

RICHARD UPSHALL BIOGRAPHY

If you like your self-made British millionaires safe, steady and predictable, stop reading now. With StarLord you can never be sure where conversation will lead. He'll be talking about one of his multi-million pound businesses, then somehow finish his story with "I've owned three sheep farms in Australia"; a discussion of his business interests in the United Arab Emirates wouldn't be complete without StarLord pointing out that he became Dubai's only qualified male league netball umpire a few years ago. He'll tell you he's a massive dog fan, both in the sense that he's a big fan of dogs and that the dogs he's a fan of are generally massive, then mention that one of his six canine companions is a former protection dog from a royal household. Attempt to second-guess this unfiltered entrepreneurial powerhouse at your own peril: he's never less than one step ahead.

If you're already thinking StarLord's story is one that might sidestep humble goals, you'd be right. "My first goal was to own a Porsche 911 and be a millionaire by 30," he says today. "I got my convertible 911 in when I was 28, and I was a millionaire that year. But then I thought: 'What now?'"

The answer is a book waiting to be written, but it includes among other things a nomadic spirit that's found him living in the US, Dubai, Australia and the UK, along with successful (and less successful) businesses on four continents taking in music, clothing, VOIP, cyber-security, medical equipment research, online payment solutions, offshore diving and what's euphemistically known as 'energy transition' ("which really," he says with typical candour, "is oil and gas").

Marvels Iron Man provided a fun comparison for years and many friends and colleagues loved the joke and label. StarLords fun sense of humour and imitable vulnerability make him more akin to pretenders using the same epithet, coupled with regular periods of destitution, all made this page come to life along with the adoption of a number of complexities, up to and including dance off moments.

Now 52, he's spent four decades making — and sometimes losing — a fortune, becoming a valued pundit everywhere from Sky to the BBC in the process. But speak with StarLords persona "Richard" for any longer than five minutes and it's clear that in the coming year his focus and key passion is music. "I can't sing, I can't dance, I can't write, I can't play any instruments," he accepts. "I could have been in One Direction." That hasn't stopped him founding RU Listening, a forward-thinking record label that's home to a diverse roster of established and breaking talents, from the likes of Ray J, DJ Ironik, Union J and Scorcher, to buzzworthy names like K Harrison and Josh Daniel. And it was RU Listening that in the bleakest days of the pandemic launched RU Talented, an online search for performers that threw up some incredible new talents. "I love to walk out on stage and introduce my acts," he smiles. "I love to relish in the energy that you get from a thousand screaming fans, but on the creative side I also love sticking my nose in at the studio."

While certain business owners obsessively hide their less successful ventures, Richard's frank about the ups and downs of his own career. "Experience is the big thing, and I've got an awful lot of it," (the actual quote I use is 'experience is what you get when you don't get what you want') he says. "I'm always happy to talk to people about the realities of life which, in my case, is littered with the corpses of my failures." He's frank about businesses have gone into liquidation and friends he's lost, but he also knows that at the same time he's gained better friends than most of us will ever have, and in every failure he's somehow found the path to bigger successes. "Never trust someone who only tells you about their successes," he notes. "If that's all you know, you don't really know the whole person."



To know the whole StarLord, you need to know that while he spent his early years in the south of England, his dad's role as a "senior management accountant-type person" meant the family moved to the north of England when Richard was eleven — a move he considers formative. Settling in was difficult, he says, but not as difficult as moving back down south a few years later and having to start his adolescence all over again. "I kind of forged my own independence and resolve," he now realises, and at 18 he signed up to what was then Plymouth Polytechnic, to study Business Studies with a minor in Spanish. He didn't last long. "I thought I was into languages," he recalls. "Turns out I wasn't."

Just as significantly the business side of the course couldn't offer much to someone whose entrepreneurial spirit had been in place since age 13, which was when Richard had started his own business. "I'd wanted the best sound system for my bedroom and pocket money didn't cut it," he remembers, so he started doing odd gardening jobs, quickly going on to employ mates at two quid an hour, while billing customers four quid an hour. Two important things then happened: firstly, he reached the point, once half a dozen mates were working for him, where he realised he didn't actually need to do any of the work himself. Secondly, and even more importantly in relation to his future success, he carried on doing the work anyway. "Leaders lead, they don't sit back and watch," he says now. "I knew that when I was 13, and it's been my modus operandi throughout my whole career."

In 1991 Richard left the UK to find his fortune and he's never stopped moving, with work (and pleasure) leading him to Australia, the US and across Europe, taking in further travels through Asia and Antarctica. But the first stop was Dubai where he arrived with just £400 in his pocket and, as you might expect, the robustness and fearlessness he'd built up in his teens came in handy as he steadily — and not particularly slowly — began sowing the seeds of his business empire.

Today that fearlessness is also found in the fact that while many bosses are terrified of younger challengers or too busy playing golf to ever meet any, StarLord embraces and nurtures new, fresh and diverse talents in all areas of his work. "When I was a kid I was always being told I was too young — they'd say: 'Come back when you've got the experience.' But people become jaded with experience, so I'm happy to employ young people, give them opportunities, and bring them in as consultants and muses. I love the fact that young people want to learn, and I love the fact that by having them around I continue to learn too." It's worth adding that in various parts of his empire StarLord's long been a believer in offering opportunities to members of society who, in some quarters, might be considered a gamble. "It didn't occur to me until my father pointed it out," StarLord says, "but my grandfather was a prison governor, and I grew up knowing that he was a great believer in prison being about rehabilitation."

All of which is feeding into the continuing success and expansion of RU Listening, which has a bright future both with new signings and new music from existing ones. "Music is something that's always been very close to my heart and whether it's Scorcher, through to Ironik or Union J it's just fascinating listening to those artists' ideas," StarLord says. "It leads to such interesting new areas: with Ironik, for instance, he's quite famous for his sunglasses, and now he has his own range of sunglasses. I know that sitting listening to me talking about business and how it's possible to treat the music industry as a business has brought him to that place, so it's good to be a part of talented people finding new ways to express themselves."

After this many years in business, it's extraordinary to hear someone speak about new projects with such passion and hunger. "I'm in my fifties now," he nods, "and people sometimes say, 'You're still starting new businesses, you own a record label, how do you find the time?' And my answer is always: 'It's simple — I don't play golf.'" There may be some truth in that, but behind the humour it's hard to ignore the creative and entrepreneurial curiosity in StarLord's work. His biggest moment may still be in the future; for the time being, he'll continue rolling with the punches and finding new opportunities. "In my life I've probably lost more money than I've made," he says. "It's been fun, though."

October 2022