

# This Time Round by Ray Quinn

## Chapter 1

### **Early Childhood Memories**

I have always wanted to be an entertainer. It's in my blood - it's the way I'm wired up.

People have their own forte in life, be it as an athlete, businessman, scientist, politician or whatever. Mine is to perform.

I was born in 1988, the youngest of three sons by 18 years. From a young age I would dance in front of 'Top of the Pops' with my dummy microphone, or play guitar whilst performing for the family. I remember one of my favourite tracks at the time was 'Young at Heart' by the Bluebells. I would start singing and dancing - I just wanted everyone to watch me. My mum used to call me to let me know 'Top of the Pops' was on and I would be dancing about. The dogs would be racing round after me and I'd be running around the slide that was in our lounge. (In those days we had to cross the road to get to our garden, so my mum put the slide in the lounge so I could play on it without being run over while going across.) I would copy all the songs word for word. Like my dad and brothers I was very much the attention seeker, but it was obvious I was not going down the same route in the flooring industry.

I didn't come from a family of entertainers already in the industry, albeit my dad was a natural entertainer in the local pub. He's a carpet fitter by trade and my two older brothers, our Robin and Darren, are also both carpet fitters; all the family are. My dad had taught my brothers and one day not long before I started college he said, "Come on! I'll give you a few quid for a day's work if you come and help me." I was doing a lot of dance and drama training at the time, Brookside had finished and I had nothing really on in the entertainment business. "It'll be good to learn a trade as you get older, something to fall back on. If you're skint you can always save yourself a few quid by fitting your own carpets." He was making a joke of it, but underneath I knew he was trying to make sure I didn't put all my eggs in one basket, which was fair enough as my dad has only ever had a trade and never stopped working.

When we got to the first place it was on the 7<sup>th</sup> bloody floor. The carpet was about 20-30 foot long, and it was massive to me as I was a tiny, scrawny little thing.

“Get the end there, Son!” my dad said. It was the best underlay money could buy at the time, really thick and heavy. My dad was in his fifties, but from a rugged Irish background, and he has always been strong and ready to go. He’d say “Come on Mate, give us a hand!” like it was nothing.

“Dad,” I said, groaning back at him, “I can’t lift it!”

“Just push it, Son! Go on, Lad!”

I couldn’t do it, but I gave it everything I had and with a big struggle we managed to get it to the top of the stairs, and that was not even the job half done.

Then he said, “Right Son, now let’s get the carpet!”

To which I replied, “Oh my God, Dad I can’t!” and I knew from that moment there was no way I was going to be doing this for a living.

I used to look at my dad and brothers’ hands and see they were always cut, rough and somewhat swollen; mine were soft and still are. The joke to this day in the family is that I have never lifted a hammer only a microphone! Our Robin and Darren could practically build their own houses, but I couldn’t do anything like that even now. So what I gained from that experience was that it put me off manual labour for life. I suffered from meningitis as a baby, I was very ill and I was in hospital for three weeks and of course this was a very worrying time for my parents all be it that it has not really affected me. I think this is why my mum was very protective as I grew up.

In 1994 when I was six we had just moved from Knotty Ash, where we lived four doors away from Ken Dodd, when my mum took me to my first pantomime, “Peter Pan the Lost Boys.” I remember we were four rows back from the front and I said, “I wanna do that, Mum”. I was looking at the lads dancing around, acting and performing as the Lost Boys. “I wanna do that.”

“Do what, Son?”

“Be like them, Mum!”

I longed to be on that stage, be that guy performing to an audience, and from that very day I guess my future was in my mum’s hands.

At the age of three my mum had taken me to a dance studio called ‘Millington’s’ that my brother Darren’s now ex-wife recommended as she knew of it, and from what I gathered was friends with the owners at the time. All I can remember about when I arrived is that there seemed to be a huge amount of

stairs. In reality there were only about ten but I was so small that just getting into the place felt like it took an age. The anticipation was building!

I walked into what seemed to be an exaggerated social club with lounge sofas and a bar that sold crisps and cans of pop. Behind the bar was Iris. She was expecting us, and she greeted my mum by name. As I looked about the room I saw it was decorated in tinsel, neon lights, fairy lights and trophies of all sizes, gold and silver, all on display. We were then led down some more stairs to the disco floor, which had even more neon lights, a big old disco ball spinning on the ceiling and a dance floor that was so shiny you could do your hair in it. The room was filled with girls between the ages of 5 and 15 all spinning, leaping, kicking, and shrieking about, and to my dismay there was not a boy in sight. The place was full of energy and for a three year old it was very overwhelming. I grabbed tighter hold of my mum's hand.

Behind the DJ booth was Iris's son Derek, who'd seen us arrive and came over to meet us. Looking back at it now, he would have reminded me of George Michael - he was the spit. He spoke to my mum. "Hi Val, so this Raymond," he said looking down at me.

"Yes, this is Raymond," my Mum replied. "He is always entertaining and really wants to learn to dance, don't you, Son!"

At this point I came over really shy. I don't know if it was the lights, the noise, the girls or that I was just in such a bizarre place. I hid behind my mum's legs and all I could think about was getting out of that place. To this day, my mum cannot believe how I acted the first time I met Derek. Derek took my hand.

"Come on Raymond, come with me and I'll introduce you to the girls."

