

The Insider

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Your Connection to the BBC Sales Company

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Editor's Note

Welcome to the year number four of *The Insider*. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it's been a pleasure to share my love of British comedy with such intelligent people of impeccable taste. At the risk of sounding like a teenager I have to say you guys rock.

So do the stations that offer *The Insider* as a pledge gift. I'd like to take a moment to thank them for their support and for having the foresight to realize that there are fans out there who are hungry for this kind of information.

In this issue our exclusive history of British comedy comes full circle from the 60s through to today. I can't stress enough the importance of keeping an open mind as British comedy moves into the future. There is a lot of good stuff out there, so give it a chance.

Along with other goodies this issue also contains our exclusive sneak peek at the eagerly anticipated ninth season of *As Time Goes By*. I put in a spoiler warning, but I'll bet even if you don't want to know what happens you won't be able to resist reading.

Enjoy this issue and I'll talk to you next time.

Michelle Street, Editor

Bill Owen

Much More Than Compo

For Bill Owen, the role of Compo on *Last of the Summer Wine* was something of a mixed blessing.



I became a professional entertainer 63 years ago, but the past 26 have been occupied by a little man in a wooly hat.

Bill Owen

On the one hand, Compo was the role of a lifetime that brought him acclaim, adoration and steady work for over twenty years. It also brought him the town of Holmfirth, a place he grew to love and adopt as his home.

On the other hand, Owen became so ingrained in the public consciousness as Compo that his numerous other accomplishments as an actor and writer were often overlooked. Fans loved the silly old geezer in a wooly cap and wellies, but the man who played him was much more complicated than that.

Owen was born William John Owen Rowbotham in London on March 14, 1914. His father was a tram driver and his mother worked in a laundry. Staunchly working-class, his parents instilled in Bill a worldview that was distinctly radical. He early on developed a mistrust of the upper class and a hatred of pretension that would stay with him his entire life.

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The Insider Mailbox



In The News



EDITOR'S NOTE:

In the last issue I gave the information on the theme music from *Vicar of Dibley*. The music is indeed available on a CD entitled *Goodall: Choral Works*. The CD is available through amazon.com and purchase information can be found by plugging the name of the CD into amazon's search engine. The CD also includes the theme music for *Mr. Bean*.

LAST OF SUMMER WINE LOCATION

Thank you for including where some of the shows are filmed in the recent *Insider*. I really think the scenery in *Last of The Summer Wine* is beautiful and have long wondered where in England it is filmed. Please include the location in the next newsletter.

Eleanor Eccleston, Fruitland, MD

EDITOR REPLIES: As you may have already read in the article on Tom Owen, *Last of the Summer Wine* is filmed in the Yorkshire village of Holmfirth. You're certainly right about it being beautiful.

IAN LAVENDER

I was recently watching *EastEnders* and noticed the name Ian Lavender on the credits. Is this the same Ian Lavender who starred in *Dad's Army*?

Sandie Salvucci, Indianapolis, IN

He sure has changed, but yes, it is the same Ian Lavender who played that "stupid boy" Pike in *Dad's Army*.

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The Insider welcomes all correspondence. Send letters via email to editor Michelle Street at bcdigest@soltec.com or by snail mail to: *The Insider*, c/o Greg Parsons, BBC Worldwide Americas, 747 3rd Avenue, New York, NY. 10017 - 2803. Include your full name and location. All letters are assumed to be for publication unless marked otherwise. **The Insider** reserves the right to edit letters for reasons of space or clarity. Let us know what you think!

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There will be much rejoicing among **Monty Python** fans when three skits written by the late **Graham Chapman** are performed at this year's Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. Chapman died from cancer in 1989, but the sketches were recently uncovered by his literary executor Jim Yoakum. The skits will be performed by the comedy troupe **Sketch Club**. There are many other works that **Chapman** left behind and Yoakum stated that he hopes to see those performed as well.

Dame Judi Dench has received yet another honor. The Academy Award winning star was recently given a Doctor of Letters from the University of Leeds for her lifelong dedication to the arts. **Dame Judi** will be seen in the new season of *As Time Goes By* (see article in this issue) and in the new James Bond movie *Die Another Day*. Otherwise, she is planning to take things easy until fall when she'll appear on the West End in the new play *The Breath of Life*. Her co-star will be the estimable **Dame Maggie Smith**, so book your tickets early for what promises to be a great production.

