



Entrepreneur,
graphic designer
and photographer
Zak Walters

Picture:
SARAH LUCY BROWN

From growing up in East Anglia, to following Ed Sheeran on tour - Zak is one of the UK's most prolific creatives, who has plans for world domination. Danielle Lett finds out more

ZAK WALTERS: *One of the world's most recognisable photographers*

Very few of us are fortunate enough to be able to turn our passions into a full-time career.

However, that's certainly not the case for Zak Walters.

Graphic designer, photographer, and entrepreneur, Zak could be described as a master of trades.

He has spent his life honing his creative skills, which in turn has enabled him to travel the globe and go on to become one of the world's most recognised photographers and graphic designers.

You'll no doubt have spotted his work, as Zak happens to be Ed Sheeran's personal touring photographer, and he's also designed the album artwork for the singer-songwriter's latest release, =.

And with his latest venture, Vinca Wine, already flourishing despite being only a year in the making - there are big plans for world domination.

But how did he get his big break?

East Anglian through and through, Zak was born in Norwich, and shortly after made the move across the border and settled in the Suffolk village of Laxfield where he spent his childhood.

He attended Thomas Mills High School, studying at Suffolk New College and then Falmouth University, where he obtained a degree in graphic design.

"I used to have a 35mm film camera that I'd take on trips with me when I was 18, and when I did my art foundation degree at Suffolk New College, I began experimenting more with photography. One of my modules was to create a project within Ipswich, and I concentrated on graffiti within the town. I'd take loads of shots before taking them back to the lab and developing them," he explains.

"When I went to university, I always had a camera on me, capturing parties and holidays - but I never thought I'd end up doing it professionally."

Upon completing his studies and graduating, Zak soon made a name for himself in the design world and worked as a designer at a London-based creative agency for four years before transferring over to their New York office.

It was during his time in the Big Apple that he met up with a former schoolfriend from his days at Thomas Mills High School who happened to offer him the chance of a lifetime.

"Ed Sheeran's tour came through when I living in New York, and we hadn't seen each other in a while, so we met up and got chatting. He said he was looking for a photographer to go on tour with him, and he wanted someone he knew and trusted, and asked if I'd be interested."

After mulling over it, Zak decided to take the plunge and handed in his notice.

Within two weeks, he was on his way to Australia to follow Ed on his Divide Tour.

"By that point, I'd had very minimal experience with digital cameras, so I before I left, I asked a lot of my network for advice on what camera to buy and what else I'd need. It honestly didn't feel real until I was actually there," he says.

"I'd been doing what was essentially a nine-to-five job, so it was quite a departure for me. And besides living in America, I'd never been outside of Europe, so to go on the road with one of my best friends and see the world was incredible."

For two and a half years Zak travelled alongside Ed, snapping shot after shot, night after night, in some of the world's biggest and most iconic venues.

"I started off on the Australian and New Zealand leg of the tour before going to Asia, and it was honestly a dream come true. I saw new places and met new people, and I got to be creative while doing it.

"And the feeling of shooting live music is the best because you're soaking up the energy of the stadium. There's 60,000 people all looking at Ed and singing along, and you're capturing that moment and telling a story every night."

But what is it like, not just travelling the world with one of your best friends, but undoubtedly the world's biggest pop star?

"Ed was always one of those guys in school who had a glint in his eye. He had this raw talent, and we always joked he would make it. I actually think he won 'most likely to become famous' at the year 11 prom awards."

"But seeing him develop and grow into this massive success has been such proud moment for me as a friend. No one imagined he'd get this big, but to me he's still the exact same dude I went to school with. Every time I see him, it's like nothing's changed. We'll go for food, or grab some pints down the local pub, and we'll chat about what we've been up to. I don't see him as Ed Sheeran, I just see him as my mate."

Alongside snapping shots of Ed, Zak has also photographed the likes of Lewis Capaldi, Anne-Marie, Snow Patrol, Zara Larson, James Bay, and One Ok Rock.

"It's an amazing job to have, following all of these hugely successful and talented people around the world. I was on the road with Lewis Capaldi for nearly a year, and that job was really important to me as I wanted to prove myself."

Over the years, Zak has finessed the skill of being a touring photographer, and it's his eye for capturing the moment that has allowed him to add such a roster of top artists to his portfolio.

"Taking photos is half the job - the other half is getting on with people, and them getting on

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with you. You need to know when, and when not, to point a camera in someone's face. Being able to read the person is crucial in such an intimate job, and I feel I've done that well with Ed and Lewis especially."

Living a life most of us can only dream of, Zak was mastering his craft and flying high.

But just a few months into 2020, and everything was abruptly put on hold.

The world went into lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic - and the curtain came crashing down on the live music and events sector.

But a creative at his core, Zak couldn't sit on his hands and do nothing.

So he began his next design project - which would end up becoming his biggest yet.

"When Ed and I were on tour, we briefly chatted about the album artwork for what was to become his fifth album. And with my design background and eye for photography, we thought it would be great to create something harmonious that used both of those talents.

"Eventually, lockdown hit, and I was meant to be on tour with Lewis Capaldi but that was obviously pulled. I went from having plans of being on the road for eight months, to being at home with not much work coming up, so I started working on the album artwork and overall branding."