"Go on Raymond!" my mum encouraged me, but I wouldn't let her out of my sight, so she came onto the middle of the dance floor with Derek and me as the music died down. Derek motioned to the dance floor. "Hi, Girls! I'd like you to meet Raymond. Do you think we can make him welcome?" It seemed like in unison all the girls turned and said, "Hi Raymond!" I remember feeling like I just wanted to get out of this place. I was wearing my Adidas tracksuit that my mum, who happened to be a seamstress, had amazingly turned into a Lacoste tracksuit by sewing on a Lacoste crocodile logo.

To start with I hated my visits to those disco classes! The first time I sat there and just cried cos there were too many girls and I was very embarrassed; I didn't get up at all, just sat there watching. The second time was a bit better and I got up and did my first 'up out kick'. I followed the line of girls, with one other boy named Ian who appeared on the second week and made me feel better

being there with all those girls. He was about ten and I remember watching him in awe, as he could spin, jump up in the air and end up in the splits. I remember looking on and thinking to myself, I want to be that good and I want to be better. The whole room was watching and cheering him on. Derek asked me if I wanted to be like that and I told him yes, so Derek told me to go Ian and he would help me.

With dancing, you first have learn to dance solo. After about six weeks I did my first competition that way, and I absolutely loved it, I came home with a massive trophy, and even though I'd only competed against six other boys, I was so proud of myself. Dancing was not as popular for boys back then - not like it is now, especially not up in Liverpool. My mum never forced me to go to lessons; if I didn't want to go I didn't have to, but I enjoyed them so much that I would ask her to take me and couldn't wait to get there. She would always ask me if I was sure, but off I would always go. I loved it.

When I was about five Mum was finding it difficult to drive me to and from Bootle, so she looked for a place a little closer and found the Chiltern Castings in West Derby. They taught every sort of dance there and at the time my mum thought it would be good for me to learn all the different forms if I really wanted to make a living out of it. I did manage to convince her to keep taking me to Millington's to carry on the disco dancing though. Derek knew I was going to be good and was always complimentary and supportive. He told my mum I was a 'phenomenon'. I didn't know what he meant - didn't understand the word - and I don't think my mum did either because when I asked her, she said, "I don't know Son, but best you keep doing what you're doing as Derek seems very happy with you". My mum was happy, my teacher was happy, so I was happy too.

Derrick partnered me up with Natalie Wilcox when I was seven. She was unbelievable for a seven year old! We were soon on the local ITV News and within six months we had won every competition we entered. We were that 'phenomenon' that Derek had spotted. Natalie was so tiny and so graceful, like a feather going through the air - she was amazing. The only trouble was that when we went away for competitions she would get home-sick and want to be back with her mum. I felt sorry for her at the time.

At the same time I had also become British Champion for Disco Dancing Solo and Natalie and I were Rock 'n' Roll champions. I was kept very busy.

As my dad was away most of the time working and my mum was working full time on the market, the school summer holidays were a slight problem. Mum was very protective of me; she didn't like me playing out on the street and when

I did play out I was only allowed around the corner. Then one summer when I was nine she saw an advert in the local Echo, and I was taken along to 'Chiltern Castings Summer School,' which was £80 a week. Chiltern Castings was based in another part of Liverpool and used this place in the summer. It was a lot of money in those days but my mum saw it as a good way to keep me safely off the street. It was a typical theatrical dance school with pictures of ballet dancers on the wall and posters of musicals all over the place, and it was owned by a lady called Mrs. Byatt. She was very old school 1950's glam, blonde and always wore a fur coat. Very classy and theatrical, she was a lovely lady and as time went on she mothered me.

The place was once again full of girls and there was a lady there called Miss Suzanne. She was lovely too and she sat with me when I first arrived. I kept looking round to make sure my mum was still there and hadn't left me, but I must've soon forgotten all about her because unbeknown to me she sneaked out the back of the class after being given the nod to leave from Miss Suzanne. To this day I can't remember Miss Suzanne's surname - we just always called her 'Miss Suzanne' and that's how I will always fondly remember her.

I ended up that day loving this class and when my mum came to collect me at four o'clock I couldn't wait to bound over the rise in the car park to tell her how fab it was and what I had been doing. "It was such good fun, Mum! Can I go back tomorrow?" It must have been music to Mum's ears. "Sound!" she said and smiled. This was two birds with one stone: I was enjoying myself *and* I was getting kept off the streets and was somewhere safe while she was working. This summer school was fantastic. I learnt drama as well as singing and all new different types of dance. A film I was really keen on at the time was 'Singing in the Rain'. I remember sitting down one Sunday afternoon and watching this with my mum and I just loved it. The energy, the dance moves blew me away; it was just so cool and slick how Gene Kelly would move with effortless efficiency.

The drama and singing was all new to me and I loved every minute of it, but I was still doing disco with Natalie at Derek's. Mrs Byatt wanted me primarily at her school but I wanted to do both, so on Tuesday and Saturday mornings I went to Mrs Byatt's drama and singing lessons and on a Tuesday and Saturday afternoon I went to Derek's dance school. The teachers were very territorial and wanted me solely to themselves. Looking back now I realise my poor mum must have been exhausted running me round to each lesson as well as going to work, but I was only a kid. That's what mums do!

