It's quite possible that you do not know who [Rylan Clark](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2012/nov/11/x-factor-live-sixth-results-show) is, but he's never heard of [G2](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2012/dec/13/g2) either – and if you're wondering what he's doing here in its pages, so is he. He's just got back from a gig in Hull when we meet at the west London offices of his management company, and will be on a plane to Dublin later for another gig, so he's sorting out his luggage, much of which appears to consist of miniature bottles and chocolates raided from last night's hotel mini-bar. He is wearing an electric blue tracksuit and Ugg boots – "FLAs, actually, they're sort of luxury Uggs" – with his hair stuck up on end, all wonky from sleeping in the car. In the past he has cheerfully confessed to spending every last penny on his appearance, and would sooner go without food than economise on cosmetic improvements, but he is one of the most unselfconscious people I have ever met. I'm pretty sure he would struggle to identify the Guardian on a newsstand, and he greets me with the giddy intimacy of a fellow guest on a hen night, yet his attention is more engaged than almost any interviewee I can recall.

"So I was worried that this is, like, the Guardian. So what is it for? G2?" That's right, I say. "And G2 is ...?" As I try to describe G2 he listens closely. "So I'm probably not your normal type of interviewee, then?" Well, no, I agree; last week it was a [foreign minister](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/aug/01/sayeeda-warsi-decca-aitkenhead), and the next one will probably be a party leader. He stares for a moment, as if just checking I'm not joking. "And then it's me? What have they asked for me for?" Actually, I tell him, "they" didn't. It was me. Like many viewers, when this [X Factor](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/the-x-factor) series began I had Rylan down as the obligatory freak. The novelty act is central to [the X Factor](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/the-x-factor) formula, and requires a talentless wannabe of questionable mental stability and disturbingly unrealistic ambition, whose job is to make headlines and get people talking, then get voted off. So when Rylan at first did his duty – collapsing in theatrical hysterics when selected for the finals, then outpolling a better singer in week one and provoking Gary Barlow to storm off in disgust – I could not have been more bored.

The 24-year-old inhabits a contemporary subculture for whom reality TV has evolved into a professional network, a lifestyle choice and a philosophical identity, not unlike the armed forces, say, or the church. Before this year's X Factor, Rylan had starred in a modelling show called Signed By Katie Price, and come within a whisker of the Big Brother house; two of his friends made The X Factor finals last year, and he knew some of the Essex boys who got as far as boot camp this year. He was going to make a guest appearance on [The Only Way is Essex](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/the-only-way-is-essex) last week, until some of the cast threw a [hissy fit](http://www.mtv.co.uk/news/the-only-way-is-essex/369987-the-only-way-is-essex-cast-quit-threat-rylan-clark), which swiftly – inevitably – made its way on to Twitter, where the last time I checked it was still going.

In other words, Rylan was meant to be another vacuous, fame-hungry, narcissistic diva. But as the weeks went on it became increasingly apparent that he was nothing of the sort. Unaffected, infectious, quick-witted and authentic; the rest of the contestants adored him, and the public soon fell in love with him too. Talentless chutzpah usually wears thin once viewers see that it's really grandiose self-delusion, but all Rylan's spray tan and Lady Gaga-esque camp failed to conceal an intelligence and grace, which took everyone by surprise. Daybreak hired him as its [entertainment](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/entertainment) editor within hours of his eventual elimination, the next Celebrity Big Brother is rumoured to have already signed him up, and it is quite possible that his showbusiness career will outlast that of every other X Factor contestant.

Whether you find Rylan's overnight success inspiring or depressing will depend upon your view of his sort of celebrity. But he is smarter than the average, not yet jaded enough to be guarded, and wants to make the case for the ambition of fame.

Rylan can still remember watching Will Young win the Pop Idol final. It was only 10 years ago, when the winner still assumed he had to keep his sexuality a secret. Rylan was 14 at the time, living in east London with his mum, his nan and his brother. "Fat, ginger and gay," he says, "I got all the gay shit. I wasn't the tanned, dark-haired good-looking kid that played football, I was the gay ginger one that done the dancing in the corner of the playground with the girls."

He was also the brainy one, coming top of his class throughout primary school. But in his mid teens the family moved out to Essex, and he began to redefine himself. "When I went to secondary school my mind developed from education, education, education, to fuck education." Why? "Cos I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be famous. I didn't know what I wanted to be famous for. I didn't care. It was about being, not doing. I looked at people like the Spice Girls and thought: 'That's the life I want.'"