to best exploit your strengths and cover up the weak sides of the track."

Haver has also agreed to produce 48May's debut album, which they plan to record this year.

But the man responsible for bringing the best out of Austin has been his dad, John Ho.

Jon now uses the English version of his rather unfortunate family name. It's an understandable decision for someone entering the public eye.

He chuckles self-effacingly as he admits his father is the reason he's in a band.

"The inspiration to be in a band comes from my dad. He would always pull out his band photos when I was young, so now it's reversed. I can show him photos of me and he lives his rock star dreams through me."

The comment is as Weet-Bix kid as they come, but he's so damn earnest it's hard to doubt him.

When Austin said he wanted to leave university to concentrate on music, his dad wasn't too pleased. So Austin made a deal that if music didn't start to pan out within a year he would return to university.

With music looking a success so far, Jon's dad is now 48May's biggest fan. He says he listens to their demo CD every day on the way to work. John Ho senior has no hesitation in shamelessly plugging the band.

"They're really good. If you ever get the chance, you should definitely go

see them."

He describes Jon's first song, at age 11, as a classical opera-style song with a guitar part.

"It was very good. For a boy of 11 to come up with the music and the chords was amazing."

"I'm trying to convince him to record it some day."

Austin left university in his second year of AUT's Bachelor of Communication Studies degree after receiving the NZ On Air grant.

He moved down to Raglan to start jamming with the band, a decision he describes as "balls on the line".

It's hard to tell if he's talking about the fact he's actually going to live near Hamilton or the process of leaving university. Gutsy move either way.

"The whole process has been fairly impulsive, but it's worked out."

His communications degree experience has helped his band in ways he hadn't considered. He's thankful for unexpectedly useful skills he's picked up.

"When I was at university, I always thought to myself how this knowledge would never come in handy. But it has — in the way of writing proposals and just in the day-to-day running of the band."

Fond memories of playing in Rockquest bands sparked 48May's formation. Austin knew guitarist Captain Hook from high school. And Hook already knew bassist and drum-

mer brothers, Shannon and Jared, who have played together for years.

"It's going to sound really cliché but we talked about playing together back in the day in the Rockquests and how fun it was."

"We said, 'Why don't we start a band like that again? Why don't we start up a high school band and just not be in high school?'"

His influences reflect his fondness for nostalgia and the summertime sounds of today's pop punk.

Def Leppard, Blink 182 and Sum 41 would be 48May's ultimate support slot. He also name checks Kiss, the Foo Fighters and the Starting Line.

"Our friends in Stereogram just opened for those three bands, Sum 41, Blink 182 and Def Leppard."

It's obvious this dream isn't far from his mind now. He's got a spark in his eye.

It's hard not to feel like the show promoter as he does a quick sell-job on how badly he wants this gig.

"I would love to be those guys now. I would do anything. I'd bring them coffee. Anything," he says in a begging tone.

A key to success has been experience. Jon's bandmates are well-known in the New Zealand music scene. Bassist Shannon once played in Tadpole. Shannon and his brother, drummer Jared also played in Mama Said. Guitarist Captain Hook played in a band called One Man Riot.

Although this is a band of obvious talent, Jon is a modest kid. He says he hopes his band will someday be half as good as touring partners Poodlefaker, Goodnight Nurse and All Left Out.

"There are bands out there that are 100 times better than us, but they haven't had the opportunity - they haven't had the good fortune of having people who have been there and done that."

A textbook answer, but he's genuinely incredulous about the whole thing.

One of those opportunities was the *Fightback* tour.

Radio station The Edge jumped on board with promotion, giving the tour credibility and a higher profile.

"When we finished I got tour withdrawal. As soon as we finished I just wanted to hit the road again."

He's very enthusiastic. Austin is kind of a frat boy, but not.

He loves the blokey experience of being out on the road with the excessive drinking and partying.

"It just feels like boys being boys out on the road."

It's an interesting combination.

He's a sensitive songwriter type, but also something of a lad.

The other members were already seasoned campaigners when it came to touring, but reports have it that Austin always has the stamina for after parties.

Despite all this experience in the band, Austin is also determined to pull his weight musically.

Bassist Shannon Brown says although Austin is relatively inexperienced, he comes up with a lot of the musical ideas used by the band.

It's not a surprise to hear that he's a real positive influence.

"Jon being quite green and naive is actually really good for the band. He is really down-to-earth and completely realistic about who he is," says Brown.

He's sounding like a bit of a golden boy, so the hunt for dirt begins.

Shannon gives the literal answer. "His personal hygiene is pretty sub-standard," he laughs.

Looking at the forum on 48May's website, there's a noticeably large number of teenage girls posting messages.

The boy band question must be asked. It's posed diplomatically, citing examples of Rubicon and Zed.

He cuts to the chase and, admirably, he isn't offended.

"You mean that whole boy band thing? If you were to put some bands into a blender or have a big car crash, [48 May] would be a mix between Def Leppard, Sum 41 and 'NSync."

"I would love to say we're more hardcore than that, but we're not."

Look at their website, and their bios list their favourite artists as Hanson, 'NSync, Boyzone and Britney Spears. If you can't laugh at yourself, when can you laugh?

"With the harmonies and the melodies we do, I would be a liar if I said it wasn't boy band-esque," he deadpans.

But unlike boy bands, 48May write their songs themselves. Duties are shared.

"We all write the lyrics, because we all write the same kind of lyrics about how absolutely shit we are with girls."

The band has also received NZ On Air funding for next single *Come Back Down*, and the song doesn't stray far from the formula.

"It's about girls that can't take a hint."