My dad was working away a lot at this time and didn't manage to come to see any of my competitions: not because he didn't want to, he just couldn't. I remember he came to one competition and stood at the side on his own watching me in disbelief and with tears in his eyes. As I stepped off the dance floor after my heat he was rubbing his eyes quick, so not to let me see his emotion. "What do you think of me dancing, Dad?" I asked, skipping towards him so pleased to see him there. He told me he hadn't realised how good I was, how proud he was of what I had achieved and how sad that he'd missed out on so much of what I'd already done because of his work. At that moment I think he realised this was going to be more than a hobby. This was what I was going to be doing for the rest of my life.

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By now my teacher Mrs Byatt had started to see potential in me and was giving my dance lessons at nearly half price to help my mum out a bit. A few stars had already passed through Mrs Byatt's hands and she also acted as an agent, so I guess she was keen to keep me. It was Mrs Byatt who had spotted Jennifer Ellison and unbeknown to me she was a casting agent for the local soap 'Brookside'. Funnily enough, the one class I hated at Mrs Byatt's School was Mrs Headspeath's: it was a lot of reading and repeating and I hated it, but as it happens it was her class that stood me in good stead for the future.

Natalie's mum Cal wanted her to specialise in ballroom, tap, single and disco. Natalie's parents were better off than mine. They came from an affluent area, lived in a big house with a studio in it and they could afford all the expensive dance lessons, shoes and costumes that went with it, which mine unfortunately couldn't. There were not enough hours in the day for my mum to fit in two jobs and all the classes, and as I was so young and was unable to make my mind up what I wanted to do my mum had to make some of those decisions for me. Mum and Dad also wanted me to quit Mrs Byatt's, which I didn't want to because I loved it there. I had already given up the disco dancing, as we could not afford to do both. Now the costs were building up - £18 a lesson here, £25 a lesson there, plus the costumes and the running around. I was lucky I had a mum like I did, otherwise none of the things that came later would ever have happened. A decision had to be made, so I parted company with Natalie, although we stayed firm friends, and Bryony became my new dance partner.

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It's a tough old game in the dancing world even at the age of ten - a dog eat dog world where everyone's after the best they can get. There were pushy mums everywhere wanting their kids to be up the front, and there was a lot of politics

involving who was to dance with who, who taught who. My mum was approached by the parents of some of the best dancers on the circuit wanting their daughters to partner me. I was so small, though, that most of them were too tall. I was the runt of the Quinn litter - even my dad's nick name for me was Titch! This was when Bryony became my partner.

At this time I also auditioned with Elsie Kelly for a Lost Boy part in the pantomime production of Peter Pan, with Unis from Gladiators, (then a popular prime-time TV show) as the headliner. It wore me out, as it was 7-8 weeks over Christmas, but it was my very first paid job and I was going to earn the grand sum of £1.50 a show. I guess children didn't really get paid in those days; even the mums didn't get paid for being chaperones. It was considered more of an opportunity for kids to take a step in the right direction if they wanted to get into the business.

The show was a great experience and so much fun. I was no longer practising - this was the real deal. I remember on the opening night I was so excited and nervous having lines to say! I found it a bit weird when the chaperones were putting our make up on, only to be told 'that's show biz', but to this day I still try not to wear make-up. While we were waiting for the show to start I could hear the noise of the auditorium filling. The tannoy announced 'This is your Act One Beginners', the curtain went up and the show began. As my scene was about to start I remember my heart racing and I couldn't speak to anyone because I had to stay focused on putting heart and soul into my part. I only had eight lines, but I was leader of the Lost Boys and felt under so much pressure. Soon as I entered centre stage the buzz was incredible and I was hooked: there was no going back now.

I remember being on stage with all those people in the theatre looking at me; I remember looking down at the seat four rows back to see a young child sitting where I'd once sat with my mum. I was now that boy I had told my mum I wanted to be.

## Chapter 2

### Brookside Years

At the age of ten I got my first acting part in a British soap called 'Brookside' after secretly going to the audition with only Mrs Byatt and my mum knowing. The show was broadcast on Channel 4 three nights a week at eight o'clock and had already been running for twenty one years. It was the brain child of Phil Redmond the writer of Grange Hill and had regular viewing figures of over a million at its peak. Everybody loved Brookside! It was the first real 'scouse' show – it *felt* real, and to be honest if it hadn't ended I would probably still be there. Mrs Byatt set up the audition, which was held in an office on the set of Brookside in Childwall, home of what was then Mersey TV. Phil Redmond had wanted realism in his show, so he'd created a breakthrough concept by buying a total of thirteen houses in a real Liverpool street; six were used on screen and the remaining seven for post-production, admin and welfare. After the show got cancelled, the houses were sold back to the public and the street is still there with people living their normal lives.

There was a role up for grabs for a boy aged about ten years old and there were about sixty other lads at the auditions. We all had our photographs individually taken and we were dwindled down and down. The main aspect of the part was that you were joining a family, so the initial requirement was that you had to look a bit like Bernie Nolan and Neil Caple, who played the parents of the character. They had already cast the brother and sister roles.