Romance is in the air for *AbFab* co-star **Julia Sawalha** (who played Saffie) and *Jonathan Creek* himself, **Alan Davies**. The pair is dating and was spotted together at the wedding of Julia's sister **Nadia Sawalha** to director **Mark Adderly**.

In an interview with the official Red Dwarf Fan Club magazine *Better Than Life*, **Doug Naylor** gave out a few kernels of information about the still-in-production *RD* movie. Naylor said that co-director **Ed Bye** has left the film and that he will be directing it himself. He also revealed that the plot will not pick up where Season 8 left off. "It begins before the series started," he said, "and then goes off in a direction that the series didn't go off on. So it's set up and then has it's own story, complete in itself, whilst still being able to assemble the cast that we know and love." Yes, but what *The Insider* wants to know is when the SMEG are we going to see this movie? In sad *RD* news, long-time production designer **Mel Bibby** passed away on June 15th. His creativity and vision will be sorely missed.

FROM *BALLY K* TO HOLLYWOOD:

Meet COLIN FARRELL, Tinseltown's Newest Hotshot

In terms of Hollywood buzz, Colin Farrell is not just hot – he's on fire.

In a relatively short period of time, Farrell has gone from playing Eamon's nephew Danny on *BallyK* to the brink of Hollywood A-list stardom. He's been directed by Stephen Spielberg and co-starred alongside Hollywood heavyweights like Bruce Willis, Tom Cruise, Ben Affleck and Al Pacino. At the age of 26 he can already command \$5 million per picture.

Farrell's rise to stardom has a bit to do with his dark good looks, but he's also a talented actor who more than holds his own against his famous co-stars. When he appeared with Willis in *Hart's War* it was Farrell whose performance was singled out for critical praise.

In case you couldn't tell by his sometimes-indecipherable accent, Colin Farrell is a Dublin boy. His father, Eamon Farrell Sr., was a famous soccer player while his mother raised Colin and his three siblings. Colin wasn't particularly interested in school and until his mid-teens considered following in his father's footsteps as a footballer. After graduation he drifted through a number of jobs, including a stint as a part of a company that toured Ireland in a mini-van giving demonstrations of country-western line dancing.

He then studied briefly at Dublin's Gaiety School of Acting. Despite the fact that he didn't even finish the course, Farrell was soon making a name for himself as an actor. A performance in the television miniseries *Falling for a Dancer* led to an audition for the role of Eamon's nephew Danny on *Ballykissangel*.

His entrance on *BallyK* astride a beautiful horse could not have been more appropriate for a future heartthrob. His character, Danny, was a bit of troubled lad who, following run-ins with the police, came to BallyK to ensure the safety of his prized horse, Razor. For two seasons Farrell received plenty of "on the job training" by working with seasoned veterans like Tony Doyle, who played wheeler-dealer Brian Quigley.

The turning point in Farrell's career, however, came in 1998 when Academy Award winning actor Kevin Spacey caught Farrell's performance in a London stage production of *A Little World of Our Own*. Spacey was so impressed that he helped Farrell land a role in the 2000 feature *Ordinary Decent Criminals* and was also instrumental in helping Colin get representation with the powerful Creative Artists Agency talent agency.

Farrell's breakthrough role was in the film *Tigerland*. This thoroughly Irish lad was quite convincing as Roland Bozz, a Texan preparing to go to Vietnam at a Louisiana boot camp. The film wasn't a commercial success, but was seen by the right people in the movie industry. Hollywood then woke up to the fact that Farrell had the goods to be a star. Colin would play another American – Jesse James – in his next film *American Outlaws*.

Since then he has worked virtually non-stop. He filmed *Hart's War* with Bruce Willis and went immediately to the set of the futuristic thriller *Minority Report*, directed by Stephen Spielberg and starring Tom Cruise. His upcoming projects include *Daredevil* with Ben Affleck and *The Recruit* with Al Pacino. In amongst all this activity he also found the time to fall in love with actress Amelia Warner. The couple were married, but divorced just a few months later.

He may be Hollywood's latest hotshot, but at heart Farrell is still a Dubliner who enjoys a pint (or twelve) and whose volatile Irish temper can sometimes get him in trouble. However, this volatility may be part of the reason he's so compelling on screen. Incredibly, he doesn't seem to have let Hollywood go to his head. He remains grounded mainly due to strong family ties and the pride he takes in his Irish heritage.

