

# Ard Matthews

On his debut solo album, choosing S.A. over L.A., and moving past the national anthem disaster By Annemarie Luck

**W**ITH A 16-YEAR CAREER BEHIND HIM, the Just Jinjer front man is back from an eight-year stint in the U.S. and he's going solo. *First Offerings* took two years to complete and, says Ard Matthews, is raw, unpretentious and honest. "It's me in my darkest place. Which is never that dark, actually. I'm not a tortured person. Yes, there is some heartbreak on there and maybe for a brief moment I go there and method act it for a bit, but in general I'm super happy. Considering where I live in Durban, on the beach... if I tried to pull off being miserable, I'd be the biggest tit in the world."

## Does the honesty make you feel exposed?

Yes, but it's not new for me. I've always been honest. I'm not in the business of making myself look cool. I'm still the same geek I was in high school.

## How did living in Los Angeles affect you as a person and an artist?

It kept me a humble person. As an artist, I wouldn't say it affected me that much; I've never been that heavily influenced by my surroundings. I've never had my finger on the pulse. I hardly ever listen to new music, so I'm not even that aware of what's out there. It's very weird.

## Why did you come home?

We were signed to Capitol in L.A., waiting for opportunity to happen over there; our single went onto radio and basically fizzled. It's hard. Americans are super patriotic and buy 90 percent American music. Eventually we were, like, "Things aren't aligning." All we were doing in between the few little shows here and there was planning the next braai with our few South African mates. So we thought, "What the fuck are we doing here?" Now that I'm home, I've changed my lifestyle, trying to get fit and healthy... listening to music on my iPod while running. In the last few weeks I've been obsessing over Radiohead again.

## Running to Radiohead?

Yah. Not my fastest times... [Laughs] I'm going to have to find some proper running music.

## Does your solo sound differ from the Just Jinjer sound?

No, I've always been the predominant songwriter in Jinjer, and I wasn't trying to differentiate the sound. Although, because I played a lot of the instruments myself, there is a different energy – it's more rugged and not as polished, which I enjoyed. I'm at a place where I want to

hear personality on a record, even if that means a wrong note here and there. **So why a solo album then, instead of just another Jinjer album?**

Well, we've been a band for 16 years and we've never co-written. So when I had this body of work that would typically become the next Jinjer album, I just thought, hold on, these are my songs. I also knew that once I got this out of my system, it would pop open a creative bottleneck I'd been feeling. And it happened. I really do feel free. It was like a childbirth in a way... So now that I've got this out, I'm ready to raise a family. [Laughs]

## It's been a year since that national anthem incident.

### How do you feel about it now?

I battle with it daily. Like, properly battle with it. It's all about my journey in forgiving myself. I judge my progress by how many times I don't think about it every day. And at the moment it's a fucking lot. It's still very heavy. It created this little demon on my shoulder, with this voice telling me, "Dude, you can't do anything live, ever." I've had to learn how to shut him up.

### How do you shut him up?

I think the years of confidence I'd built up before helped. If it weren't for that, and for this new album, I would've gone to a very different place. I don't think I would've been making music any more.

## You were part of the Nineties music explosion in S.A. How do you stay relevant now?

I'm lost in the battle of how to stay relevant. All I can do is promise to stay true to me. This is what I do, I'm not trying to break new ground. All I have is me and my mind – which gets very crowded sometimes. If people get it, they get it.

### To what do you owe your success?

"Keep it simple stupid" is a common phrase in the recording industry. For me, it's always been about honest songwriting, keeping things simple. As a matter of fact, it's when we started trying to get clever that it all fucked out and we didn't sell any records. Remember, the people who are buying your music don't care if you've played a diminished chord or if you've used a clever chord progression. They hear a simple verse and a simple chorus. Obviously, shocking pop music has taken that format and bastardised it – they put 48 hooks in a place that doesn't need anything, and they've got stuff that's so annoying you can't help singing it.

### What gets you up in the morning?

My dog, Jeff. He's 80 percent legend and 20 percent Border Collie, Ridgeback and Alsatian. He's very active on Twitter (@JeffreyDingoDog).

## You cut your dreadlocks off two years ago. Where are they now?

I've kept them for charity events and I've sold two locks so far, the first for R10 000 and the last one for R21 000.

### Why did you cut them off?

15 years. You've gotta move on. 