The casting was done in a tiny little room at Mersey TV, now known as Lime Pictures. Dorothy Andrews was the casting director and she was with another girl, Joanna Aicher. They kept cutting and whittling the group down, and then I was given two pages of script to learn by the end of the day. I had ten scenes and I had never done anything like this before, but I knew I wanted to be on TV and this was my chance. Those lessons that I hated with Miss Headspeath had now paid off, as the script reading came easy to me. Thanks to her, digesting lines was not an issue, and learning them off by heart definitely helped me to focus.

Eventually we were whittled down to just two. (I knew the other lad from Chiltern Castings; he was called James we were not friends as such, but had seen each other knocking about and had lighter hair than myself. James later went on to star in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat.) That evening we were sent home and told we would hear from the studio in the next few days as to who had been selected.

The next day was like any other day for me, just a normal one at school. When I got home that evening my mum acted like normal and then she said matter of factly. ‘Guess what, Son, you got it. You got the part!’

‘Shut up!’ was the only thing I could think of to say. Even now, writing about it gives me goose bumps. This was a massive step for me - Brookside was massive - and I was a very happy little boy.

The strange thing was that the night before the audition my mum had taken me to see ‘Blood Brothers’ on stage at the Liverpool Empire, starring the very ‘Bernie Nolan’ I was about to start to work with. The theatre was full and the only seats we could get had restricted view, but that didn’t bother me, I loved it. Little did I know then that I was going to be working with Bernie and she would be the one playing my on-screen mother, Diane Murray. ‘Blood Brothers’ had me in tears that night. I was a bit of a ‘queen’ in those younger years!

Later on, when we first met Bernie on the set of ‘Brookside’ my mum told her ‘We watched you on stage the other night in ‘Blood Brothers.’

Bernie replied, “Oh I, you should’ve rung me! You could have come back stage.”

“Well, we couldn’t ring you, because we didn’t know you!” my mum said.

It was funny at the time.

Bernie had an amazing presence about her. I remember being on set with her for the first time and everyone there having this nervous energy because she was ‘Bernie Nolan’ from the ‘Nolans’. Neil Caple and I were stood outside the house in the Close and Bernie was doing a scene through the front window. We heard the director scream, ‘Action!’ and Bernie slowly walked towards the window taking a longing look out to the other side of the street. I turned to Neil and said, “I can’t believe Bernie Nolan is playing my mum.”

He smiled down at me. “Your mum? She’s playing my wife: I get to kiss her!”

I joined the show in early 2000 and played the character Anthony Murray. I was a member of a new family that was coming to live in the Close and I appeared

in the show until it finished in 2003. My first day filming was not on the Brookside set, as we were first filmed as a family packing up the house ready to move to our new home on 'the Close'. I remember I had no lines - I had to hide in the attic, as my character didn't want to move house. It was supposed to be an old house, very dusty and with cobwebs everywhere, and because I had to be in the loft there was no light up there and I was left at certain points with the trap door closed in the pitch black. But I wasn't scared. (Not!)

It was amazing being on set and being one of the actors. I could eat what I wanted, I had a Winnebago, and I didn't have to pay for anything: it was so different to what I was used to. There was a runner on set and they would ask me what I wanted and the runner would go and get it for me. Because I was only a minor I had to be looked after and a lady called Sue Taylor was my chaperone. Sue became like my step mom, and I loved her - she still comes to everything I do now. I loved being fussed over, and like my mum she used to tickle my back or my arm. This was something my mum had done to me for years and my nan, God bless her, used to do it for hours. It's my little weak spot, and nothing has changed!

After the first shoot it took about four weeks for the episode to appear on television. I remember the night it was shown on Channel 4 everyone came round ours to watch the episode on TV. Mum and I had already seen it, as Channel 4 had given us a private screening at the studio in Liverpool. It was all very exciting and our lounge was buzzing. Everyone was there - nan, my brothers, uncles, aunties, Mum and Dad and the dog's cousin!! This was an event. My mum recorded it on video tape, and she still has the tape to this day. When the show finished she rewound it and we watched it all over again. I think we watched it three times and the family clapped and cheered every time. When I was told to go to bed and my dad had gone to the pub and everyone had left I could hear through the walls my mum watching the episode again with a glass of wine. That's mothers for you!

There was media build up on telly, but I hadn't told any of my school mates. No one even knew I danced. When I went to school after the first show was aired the headmaster said, "I've seen you on Brookside, Raymond. Very good!" The kids at school weren't really bothered as I didn't have that many close friends at school. Those that said anything were generally taking the piss, but that's kids for ya. Kids I was friends with lived round the corner from Mum's house; they were the kids I hung about with. I was never at school long enough to form firm friendships, I was sort of a loner at school. The truth is I was in one day out the next and I had a lot of time off with no further education beyond that. In

those days they didn't have a tutor on set. I had no real interest in school anyway, but with all my time away I was becoming less and less interested. I didn't mind lessons like art and graphics. They were my best subjects because they grabbed my imagination, held my attention and tested my creativity. PE wasn't really my thing, especially not football, which was too aggressive for me. I was small for my age and not one for rough and tumble. While I was starting out in Brookside I was still going to Mrs Byatt's dance school. After filming I had a certain amount of time to learn script, then go to ballroom, then practice, then have my tea. My day was literally full to the brim and I guess my schooling did suffer. Learning the script wasn't that bad; the older actors in the show were allowed to ad-lib a little, but I didn't. I did everything I was told, I didn't want to mess up my chances.

