

# Alive & Kicking

360's hit 2011 album 'Falling & Flying' saw the Melbourne MC ascend to the upper tiers of fame and fortune – and then come crashing back to Earth thanks to a debilitating disease and spiralling drug addiction.

**By James Jennings**

**W**HEN MATT COLWELL CASUALLY ENTERS A LOUNGE AREA IN THE QT Sydney, a boutique hotel where Art Deco and contemporary design collides in hipster-pleasing fashion, heads turn. Standing 6'4", short hair shaped perfectly and neck and hand tattoos peeking out from a slim-fit bluish-grey Jack London suit, he looks every inch the rock star. Whether or not the there-to-be-seen hotel patrons seated in plush vintage chairs recognise him as 360 – the ARIA Award-winning rapper behind 2011's double platinum album *Falling & Flying* who's more often than not attired in a baseball cap and T-shirt – is questionable. They eye him up regardless: he carries

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL BOUD**



the cool and swagger of Someone Important. Despite being legally blind in his right eye and the left slowly deteriorating due to the degenerative eye disease Keratoconus, Colwell has become attuned to feeling the looks, hearing the whispers.

He places his tall frame in a leather lounge chair and tosses a fresh pack of cigarettes on a black coffee table, explaining – with genuine confusion – how on a recent trip to the U.S. random strangers asked to have their photo taken with him, despite having no clue who he was. “They were like, ‘You look cool, you look famous!’ I asked my manager what the deal was, and she reckoned it was something about the presence I gave off.” Although now comfortable with the attention, Colwell admits that for a time it made him “extremely anxious – especially once shit got a bit out of control.”

As he tells it, “shit got a bit out of control” after the astonishing success of “Boys Like You” (featuring singer Gossling), the quadruple platinum-selling fourth single from *Falling & Flying* that landed at number eight on Triple J’s 2011 Hottest 100. “It changed everything,” he states emphatically. The rapper suddenly found himself in the odd and overwhelming predicament of being mobbed in the street – a far cry from his pre-fame life where others would “cross the road if they saw me coming.”

“We did signings around the country where the riot police were called because kids were smashing up shop windows ‘cause not everyone could get in,” Colwell says, still gobsmacked. “We’d get in the car and people would be chasing us, crying. It was like, ‘What the fuck is going on?’”

The rabid attention pushed Colwell into a crippling state of paranoia: fans recording footage on their camera phones began to follow him home, and nights out with friends soon became an endurance test of impromptu performances from aspiring rappers. “Guys would always try and rap to me while I was taking a piss,” smirks Colwell. “I don’t know any other profession where people do that. Do guys who cut grass go and do it in front of someone else who cuts grass? It’s funny. Rappers always feel like they have to prove themselves.”

It wasn’t just the wannabe MCs behaving inappropriately: a number of male fans started offering Colwell the opportunity to have sex with their girlfriends (“Can you fuck my missus? You’re on her list, she’d love it”), and numerous groupies would hit on the rapper even when his then girlfriend was standing right by his side. “Girls would come up and try and kiss me, and I’d say, ‘Get off.’ Then they’d yell ‘Fuck you!’ and go

*Senior writer JAMES JENNINGS wrote about Tune-Yards in RS 752.*

completely crazy at me. Real psycho shit.” Colwell soon became a recluse, rarely leaving his home.

Long before the hordes of screaming fans and lascivious offers, Colwell was an average kid growing up in the culturally diverse Melbourne suburb of Ringwood (“It has some real shithole parts, but we were in the nice part,” he clarifies). Son to an accountant father and stay-at-home mother (his sole brother, Dave, is two years his senior), he enjoyed school but was, by his own admission, not an ideal student (“All I’d do was write raps and mess with teachers”).

Luther College, a private school Colwell says was full of “jocks” who’d constantly harass him for being a rapper, asked Colwell to leave in Year 9; a later stint at Box Hill Senior Secondary College saw him leave in Year 12. The period was marked with a succession of odd jobs: mowing lawns; a carpentry apprenticeship; delivery driving for Thai restaurants. “I fuckin’ hated all of it,” says Colwell. “My Dad did a job he hated all his life to provide for his family, which I respect, but it made

Song”, featuring 360, placed number seven in the 2008 Hottest 100.