Whether Farrell's meteoric rise will result in an equally rapid plunge remains to be seen, but for the moment this boy from *BallyK* seems to be doing just fine.

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As Time Goes By: Season 9



The final return of America's favorite romantic comedy



ALERT! ALERT! SPOILER ALERT! This article contains information on the new season of *As Time Goes By*. If you don't want to know what happens, go ahead and skip to the next article. Don't worry – I won't be offended.

If you spend a lot of time watching television or movies, you might get the idea that love is almost exclusively the province of the young and beautiful. Middle-aged couples, when shown at all, are normally portrayed as cranky sparring partners rather than people who still might still have an iota of interest in one another – romantic or otherwise.

That's part of the reason why audiences have taken *As Time Goes By* to their hearts. It's refreshing to see a not – so-young sitcom couple whose relationship hasn't deteriorated into something along the lines of *Sybil* and *Basil* or even *Hyacinth* and *Richard*.

But then again, *As Time Goes By* was never intended to be as overtly farcical as *Fawlty Towers* or *Keeping Up Appearances*. This gentle romantic comedy began as a “will they or won't they?” story about two middle-aged lovers – Jean Pargetter (Dame Judi Dench) and Lionel Hardcastle (Geoffrey Palmer) who reunited after forty years. Could they - and should they - rekindle the spark?

That plotline was resolved fairly early on when Jean and Lionel moved in together and eventually married. In less-skilled hands the show might have ended right there. However, writer Bob Larbey (who penned such classics as *Mulberry* and *Good Neighbors*) was smart enough to take the show in interesting new directions such as Jean having to deal with retirement and Lionel's worries about being able to help with the couple's retirement. He also left himself other romantic entanglements to explore and sort out, which he does nicely and neatly in the final season of this popular sitcom.

Jean and Lionel are present and accounted for, but the focus shifts to the romantic dilemmas faced by Jean's daughter Judy and her former employee Sandy. Of course Jean is right there in the middle, trying to prod their relationships along in her own inimitable style. Lionel cautions her not to get involved.

“If this is going to be a lecture about minding my own business and not wanting everything to turn out for everybody, you can forget it,” she tells him. “I don't mind my own business and I do want everything to turn out right for everybody.”

First, she wants to see happiness for her daughter. Throughout the series Judy has been involved in an on/off relationship with the self-centered, ambitious publisher Alistair Deacon. As season nine begins they are definitely off. During the first episode Alistair, who had suffered a career crisis, gets his mojo working once again. Now that he has his financial house in order Alistair decides to propose to Judy once again. She turns him down for the same reasons as before - Judy wants someone less work-obsessed who's going to be there for her. She can't get Alistair to see that she doesn't care about him because of his money. In fact, she liked him better when he was down. Alistair claims that he's going to change, but Judith doesn't believe him.

Meanwhile, Sandy and her rugby-obsessed beau Harry are also at a critical stage in their relationship. This becomes even more critical when Harry announces that he's been promoted to Detective Sergeant and is going

(continued on page 19)

As Time Goes By: What Happened When



Now that *As Time Goes By* has filmed its last episode and we've given you a sneak preview of season nine, *The Insider* presents a guide to the other eight seasons. So get yourself a custard tart and enjoy this look back. After you've refreshed your memory, go and take the quiz on page 19.

Season 1 (1992)

Former lovers Jean Pargetter and Lionel Hardcastle are reunited after almost forty years when Lionel uses Jean's secretarial agency to help him with his memoir, *My Life in Kenya*. At first he's attracted to Jean's twice-married daughter Judith, without realizing who her mother is. Meanwhile, Lionel's smarmy and egocentric agent, Alistair Deacon, takes a shine to agency owner Jean.

So at first, the older man (Lionel) is attracted to the younger woman (Judith) while the younger man (Alistair) is attracted to the older woman (Jean). As the season ends, this tangled web of romantic intrigue is about to be unwoven. Jean and Lionel realize that the years of silence between them were caused by something as simple as letters that went undelivered. They take hesitant steps towards resuming a friendship while Alistair finds a lot to like about Jean's daughter Judith.

Season 2 (1993)

Pressure mounts in several ways. Lionel's book is about to be published and there are concerns about how well it will sell and about the new image Lionel will need to project. It's tough to teach an old dog new tricks (especially an old dog as set in his ways as Lionel), and Alistair's attempts at a makeover meet with mixed results.