One day a new director turned up on the Brookside set. He was really handsome like George Clooney, but he was also very strict and wanted the scripts word for word. This upset some of the actors, as they had been ad-libbing their scripts for a few years now, and there were some clashes between him and the cast, but it was all above my head. What did happen round about now, though, was I got a bit comfortable on set - started to mess about a bit, got a bit cocky - and I remember to this day when Neil Caple, who played Marty Murray, took me to one side and had a firm word with me.

"I know this is fun and you're a young man, and you have a long road in front of you I'm sure of it. Just a little piece of advice: it's all about how you conduct yourself on set; you need to be professional and treat people with respect. Don't lose your head and don't lose who you are." He put his hand on my shoulder. "You're a wonderfully talented young man with a bright future ahead of you, so I'm telling you this now to help you keep focused on your future goals. You need to concentrate on the job in hand, Raymond, and not get distracted from what you are employed to do. You're only as good as your reputation, so stay professional at all times."

I think it was the best bit of advice I could have had at such a tender age, and from that day on I have taken everything I do seriously. It's such a competitive world the entertainment business, where everyone knows everyone, and you do not want to get a bad name as it closes all the doors for you in the future.

The writers changed and the producers changed. They were all trying to do things different ways and the show was struggling to maintain its position. By late November 2002 the show had been transferred to what was known as 'the graveyard slot', four-thirty to six on a Saturday afternoon. The cast was reduced and we were now filming for a ninety minute show. Things were changing on

set but again this was all above me; I didn't know anything about the commercial side of TV, but I did know it could be very hard work - sometimes I would have to shoot fourteen scenes in a day. We'd get the main bulk of the show done, and then the sub scenes would be filmed, sometimes late at night to get night shots, and even up to one in the morning. For me at my age staying up late was great but tiring; it was all an adventure and very exciting.

I was still very much into my dancing whilst acting in Brookside, and in March 2000 I entered the British Open along with my partner Bryony. It was being held at the World Tower Ballroom in Blackpool, with dancers coming from all over the world. It was a really big thing. My mum thought maybe telling Bryony's parents that I was in Brookside would lead them to think it would affect my dancing. They wanted us to be professional dancers and that was all - but we won, so she didn't have to worry after all! A family holiday was planned in order for everyone to recoup after all the hard work we'd been doing, and we went to Italy in the June of that same year, but Bryony didn't want to enter the Italian dance competitions so she didn't come. Me and my mum just watched the dancing, enjoyed the sunshine and had a lovely time for the first week, then Dad came out for the second week. It was fantastic!

Anyway, when we came back from Italy Bryony and I split up our dance partnership because I guess I wasn't really focusing on the dancing because of my commitment to Brookside. Stacey Parrott from Bournemouth, chosen by Margaret Redmond, was to be my new partner. Margaret was the best teacher there was, so Stacey used to travel for five hours to dance with me! She was a little, delicate girl; most girls were too tall for me back then, as I was so small myself, and they also wore little heels that made me look even smaller. When Stacey and I started having lessons, she would stay with us at weekends, but it all got too much for her and my mum. We were entered into a competition at the Winter Gardens which fell on the same day that I had scenes to do at Brookside. We didn't tell Stacey, but I had a scene at five pm for Brookside, and the final for the Winter Gardens if we got through would be eight pm.

"What we going to do?" I said to my mum.

"Don't worry, Son, I'll sort it out!"

Mum, Dad and I got in the car that afternoon and did a dummy run from Blackpool to Liverpool to make sure they knew exactly how long it took, "Don't park - I'll jump out, you pick us up!" For Dancing you have exact times for each dance, so we knew the exact time we had to be back. We had two hours and fifteen minutes to get to the Brookside set and back again, but it was a

simple scene, just me getting filmed walking down the alleyway. We left Stacey and her mum without telling them where we'd gone, and I thought it was all very funny and exciting at the time. We made it, though! I did the Brookside scene, then jumped into the car and got changed back into my dance outfit while my mum was driving along - which may sound easier than it was, as there are so many bits to a tail suit. Besides the cufflinks, each individual button has a tiny little screw, and there are loads down the front of the jacket; the whole thing is fitted together piece by piece, so it was really hard to put on at the best of times, let alone in the back seat of the car as it was weaving around the roads trying to get back in time to compete in the dance competition final.

Just as we got back to the hall they called my number and I was like, "Dad! Help me quick!" as I was running in still doing up screws on my jacket.

"Where have you been?" Stacey asked in a panicked voice.

"Oh, just out for lunch. We on?" I asked her in a blasé manner, still a bit panicky myself from trying to do my screw buttons up.

It was the weirdest day ever. Amazingly enough we came fifth, but it was getting to be very hard work for Stacey what with all the travelling, so inevitably we didn't last long and Stacey and I went our separate ways.

Talking of funny stories, there's one about my mum, my nan and me when we had to stay in a hotel in Blackpool. It was at the height of the Easter season, with dancers everywhere and kids on their school holidays. Blackpool was buzzing and packed and all the hotels and B&Bs were fully booked. We had been dancing all day and so mum decided that we should stay overnight, which was easier said than done. We couldn't believe our luck when we managed to find a room - £70 it was. We were so tired we could have slept in a bus shelter, which in all honesty we should have done because when we got into the room it was filthy. The sheets were stained, the wardrobe door was hanging off and the room stunk of I don't know what, but if it was a colour it would be brown! My mum put my poor nan on top of the bed covers in a sleeping bag with her coat on.