Colwell’s debut album *What You See is What You Get* landed in 2008, an effort that gained him notice but not a particularly healthy bank account. Living in his parents’ basement and on his “fourth or fifth” year of Centrelink benefits, a sustainable career in music seemed increasingly unlikely: “I was just pleading with my parents saying, ‘Just give me a few years and I guarantee I’ll be the biggest rapper in the country.’”

Largely recorded in 2010, follow-up LP *Falling & Flying* was to be Colwell’s last ditch grab for success; an album he’d painstakingly poured his heart and soul into. He almost didn’t live to see its release.

On July 18th 2010, Colwell – who’d turned 24 six days prior – boarded a train to the Sydney suburb of Minto to meet hip-hop buddies Bliss N Eso at a go-kart track to celebrate his birthday. Too drunk to drive after downing an entire bottle of Bacardi en route, he sat in the child passenger seat of a go-kart driven by Eso’s girl-

“Whatever was there, I’d take it. I’d lock myself in the house and just go on benders. I trashed my body pretty hard.”

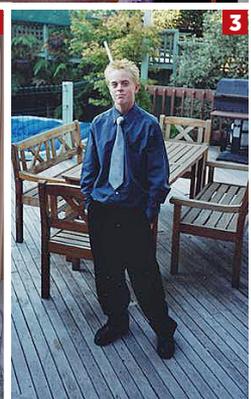
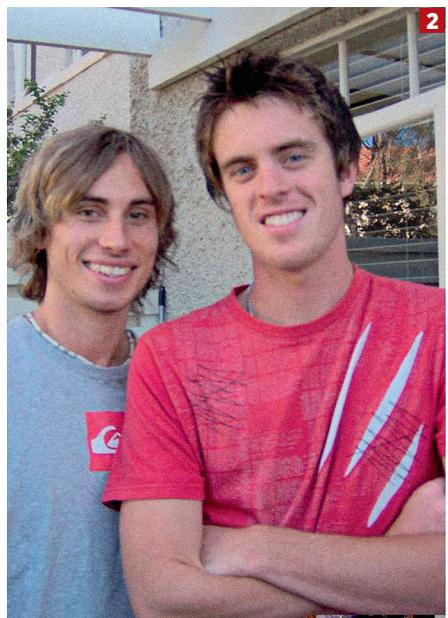
him miserable. I couldn’t follow in those footsteps and do something I loathed for money.”

After the Keratoconus scuppered plans for a basketball career (“It fuckin’ crushed me,” Colwell says ruefully), an obsession with rap – sparked after hearing 1998 hit “Ghetto Supastar (That is What You Are)” by ex-Fugee Pras – took a firmer hold. It was a passion shared by Colwell’s basketball teammate Perry Chapman, later to be known to the wider world by his stage name Pez. The 16-year-olds became fast friends (“We both copped a lot of shit for rapping”), the pair honing their skills by driving around and freestyling about various topics: other cars, other drivers, the suburb they were in.

Colwell soon entered his first underage rap battle (he placed second), and he and Chapman spent the following years engaging in “hundreds” of rap battles and freestyle sessions. “By the time we were 19 we thought we were gonna be the biggest things ever,” Colwell says with a smile. “Pez taught me to believe in myself. He was the reason I stopped and said, ‘Fuck working, let’s just do the music thing and go for it.’” Three years later Pez’s hit “The Festival

friend, who moments later misjudged a corner and crashed into a fence. The mock kids’ steering wheel placed near Colwell’s abdomen instantaneously lacerated his pancreas and tore open both an artery and his scrotum. Paramedics promptly arrived (“They said I was about an hour away from dying if they didn’t get to me,” he says grimly); emergency surgery to stop internal bleeding and a week in intensive care followed. The album release, understandably, was pushed back to 2011. “We made a few new songs that ultimately made the album better,” Colwell says, his tattooed finger anxiously tapping on his cigarette packet. “You’ve gotta try and find a positive in all negative situations.”