Zak began with some sketches, and it was when Ed sent over some tracks that everything started to cohesively come together.

"Ed had his firstborn, and we settled on this idea surrounding new beginnings, and we talked about how butterflies symbolise a new birth and new life. And it also related back to how people were feeling - locked away during the pandemic, wanting to be free, and we just kept coming back to this idea of butterflies and a new life."

Zak took to his drawing board, and spent a month coming up with a range of ideas that reflected this.

"I started playing with this idea of movement, and that's when I got hold of some dried butterflies. I set up a home studio in my kitchen and spent the second lockdown shooting them through light prisms and pieces of glass. I didn't want the concept and imagery to feel flat, I wanted there to be movement and energy in the imagery. The first single off the album, Bad Habits, is an uplifting dance track, and I wanted that to resonate in the artwork."

After much playing around, Zak created 14 butterflies - one for each of the album's 14 tracks.

"Each one has its own personality, and we tried to bring that in with the overall concept. I'm sure some of the superfans have spotted it, but each butterfly has a hidden story element to it. The one that means the most to me thought is the one for the track 'Visiting Hours,'" he says.

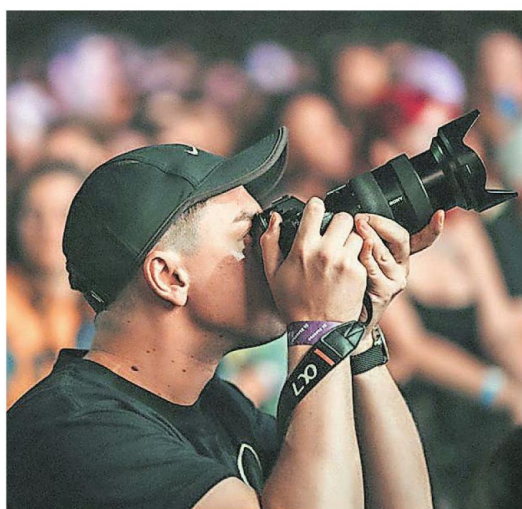
Visiting Hours is the 12th track on the album, and is dedicated to

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”



Zak with a copy of =, Ed Sheeran's latest album which he designed the artwork for

Picture: SARAH LUCY BROWN



ABOVE:
A photo of Ed Sheeran taken by Zak

LEFT:
Zak behind the lens



BOTTOM LEFT:
Zak has photographed the likes of Lewis Capaldi on tour

Pictures: ZAK WALTERS

Ed's friend, former music promoter Michael Gudinski who sadly passed away last year.

"We shot this butterfly in my home studio, and on the right wing, we tried to make it look like it was falling apart, and the idea was to show the fragility of life. We also hid a little Mushroom Records logo in each of the wings. Essentially, every single piece of the album had this story to tell, and they all sit in this overall butterfly branding," he explains.

= was eventually released on October 29 last year, and topped the charts across the world - securing the number one spot in a whopping 23 countries.

But how does it feel to have something you've designed plastered across the globe?

"A few friends have asked me this, and it actually doesn't feel as mad as I thought it would. I remember when the album came on in my car and the artwork was on the screen, and how weird it felt that something I'd spent a year and half designing was now everywhere.

"I was quite nervous when Ed asked me to do it, but I was up for the challenge and I'm really proud of how it's turned out."

With the world of design and photography firmly conquered, Zak isn't resting anytime soon, as he has just recently launched his very own canned wine brand, Vinca.

Explaining how this venture came about, he says: "One of my good friends, Jack, was a wine buyer and sommelier for a decade, and I've had experience with designing alcohol branding, as I've worked with the likes of Smirnoff, Gordon's and Guinness. And anytime we got together for a drink, we always said we should do something together."

When lockdown hit, Jack got in touch with Zak - and the pair got the ball rolling with Vinca.

But Vinca is no ordinary canned drink - and the two have big

ambitions to change how we see and consume alcohol.

"The idea behind it is to change the wine industry, and make it more sustainable and better for the planet. A massive part of the wine industry's carbon footprint are the heavy glass bottles that are produced, and a lot of canned wine brands before us would tend to focus on the convenience of wine rather than its quality, so we wanted to tackle the two.

"With Jack's expertise, we've managed to put the best possible wine into the can, and the inside of the can actually has a water-based lining on the inside, so the metallic can doesn't affect the taste of the wine."

Every part of this zero-plastic product has been carefully considered - right down to the labels which are printed on paper made from the leftover grape skins cast off during the wine's production.

"Since lockdown, this has become an integral part of my creative life - it takes up four days a week, and while I'm still doing one or two days shooting for artists now restrictions have lifted, Vinca is my baby."

Zak is currently focussing efforts on stocking his beverages in London, with hopes of branching out into a number of bars and restaurants in the east.

"As proud as I am to see my album artwork everywhere, I want to see my wine cans sold around the world. Not only do we want to get people thinking about their drinking and consumption habits, but we want to make the world better for future generations."

With another string of success added to his bow, the sky truly is the limit for this lad from Laxfield.

To find out more about Zak and his work, visit zakary-walters.com. To learn more about Vinca Wine, visit vincawine.com