There's also the question of where Jean and Lionel's relationship is going. Jean meets Lionel's father (the ever youthful Rocky) and Rocky's housekeeper, the weather obsessed, fanatically precise Mrs. Bale. Also introduced in the season are Jean's former sister-in-law Penny and

her husband Stephen, who think that "poor Jean" has given up on life following the death of her husband.

Trying to explain her still fuzzy relationship with Lionel proves to be tricky for Jean, but as the season ends the pair are set to once again become more than friends.

Season 3 (1994)

The season starts in Paris, where Jean and Lionel are on the holiday they had wanted to take many years earlier. They return to the news that Rocky, 85, is going to marry Madge, 78. Their commitment to one another is another wake-up call to Jean and Lionel to think about where their relationship is headed. They decide to move in together and after some initial confusion, they begin sharing Jean's house.

Lionel and Jean then head to Los Angeles to meet with television big wigs. Lionel's book may not have set the world on fire, but there is interest in him writing a mini-series based on it. Of course, since this is Hollywood there's very little chance that the story will actually resemble the truth.

Jean also forges ahead professionally, opening up a second branch of her secretarial service. She hires the gorgeous, absolutely perfect Sally "Miss Ice Cubes" Curtis to run it. Jean is not happy, though, when Sally sends Lionel the beautiful Daisy (Zoe Hilson) to help him with the mini-series. Surely that can't be jealousy coming from the usually tough Miss Pargetter, can it?

(continued on next page)

Season 4 (1995)

Lionel is trying hard to write the mini-series but has a number of distractions – mainly of the female variety. Things are going smoothly for Jean and Lionel, but everyone else seems embroiled in a romantic crisis. Sandy, a secretary from Jean's office, is now sharing the home with Jean, Lionel and Judith after breaking up with her boyfriend. They are soon joined by Penny, who temporarily separates from Stephen when he tells a white lie to throw her off the track about their upcoming surprise anniversary party.

Adding to this distraction is Mrs. Flack, who becomes Lionel's secretary following the dismissal of the beautiful Daisy. Mrs. Flack has a good heart, but is absolutely hopeless when it comes to being of any help to Lionel. Jean swallows her pride and Daisy returns.

Series writer Larbey then gets to have a lot of fun satirizing American television when the couple deals with show biz visitors from the States who use Rocky's country house as a setting for Lionel's mini-series.

Most important, Lionel and Jean finally do something they should have done years earlier – they marry.

Season 5 (1996)

During season four Lionel was given possession of Rocky's country house since he and Madge are usually trotting about the globe anyway. Jean and Lionel welcome it as a peaceful place to spend weekends, but the house becomes something of a burden when they meet up with the "Hampshire set," a tight-knit group of locals who overwhelm Jean and Lionel with social invitations. Jean and Lionel discover, however, that the locals have some disturbing, cliquish habits and take steps to disentangle themselves from the gang.

Also during this season Lionel's mini-series (called *Just Two People*) hits the small screen in America to the overwhelming indifference of the few viewers who see it. It's no wonder, seeing as the Korean battle scenes were shot in Wales.

Season 6 (1997)

Season six takes a step back from the romantic to deal with Jean's reluctant acceptance of the fact that she needs to slow down and retire. Without the worry of her secretarial agency, she has nothing to do but concentrate on other people's problems. She frets about her daughter's love life when Judy and Alistair go through a

rough patch and also attempts to find out more about the mysterious Mrs. Bale.

Seasons six and seven are also about aging. Jean is far from having one foot in the grave, but now that her work has slowed down she needs to find constructive ways to spend her time. Lionel seems content to take things slowly and catch up on the reading he never did during his youth, but Jean needs a different kind of activity. Volunteering seems to be the perfect answer, but in the process Jean volunteers the rest of them as well.

Season 7 (1998)

Jean and Lionel may be settled in their relationship, but season seven still contains romantic problems aplenty. Judy and Alistair reach a critical point in their relationship while Sandy finds a new love interest in a policeman named Harry. Like any good "parents," Jean and Lionel (well, mainly Jean) try to find out more about Harry in their own discreet manner. Sandy discovers, however, that she must play second fiddle to his love of rugby and becomes disenchanted.

Jean reunites with an old friend James Penny, only to find that sometimes old acquaintances should be forgotten. Jean's curiosity is also peaked by the arrival of new neighbors and Alistair does a striptease to the delight of a number of senior citizens.