Outside in a grim alley pockmarked with dirty rainwater, Colwell sparks up a cigarette and takes a deep drag – the last remnant of a vice-heavy lifestyle that has seen him recently become a junkie of the gym variety. “These days I go to bed at 10pm, get up at 7am and feel fuckin’ awesome,” he enthuses. His current routine includes one-and-a-half hour weight training sessions first thing in the morning, six days a week (“It makes you feel great – you get that natural high”), supplemented



### From Kid to Rap Superstar

**(1)** 360 onstage at Groovin' the Moo in Maitland, 2012. **(2)** With Pez in 2007, a year before Pez's "The Festival Song" breakthrough. **(3)** At home in Ringwood ("we were in the nice part") and **(4)** with his parents. "All I'd do was write raps and mess with teachers," says Colwell of his school days.

by protein powders and eating five small meals a day. He calls it his "latest obsession", quick to cop to having an addictive personality. "I didn't think I did, but I do. If I do something, I go fuckin' hard at it. Right now it's the gym and music . . . that hasn't always been the case."

**T**WELVE MONTHS AGO, COLWELL was more likely to be getting home rather than getting up at 7am. Usually he'd wake up hungover in the afternoon, "drink out of a bottle straight away" then continue on to "smoke weed all day, and whoever wants to party, let's do it". Colwell was, he admits, "on everything - whatever there was, I'd take it. I'd lock myself in the house and have people over and just go on benders. I trashed my body pretty hard."

Colwell says the substance abuse partly began as a way to emulate music idols like Anthony Kiedis, Slash and Mötley Crüe. "I'd read all their autobiographies and think, 'Fuckin' hell, I can't wait to try all that shit!' So when I had all this money I started partying all the time, but then it got to a dark stage where it became an escape. I was also trying to block out what was going on with my vision - I hadn't come to terms with the fact I might be going blind." Although Colwell's already undergone a cornea transplant on his right eye, he's awaiting another. "My vision's getting worse," he sighs. "Right now it's up in the air how it all goes."

The excessive lifestyle proved costly thanks to Colwell's willingness to shout all and sundry, including hangers-on who were more than happy to take advantage

of his generosity. "The amount of money I've spent on partying is fucking mental," he sighs. Colwell balks when asked to name a specific figure, concerned he'll appear boastful. "I will say though that all the money I made on the 2013 Big Day Out tour went on drugs. But that's shouting a lot of people - if it was all me I'd be dead." He also stayed awake for the entire week of the tour: "I was a fuckin' mess, having to take drugs to get through the shows. But I'd get offstage and be buzzing and want to go on another bender. It was a vicious cycle."

Rapidly declining health (he's currently 87 kg; back then 67 kg) and a concerned (now ex) girlfriend finally convinced Colwell it was time to get clean. "I was hiding it pretty well from everyone and your mind is such a manipulative little cunt, because

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOSH GROOM; COURTESY EMI AUSTRALIA, 3

it makes you feel like, 'Nah, you'll be fine, don't bring others into this.' When my ex found out I'd been lying to her about all the drugs I was doing, it really crushed her. Then I was like, 'Fuckin' hell, what am I doing?' I knew I had to stop."

In October 2013, Colwell contacted his manager, Rae Harvey, and asked if he could stay with her to detox. After one final bender ("I arrived at Rae's place off my face") Colwell began the arduous process of getting clean. "I went through withdrawals for about a month, which was so full on," he says gravely. "I've detoxed by myself a few times before, but it wasn't so bad. This time I was detoxing off everything. You have moments where you're just shaking and you'd do anything to not feel that way. It got to the point where I thought I'd rather kill myself than go through it. It was intense . . . I don't wish that on anyone."

Harvey, Colwell's manager since September 2011, had him stay with her at her home for four weeks. "It was a good place for him to come, because I live in the Dandenong Ranges so it's hard to go anywhere," she says. "We did lots of nature walks and we went and adopted his dog Pepper, who he loves so much. He's just a different person now - focused and motivated and happy. It's wonderful."

SIX WEEKS LATER AND the QT Sydney has been replaced by a near-empty Surry Hills sports pub, and Colwell's formal attire exchanged for the hip-hop uniform of backwards baseball cap, baggy T-shirt, jeans, Chuck Taylors and a chunky gold chain and watch. Back from a trip to Europe and the U.S. to meet record labels and do a spot of recording (one session with Aalias, coproducer on Eminem track "The Monster"), Colwell's sharing his sweet-potato fries ("They're fuckin' delicious, hey") and proudly showing off pictures on his phone of the luxurious three-storey, four-bedroom Melbourne house that he's just moved in to ("My parents have seen it and they're like, 'Wow, he did what he predicted he'd do.' They're crazy proud.") As with our first encounter, he's affable, engaging company, honest and open to a fault - a trait he admits has seen others try to "rinse" him for his money, but also the thing that makes his music so striking.

