

Sixty Seconds with Max Bowden



by Paul Simper

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■ Albert square's Ben Mitchell, 24, talks about snogging with stubble, #ballum and the joy of Steve McFadden

Why do you think EastEnders fans have got so excited about Ben Mitchell hooking up with Callum 'Halfway' Highway? You even have a hashtag – #ballum.

I think it's down to their vulnerability and the story's realism. The Callum story [as Halfway continues to struggle with his sexual identity] is touching on such a heartfelt subject. It's something that so many people struggle to deal with day to day.

Callum almost married Whitney until his fling with Ben came out in the wash. Would Callum be enough for Ben if they did properly get together after his recent brush with death?

Nothing's enough for Ben, is it?

Apart from being a marriage wrecker, Ben is a convicted killer and people trafficker. Where do you find the good in him?

All of the things that you mentioned are driven because Ben wants to find that good. That good is there. He's been so neglected in his life and felt so unloved by so many people that it's drawn him to make decisions where he wants to get people's approval.



Romance: Callum actor Tony Clay

Recasting an established soap character doesn't always work out. When did the fans start to accept you as New Ben?

To be honest, I tried to stay away from it as much as possible because, as with everything, you're always hit with negativity at the start. It was lucky because I was busy filming so I could just tune out and get on with the work. I guess the #ballum story has allowed us a lot more freedom to be more natural with the fans. That was a massive turning point for Ben as a character.

'Family means everything,' according to a recent EastEnders trailer. Who was most excited in your family when you got the part of Ben?

My nan. She loves her soaps. She's always been a massive EastEnders fan so now she's got something to show off to her friends about. She hasn't been to the set yet but soon I'm going to get her up to Elstree [where the show is made].

Which cast member/character would she most like to have her picture taken with?

Probably Gillian [Taylforth], who plays my mum, Kathy. She loves her.

When you were finally told you would be playing Ben Mitchell did you have to think for a second about taking the part?

I did, because it's a massive game-changer. You've got this added pressure of it being a character that's been well established and is integral to the Mitchells. I needed five minutes. You almost have the fear because you want to make sure you get it right.

You've talked about getting stubble rash after three hours of filming Ben and Callum's first kiss. Will you both be clean-shaven if there's more snogging ahead?

Yeah, we might have to write that into our contracts! Three hours of filming — it was a long enough time to develop beard rash! But I'm happy with Ben's stubble at the moment. It works for the character. It makes him seem a bit grittier.

Is there any screen-snogging etiquette? Do you chew breath mints first?

Oh well, when I snogged Tony I just ate loads of garlic [laughs]. No, I'm joking, not at all. To be honest, you get so encapsulated in the moment of being that character at that point that you kind of forget etiquette. You're just focused on telling the story.



Powerhouse: Steve McFadden

You appeared in panto with Steve McFadden when you were nine. What did you learn from watching Steve doing his Captain Hook?

I remember him always being incredibly professional. He still is now. He's an absolute powerhouse and is very giving as an actor. He approaches it as if it's his first day, which is so commendable.

You had a powerful scene with Steve when Ben thought Phil was about to fall off the wagon. Were you buzzing after that?

It was one of the most thrilling moments of my career. To do a scene of that stature — it was nine minutes long and we did it in one take — was great. You have moments sometimes where you come off set and think, 'I know we've just made something magic.'

What's your proudest end-of-episode 'doof doof'?

The one at the end of the Pride episode. That whole episode was brilliantly crafted by [director] Laurence Wilson. In among all the beauty of Pride and all of this love and ambition and drive, you've got the hatred as well. It's such an important story to tell because it still happens all the time. It ended with Ben on the floor of the Arches after Callum's brother Stuart has beaten him up.

■ EastEnders is on BBC1 on Mondays and Fridays at 8pm, and Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7.30pm