A couple of hours later Mum said, "Ray are you awake? Get up, Mother!" It was four o'clock in the morning.

"Mum, I can't sleep!"

"I know, Son. Get ya coat on!"

Nan was up, we were all up. The place was the pits, and we left.

It wasn't funny at the time, but looking back it makes me smile and it still makes my mum laugh. The good old days, eh!

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Of course, with Stacey gone I had no dance partner at all, but we still went on the circuit. Pontin's was the next stop on the itinerary; all my dance friends were there and we would stay the weekend, so off we went. If I'm honest it was more for my mum than me - the circuit had become her social life - so even though I wasn't dancing there we were, and I'd watch and learn from what everyone else was up to, what they were doing.

That was when I first saw a girl called Kirsty. She was dancing with someone else at that time, but I thought she was a decent dancer and could see potential if she had the right teacher.

"She would be alright for you, Raymond," my mum said, and I watched her dance. She was the right height and had a lot of energy in her movements.

Kirsty turned out to be older than me by a year. I was 13 and had just started dancing as a Junior Section; Kirsty was already dancing Junior. After a while of dancing together we formed a close friendship. We were good together as dancers and made a mark on the circuit and the dance floor, but we struggled to achieve the consistency I'd had with Bryony. On the other hand, Juniors was a higher level and there were a lot more dancers to compete with.

Being an actor the same time as I was at school certainly made life interesting. I went to Rudston Junior as a child, and have fond memories of that school. As a teenager I went to Gateacre Comprehensive, which isn't used as a school any more. It was an old building and I remember it being always cold. It was tinny and falling apart, and the place was full of graffiti, some of which I had a hand in. As you can imagine, being in a local soap opera and being treated differently from my school mates made me a target for a bit of banter. I was let off homework because of my work-load filming, and I was a favourite of a couple of the dinner ladies, our Madge and Babs. I think they had a soft spot for me because I loved my food!

The banter was what every school kid goes through, and if you stick out from the crowd you are going to be more of a target. At one point it was reported in the press that I was bullied at school. This I can tell you is misleading: if any sort of name-calling is bullying, then every kid that ever went to school has been bullied. I would be called names, get into fights, run away from fights, and when needed play the cocky, arrogant dick. I could handle myself. To be fair, I

wouldn't like you if I knew you were getting let off from doing your homework!

One of my mates at school was Karl Pilkinson, who's now a bouncer on the doors I think, in Liverpool. His dad had a motorbike that I used to go on the back of every now and then, unbeknown to my parents, which I didn't mind because it was 'cool'. Mostly, though, I didn't fit in at school, and looking back now that was not necessarily a bad thing. When you grow up you realise it's not always best to follow the crowd. The Sun newspaper later on wrote an article about me headed 'Bullied - Look At Me Now!' but they took things I said and twisted them. It seemed to be a local pastime for lads hanging around the streets to egg my mum and dad's house. My dad even painted it canary yellow because it got egged so many times. I remember way back whilst I was filming in Brookside I had to have my head shaved for a plot line, but the lads at school thought it was sound and I was accepted as 'one of them' for a change, so I went along with it. One guy came up to me and said, "Is right Lad, you're one of us now!" and ruffled my number 1 haircut.

They were all listening to heavy rap music in those days and still are. Back then 50 Cents and G Unit were the craze, and we used to wear G Unit trainers in black so the teacher thought they were school shoes. I loved my hair, though - I've got good hair and I hope I keep it, so when I had to shave it off it was a bit embarrassing. The other kids loved it though, so I was happy with that for a while.

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Brookside was such a massive show to me and a lot of others around me, especially my nan, God rest her. She was a big fan. I was so young at first, but after a while it began to feel normal. I was going to the same place every day, with the same people, and I used to really look forward to it. Being on set with all the adults, I learnt very quickly to deal with certain situations like an adult: I had to grow up very fast. Even though I was so young, I desperately wanted to fit in, to be part of the team and not seen as just the little child actor. I wanted to be taken seriously and I was really eager to impress. They used to swear a lot and there was a lot of banter but luckily I was used to that growing up around my dad and my brothers! My Mum was worried that I always seemed to have a lot to learn, but Bernie Nolan told her, "Don't worry Val, trust me! After a few weeks it'll become second nature", and it did. I was like a little sponge, soaking it all up and learning everything and each day it got easier.

Over time the story-line began to get difficult for me, as the character I played started to go through some very hard times. There was one particular scene I'll never forget because they needed me to cry on-screen. For quite a while I'd been putting myself in situations that made me feel down; the build up to this particular scene took months and it really began to get to me. I started not going out as much and spent a lot of time on my own, wrapped up in my own thoughts. I didn't really notice at the time but as I look back now, the acting I was doing was affecting me. There were days I would go on set knowing a certain scene was happening and I would start thinking and being a certain way beforehand, so that when I got to the scene itself there was a build-up of emotions inside of me that would then burst out on camera. What made it more difficult was if we had to shoot the scene again. A re-take could be for anything, not necessarily the actors getting it wrong; it could be a bad camera angle, or because a camera lens had gone soft or a sound man had picked up a stray sound such a car horn or an aircraft.

