

# LIFE ARGUS

# Husband finds strength in children and music

**BEN** Westwood has been inspired by his children to release his debut album three and a half years after he lost his wife Carolina to breast cancer. **LIAM LINES** reports

**I** STILL dislike those conversations when a person first finds out that my wife has died," says Ben Westwood. "I've had the conversations dozens and dozens and dozens of times."

The University of Brighton lecturer said: "I don't like to call myself a widower. I hate the word. I see myself as a single dad. The fact is, as a widower, you've lost somebody. As a father you have two people."

Part of Ben's debut album is about young widowers and how they can get through their loss. The album is called *Sing Like Your Life Depends On It* and comes out on February 24.

It takes us through Ben's life from finding love to trauma and grief and coming to terms with the tragedy and finding solace.

Ben, 40, from Polegate, hopes people will not only enjoy his music but find deeper meaning with it too: "I've always been affected by music that has more to say."

He says Adele's 21 album had a huge influence on him in terms of raw emotion.

"I really got into The Beatles and John Lennon when I was a teenager and, in his first solo album, he expressed a lot of very deep-rooted feelings about the loss of his mum."

Ben studied music at undergraduate level but did not envisage making a career out of the industry and chose to continue his passion for writing.

As a student journalist he found himself working at *The Independent* under the BBC's Andrew Marr. After he graduated, he chose to teach English abroad as many of his peers had done the same.

"I didn't want to just teach English in Spain, I was looking at South America or Asia and managed to get a job in Ecuador."

At the age of 22, this is where he met Carolina and they hit it off immediately.

Ben said: "We got married relatively quickly after meeting."

"It was around eight months. It was quite a whirlwind romance, really."

He then returned to London to train as a journalist and worked at *The Telegraph*, specialising in travel.

In 2007 the pair chose to return to Ecuador and emigrated there where he taught at a university and wrote several travel guides.

But it all came crashing down in October 2011 when Carolina was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Ben said: "It was a massive shock and our kids were so young at the time, Jake was aged six and Isabella four. Often when young women have cancer it is a lot more aggressive."

Carolina died in June 2013.

Ben had been writing music on and off before his wife's death.

He said: "I'd known Carolina for nearly 15 years. To lose somebody in that way and for your children to lose their mum, for me, that's the hardest part of all of this."

"When Carolina was diagnosed, I continued writ-



Ben Westwood has found solace through music



Carolina and Ben on their wedding day



Carolina and Ben with their children Isabella and Jake

ing songs for her, one of which is on the album. It's called *I Will Never Leave You*.

He said: "But when she got really ill, I stopped completely. We're talking four years without writing a note."

He said the start of the process came from nowhere. "The songs only started flowing out last year. The first one I wrote was *I Miss You*, which is one of the most intense on the album and then I wrote *Up Again*."

"I wrote a song called *Time Heal, Me* which is all about trying to recover and, hopefully, over time you can heal."

Ben describes how he came to find himself with all these songs and needed to find a way to piece them all together.

"I actually recorded 16 tracks in the space of about three months, half of which were older songs and half were new."

"By the time I had got all those songs, I thought I've

got to try to order this. It made sense to have one side of the album to be the songs I wrote before everything went wrong, the themes of nostalgia, love songs, family life, marriage and when you first meet someone, that first kind of excitement."

Ben got some help from Stuart Epps, who helped produce music for the likes of Elton John, Oasis and Led Zeppelin.

Once finished, he took a step back and waited a year to plan the launch of the album.

"I decided to take some time over planning how to launch it and I got in touch with quite a few different charities because I realised it would seem a bit strange to just launch an album and to try to carve myself out a music career talking about so many serious issues."

He has selected *Winston's Wish* and *Widowed and Young* to receive 50 per cent of the proceeds from the album sales.

*Winston's Wish* supports children, young people

and their families after the death of a parent or sibling.

*Widowed and Young* is a national charity for men and women aged 50 or under when their partner dies. It's a peer-to-peer support group run by a network of volunteers.

Ben said: "Because it's hard when you're younger, young people don't know how to relate to you, whereas when you're older, it happens in your peer group - people lose someone."

"Those charities do some very important work." Ben described how he found inspiration for some of the lyrics through his children.

He said: "In the song *I Miss You*, the lyrics in the first verse are 'sometimes I wake and I cannot find the light, although, it's day I'm stuck here in the night'. That was written specifically with my son in mind who was having a lot of nightmares."

"In the second verse, the lyrics go 'sometimes I dream and I don't want it to end'. That was a refer-

ence to my daughter having dreams about her mum and actually wanting the dream to carry on."

Ben is also keen to highlight that the lyrics are not always about such difficult times.

He said: "In *Let in the Light*, there's one lyric where I mention that you're full of so many questions and answers that you cannot work out."

"And that's really a reference to my daughter who asks a huge number of questions. 'I'll be sitting having breakfast and she'll ask me how many blades of grass there are on the lawn or how many stars are in the sky.'"

"She's a smart girl. She's only nine years old - very inquisitive - and so she knows when I sing that line it's about her asking questions. We allow ourselves a smile there."

Ben believes there's no point in singing unless you feel like your life depends on it.

The idea of the song title *Sing Like Your Life Depends On It* originally came about during a conversa-

tion with a friend.

He said: "I was having a conversation with a friend, who's also a musician and I ended up saying sing like your life depends on it, and I thought that's exactly what I mean."

"Before all this happened, I suppose I wrote songs and may be I was making a conscious effort in the hope people might like them."

"They were more upbeat but it wasn't all that real. 'I was quite happy when I was writing them but it doesn't have the same power.'"

The cover of the album is Ben's face half in dark and half in the light. It's quite a striking image.

"I think the album cover is a bit darker than the album as a whole because there are quite upbeat songs, such as *We've Got It Made*."

"I made a conscious effort to make sure there was plenty of light in the album."

Ben will be performing in Eastbourne at the Printers Playhouse in Grove Road on February 25.

## Charities for the bereaved

**WIDOWED and Young (WAY)** is the only national charity in the UK for men and women aged 50 or over when their partner dies.

It is a support group run by a network of volunteers who have been bereaved at a young age, so they understand exactly what those who come to the charity are going through.

WAY was founded in 1997 and has gained 2,300 members across the UK.

Winston's Wish was the

first established charity for child bereavement support services in the UK.

The charity was founded by Julie Stokes, a clinical psychologist, in 1992.

She was inspired when she visited the US and Canada as part of the Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship.

The charity stated that one in 25 children and young people has experienced bereavement of a parent or sibling.