

# Back to reality

ANNE GIACOMANTONIO spoke to Matt Willis about a journey that's taken him all the way to the jungle

**A**t only 24, Matt Willis has already worked his way into the hearts and ears of the UK's teenage population with Busted, and gone on to beat Myleene Klass and Jason Donovan to the coveted title of King of the Jungle in television show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* How does he do it? Not even he knows...

"In some ways – and this will sound really odd to a lot of people, especially people who know me – when I was very young I was quite shy," he reveals. "I used this flamboyant

silliness to punch through the shyness, then suddenly I wasn't shy after all."

Apparently not, for Willis was aware from very early on than he wanted to take to the stage. "My brother was in a band – he played guitar and I looked up to him. He was actually a bit of a nerd, but at the time he was into Nirvana, Red Hot Chili Peppers and stuff like that, so he got me into it young."

The spotlight started to turn on Willis when a contact got him an audition at the Sylvia Young Theatre School. "I went along and ended up getting a scholarship, which was a huge amount of money so you can't really back out – nothing like that happened to anybody else I knew." He was in good company too, with the likes of the All Saints Appleton sisters, Emma Bunton, Billie Piper and Amy Winehouse having been educated at the prestigious institution over the years.

"I was there for my last two years of school. Everyone thinks of you as someone who is more interested in your teeth and hair than schoolwork. We did schoolwork from Monday to Wednesday but it was full on. It was so much harder than being at normal school because you had to fit five days work into only three days.

"I went to that school having no interest in any academic subject whatsoever. However, there was an English teacher called Mr MacIntyre. All of a sudden I related to somebody and he taught me in a way that wasn't condescending. I found creative writing very interesting and he made it all seem important, which was quite a massive thing for me."

'When I was very young I was actually quite shy'

Willis also met James Bourne – fellow member of Busted – at the theatre school, and although he claims they never "hung out together," the band must have had some chemistry, going on to achieve eight top three hits, including four number one hits. Did Willis enjoy the ride? "You are rolled up in that whole world and whisked away by it. Everyone around you is trying to keep your feet on the floor, which is really annoying."

Busted broke up in 2005, with Willis moving on to a solo career which, despite producing some hits, never really got off the ground. However, Willis's adventure continued. "I had never really watched *I'm a Celebrity...* before I went in it. It was a decision that I found very hard because I didn't want to be one of these people that goes on a reality TV show."

Although he is now unavoidably one of those people, it seems to have worked out OK. On his return to the UK he managed to score gigs presenting *Backstage at the Brits* with Lauren Laverne, as well as MTV's *Spanking New Music Tour 2007*. Co-presenting with a seasoned pro such as Laverne wasn't all good news, however. "I was like, thanks for getting a really good person to make me look terrible!

"[At the Brits] we were standing on the red carpet when Lilly Allen had arrived. They put me in front of a camera with a card of questions with her and [her father] Keith Allen. A presenter would be able to just do the interview, whereas I was a complete child. I realised the presenting lark wasn't as easy as I thought it was! It was good training though."

By the time you read this, you'll be able to judge for yourself if that training has paid off: Willis will have been back in the jungle presenting *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here Now!* this time, accompanied on ITV2 by his fiancé, Emma Griffiths. "I can't wait to do the show. It's a new step for me, so we'll see. I don't really know what will happen after that. It's a weird thing for me to not know because normally my life is planned out." The plan seems to be working so far.