With songs that often tackle sensitive topics like drug addiction and depression, Colwell is a firm believer that personal experience always informs his best material. "If it's about me I'll always be open, I don't care, but if it involves others I have to get their permission first," he says. "Early Warning", a track on new LP *Utopia*, specifically addresses the ongoing drug prob-

lem faced by Colwell's older brother - a topic he's reluctant to embellish too much upon out of respect for his brother's need for privacy ("He's a good dude though, and doing well"). "I love artists who pour their heart out," he continues. "When you make honest music, that's the best music. Even if it's pop - if it's from the heart and it gets big, then that's the reason why - there's something soulful behind it."

Tucking into a sizable chicken parmigiana and sipping on a Coke, Colwell - 28 this month - is today clear-headed and positive, his two-years-in-the-making third album, *Utopia*, a fortnight away from release. It comes as a surprise when the upbeat MC reveals that negativity aimed at him from former fans - many who've labelled him a "sell-out" - was a major influence on the new LP. "I wanted to prove myself as a rapper again - to show I could make massive pop hits, but also that I could rap my arse off." Colwell fires up when pressed on the notion of "selling out". "If I was just doing these songs for money and I didn't like them, I couldn't

to something, that shit sticks with you. It's a voice in your head, a little demon you need to keep caged," he says between long drags. "Weird things can trigger it."

As Colwell reveals his grand plans for the future - signing artists to the label he started with Pez, Forthwrite Records; starting a clothing line; commencing work on album four and a possible LP with *Utopia* guest and close friend Daniel Johns ("We relate so well because he blew up at a very young age and also got that fame where he was getting followed around") - a shabbily dressed, wild-eyed young man carrying a bottle of orange juice and a half-broken phone approaches and slurs out a request for a cigarette. Colwell doesn't flinch. He hands over two.

The interloper, unsteady on his feet, asks for a light, then eyes Colwell for several seconds beyond comfortable. "Wait a minute - do you rap?"

Colwell nods.

"360! Fucking hell, man. Can I get a photo with you?" Colwell happily obliges as the young man admits he's on metha-

"It got to the point where I thought I'd rather kill myself than go through detox. I don't wish that on anyone."

get up there and deliver them passionately to a crowd," he reasons. "The people who call me a sell-out are probably working nine-to-five jobs they fuckin' hate, so does that make them a sell-out because they don't like what they're doing and they're doing it for the money? It's stupid."

Although the rigours of an album release and a national tour in September loom, Colwell is confident that destructive old habits won't be coming along for the ride this time. "I definitely feel better equipped to deal with fame now, and there's no alcohol on the tour rider. The Eminem support I did last February is the first tour I've done sober - that was scary at first, but I got over it pretty quickly." He grabs his cigarette packet. "I'm just focused on music now; it's the most important thing to me. To do that I've gotta stay fit and healthy. Plus 27 is the year all the fuckin' rock stars die! I don't wanna do that."

Outside on an unseasonably warm autumn day in May, Colwell lights up a cigarette as a blend of inner-city hipsters and seasoned junkies parade up and down Crown St. "One thing a lot of people don't realise is that once you've been addicted

done and suffering from drug psychosis. Colwell is unfazed.

"What's your view on going a bit overboard with drugs? I've heard about your battles and shit," asks the fan. "It's hard, hey."

"It's definitely hard!" Colwell replies emphatically. "But it gets to a point where you've gotta stop just to survive. Go to rehab, man, it's what I did. You can do it." The young man smiles, shakes hands and thanks "fuckin' 360!" for his time.

Colwell watches him amble off into the distance. "I'm sure that guy has had a tough, tough life," he finally says. "Addiction is something that'll probably be with him forever, which is a shame. Rehab can be hell too, but you do come out of it and think, 'Fuck . . . I can do anything now.'"

Just then another fan rapidly crosses the road and makes a beeline for Colwell - a teenage girl in a worn, dirty tracksuit, also high. She holds out a notebook and requests an autograph. "I listen to 360 in the park most nights," she adds proudly. "Oh yeah? Awesome, you're a legend," says Colwell. He scribbles out a message for her that's difficult to make out, save for the final sign-off: "Stay positive." ☺



**DRESSED TO KILL**  
Matthew Colwell at  
the Sterling Barber  
Shop, Surry Hills,  
Monday 14 April