Eventually the day came for the climax of the storyline. I remember leaving school early and going to Reception to sign in with my teacher, and then half an hour later when everyone else was going to their first class I was picked up to go to the studio. When I arrived I sat in the Green Room with a Crunchy and a cup of tea and Neil Caple came in to see me.

He sat down next to me and asked if I was OK. "Yep!" I said, to which he replied. "I only ask because I know this is a big day for you." He looked concerned. "There are a lot of big scenes for you in the schedule today. I just want to make sure you're in the right head space, as there's one scene in particular that if you do it right could stand you in good stead for the future."

By this time I had already zoned out into the character I was about to play, and I really wasn't thinking about it any more. I knew my lines, I knew I had to cry. I was ready to do it, and now I just wanted to get it over with. I certainly hadn't put much thought into what impact this scene would have on me and the watching public and what Neil said took me by surprise. If anything though, it made me more determined to do it right, as I'd always looked up to him and I didn't want to let him down.

As the day went on, it was like I was doing all my scenes back to back in a structured way, so by default the last one was bound to be the scene Neil had spoken to me about, the crux of the story line. If I'm honest, that scene had been on my mind and staring at me from the schedule listed on the notice board all day, and as the hours went by I was all too well aware that it was getting closer. By the time the scene was to be shot Neil had left for the day, but I had his

words in my head encouraging me to get it right. I remember going over to the director when everything was in place and asking him, “Do you think this scene can be done in one take?”

He looked at me and said, “Well yes, it can be if you get it right!” and laughed in a blasé way. It was just another day on set for him but I had it in my head that I only wanted to do this scene once, so I went for it – determined there’d be no way they’d think they could get a better performance out of me. It had been a long day; it was now cold and dark outside and after a long camera rehearsal it was time to record.

In this particular scene I was being dragged out of my house by my school bully’s family. They were looking for their daughter and knew that I had information about her whereabouts. Before we started I had said to the lad that played my bully’s brother, “Do what you would if this was real, and don’t be scared of hurting me,” to which he had readily agreed. I didn’t really know the lad as I’d only ever shot one or two scenes with him, but I knew the type of performance I was about to give and I wanted to back it up with realism.

“Lights, Camera, and.....Action!” was screamed across set by the director.

To my relief the scene was shot in one take to huge applause from cast and crew. “Was that good?” I just spoke out to no one in particular, then looking around I saw that Bernie Nolan had tears in her eyes. My heart was in my stomach when the director asked, “Did you get it?” To my relief the scene was in the can and that was it, over!

That was the scene I was nominated for at the British Soap Awards in 2002 for Best Dramatic Performance. The Awards were held at the BBC’s White City studios; I went up to London with my mum and everyone from the cast was at the event. I was thirteen at the time, but still only looked about ten! I was given a seat number and sat in the auditorium. The show seemed to last for ever and I remember being a bag of nervous energy waiting for my category to come up. It was one of the last of the night and when at last it did come up I was thinking to myself, ‘Oh, oh! Here we go!’ My mum nudged my leg all excited for me, which got me even worse for the nerves. I was up against five other scenes, from East Enders, Emmerdale, Crossroads, Doctors, Holly Oaks and Coronation Street. Mine was fourth one in, and after they’d all been shown there was no real pause before Ben Elton called my name out as the winner. I couldn’t believe it! Of course, I had to go up on stage and do an acceptance speech, and this had caught me by surprise as I really didn’t expect to win. Everyone had

told me to get a speech ready but I hadn't: to my way of thinking, if I was putting a speech together it would mean I was expecting to win and I wasn't!

Standing on the stage on my own with tears streaming from my eyes, I thanked everyone who had helped me get there with this award in my hand. I was surprised I had to walk backstage afterwards for press interviews. Someone told me that if I gave them the award, they would box it and give it back to me when I left at the end of the night. I reluctantly handed it over. I got back to my seat eventually and was surprised that there were camera crews about after the show had finished asking us to clap and laugh so they could use these scenes when editing the programme before it went out on air. Later on there was an after-show party, which I went to with my mum, and from what I can remember everyone got quite drunk. It was on this occasion that I had a picture taken with Louis Walsh.

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My time with Brookside lasted three years. Eighteen months before the show was cancelled by Channel 4 the producer at Mersey Television called the cast into a meeting to break the news. The older actors had seen it coming but I was oblivious. I was only fourteen, and was just having the time of my life. I remember at the time feeling a bit gutted; this programme was part of my life and this was my job. It suddenly dawned on me that I was about to lose my job and lose my income. This was the end of an era for me and it was going to change my life completely. The actors on set all took it in different ways: some were sad, some nervous and some seemed to be relieved it was over. I was very young at the time and didn't really understand what it was all about; as far as I was concerned the show being cancelled came out of the blue. I remember there being a big meeting with Phil Redmond and he explained that although Channel 4 had cancelled the show, Channel 5, a new TV channel that had just started broadcasting on British TV were interested and Phil wanted to go out with a bang and get some really good writers on it. The older actors had had a feeling that something was going on because they said the scripts hadn't been as good lately.

The other actors always treated me well. My particular favourites were Illy he was a director a scoucer a really nice guy everyone loved him, and Cathy from the Canteen who knew exactly how I liked my eggs and save me the hash browns, and we still speak to each other now. It was a real Liverpool clique with everyone knowing each other, and I even ended up buying a house opposite one of them. To this day when any of us meet it's great, like no time has passed at all.

Brookside paid per episode and there was no special children's contract, I received the same amount for each episode. All my money went into a bank account that my mum had organised for me; half went into a savings account and half towards my dancing and acting costs, plus I was allowed a little pocket money for my phone and bits and pieces. One day soon after the show finished I sat down with my mum and she showed me a bank account with £40,000 in it, and I remember saying, "Cor, Mum, we got all that! God, Mum we're rich!" This was the money I had earned on the show and that my mum had looked after for me. It was enough to buy a house – and that was what she did!

It was announced by Channel 4 on the 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2003 that the final show would be aired in November of that year. The last Brookside - divided into three distinct parts - was televised on Channel 4 at 22:40 on 4<sup>th</sup> November, two days after the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the show. It went out to an audience of 2.27 Million. The story line for the final show was my family leaving the very Close we had entered five years before. My on-screen mum Bernie had already left the show and the rest of us were leaving to start another new life. I had really enjoyed my time there and I didn't want it to end. I am a very emotional person even now, and I remember getting quite upset. I was given a posh glass paperweight with my name on and the start and finish date of my time in Brookside. Oh, and a key ring which - yes! - I still have. My mum keeps everything I win, souvenirs of everything I do or star in; every script, every certificate, trophy, picture and magazine. There was a wrap party when the show finished, but I did not attend. This was the end of Brookside and my first insight into life as an unemployed actor looking for work.

At the time the show finished I had just a few months left before my exams. The only one I passed was art, which was a subject I enjoyed and another way for me to express myself. I still have my finest piece of art. I had to sum up myself in one picture - Nat West bank account, Buzz Lightyear, Fanta Can, and Everton Shirt and a skateboard wheel!

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It wasn't long before I started getting really frustrated: nothing was happening, nothing was on the cards. I was expecting an influx of offers now that Brookside had finished and I got nothing. Life as a known actor is not as easy as some people would imagine; it's a hard and competitive world. Then eventually after much time waiting I was approached to do Mersey Beat. I only did one episode, playing a troubled child called Leon Marsh.

After Mersey Beat my next job was 'Singing Cactus', a BBC afternoon drama, I played the character John Reilly alongside the great Melanie Hill, best known for 'Bread', and the amazing Peter Capaldi. Melanie became a big part of my life, and from when I was 16, every time I went to London I would stay with her. I would go for weekends with my mum and Melanie Hill would pick us up. First time I ever saw her house I thought, 'God, she's minted!' It was a beautiful old Victorian cottage, very big and in the middle of Muswell Hill by the tube station.

Next came A to Z, which I was told was going to be massive, a young British version of Friends. I filmed five episodes, but these episodes never came to light even though the budget was big. One day the TV channel just dropped it. I was starting to learn that the business I was in was not an easy, straightforward one. Everything had started coming to a standstill on the acting side and I suddenly realised that I couldn't rely on just the one avenue, so I decided to explore the others I had left behind. I started focusing more on singing, with Miss Suzanne who was giving private lessons at our house. I carved my name into her piano when I was bored one day, though why I thought I could get away with it I don't know. Yeah, its got Ray Q on it – it's still there to this day!

I couldn't sing for toffee at the time, even though the whole point of Mrs Byatt's School was that everyone should sing, dance and act. It was a drama school and everyone was aspiring to be somebody in the entertainment world. As I got better at singing, though, my confidence grew. At the age of about fifteen, a typical teenager who thought he knew everything, I was placed in a boy band with some lads from the dance school and this band was pencilled in to be called 'Eaton Road'. At the time boy bands were in vogue, and Mrs Byatt had been approached by a record label to put one together. The other lads selected were Daniel Morris, James Edwards, David Heath and Anthony Hannah. We were asked to go to a meeting with Mrs Byatt to discuss the project, but my heart wasn't in it. I didn't want be in a boy band, I wanted to do my own thing.

She asked us to come back on the following Wednesday dressed as a boy band so that we could be filmed doing some numbers for the record company, to see what they had to say. I didn't do any research - just turned up in my usual clothes. I wasn't really interested and knew what my decision was going to be, regardless. I didn't ask any questions about the record label or anything else: I was totally uninterested. I only went along for the experience.

Before the Wednesday we had some practice sessions at the school with Mrs Byatt and her daughter Michelle, who was the dance teacher. The other lads

were well into it and saw it as a big opportunity but I felt like I was wasting their time. I did make my views clear to Mrs Byatt right from the outset, but not to the lads. When the day came we were dressed up like a schoolboy version of 'Steps' and we performed the harmonies and dance moves we were told to. I dutifully went through the motions of performing and Mrs Byatt and Michelle were happy with what we got on film. Mrs Byatt said, "I'm sure they're going to like that. I can't say how long it'll be until they get back to us, but well done for your efforts!"

As far as I was concerned, that was me done with being in a boy band and when the other lads had left I asked Mrs Byatt if we could have a quick chat in her office. I told her then that this was not for me and that I really didn't want to be in a boy band, but I couldn't tell the lads to their faces. I put it to her that I would be very grateful if she could have a word with them to explain where I was coming from, and to my relief she was very understanding about it.