Season 8 (2000)

Romantic problems continue for Judy and Sandy. While on the outs with Judy, Alistair decides to ask Sandy out. Sandy's had it with Harry's inattentiveness and wants the glitz and pampering that Alistair can provide but worries about Judy's reaction. Judy's fine with it, though she seems unable to convince everyone else of that. Harry then asks Judy out. Changing partners, so to speak, doesn't work. Sandy realizes that Alistair's heart belongs to Judy and breaks things off with Lionel. Judy realizes that Harry's not the guy for her. Poor Alistair - along with his romantic troubles, he encounters financial difficulties as well.

Meanwhile, the whole crew (except Lionel) falls in love with a mangy dog that follows Lionel home. Jean tries to keep up with the times by getting on the Internet and Lionel worries about being able to help financially as he and Jean grow old together.

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The Complete and Utter (Sorta) History of British Comedy

EPILOGUE

RECENT BRITCOMS

Like most things in life, British comedy has shown itself to be cyclical in nature. The 60s were dominated by politically charged satire and ended with the anarchic silliness of the Pythons. Then came the 70s, an era of safe, suburban sitcoms and the beginning of David Croft's long string of hits such as *Are You Being Served?* In the 80s, politics were again on the mind of young people who despised Mrs. Thatcher and the Tory party. They decided that things needed a little bit of shaking up and out of their anger came the loud, politically correct alternative scene. Finally, the stifling political correctness of the 80s morphed into the more politically incorrect, outlandish comedies that flourished during the 90s.

The changes can be explained in part by societal and governmental factors. However, what's truly altered the face of British television over the past couple of decades has been competition. The growth of cable and satellite television along with the creation of new channels has given Auntie Beeb a run for her money.

THE BRITISH FRIENDS...NOT

There has also been an increased Americanization of British television. In May of 2000, a sitcom called *Coupling* premiered. The romantic adventures of six good-looking Londoners automatically caused comparisons to *Friends*.

There are some similarities. *Coupling* stars three handsome men and three lovely women who dress well and live in great apartments. I'll even grant you that the *Friends* coffeehouse can be compared to the pub where the *Coupling* gang hangs out, but that's pretty much it. In my opinion, *Coupling* actually has more in common with HBO's *Sex and the City* than it does with *Friends*.

Partly because the BBC is not beholden to advertisers, writer Steven Moffat was able to give a more frank, open

and sometimes raunchy view of the lives of these "singletons." The character of Jane was bisexual, the girls openly discussed why Patrick was called a "tripod," and female body parts were unabashedly analyzed by the males.

Hang on a minute, though. For those who've never seen it, I don't mean to make *Coupling* sound like some frat-house teen comedy. It's not. It's a smart, bold look at life among singles from both the male and female perspective. The beautifully crafted scripts always end with a satisfying payoff and the appealing cast works together extraordinarily well.

Coupling will soon enter its third season and could prove to be a long runner. NBC recently snapped up the rights to produce a pilot for an American version hoping to use it as a replacement for *Friends* after its final season.

GIMME GIMME GIMME

Gimme Gimme Gimme carried the flag for *AbFab*-style outrageousness into the new millennium. This tale of two rather repulsive individuals sharing an apartment starred Kathy Burke (who played Patsy's boss in *AbFab*) as Linda La Hughes. Linda is ugly and obnoxious, but doesn't let that stop her from thinking that she's God's gift to men. Her flatmate, Tom Farrell (James Dreyfus from *The Thin Blue Line*), is a self-centered, fey actor. He's not very talented, but that doesn't let that stop him from thinking that he's God's gift to the acting profession.

Gimme Gimme Gimme showed the raucous adventures of these two deluded individuals. It was way over-the-top, but still a great showcase for the enormously talented duo of Burke and Dreyfus, who reveled in playing these two very unpleasant characters.

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MY HERO

The history of British comedy also bears out an old truth: the more liberal the government, the more conservative the comedy. This rule is definitely in force today as Tony Blair's "Cool Britannia" has seen a return to more traditional fare.

The trend back to a kindler, gentler Britcom started during the 90s with *The Vicar of Dibley* and *As Time Goes By*. Another good example is *My Hero*, starring Ardal O'Hanlon from *Father Ted* as a mild-mannered alien from the planet Ultron who comes to Earth and does all sorts of good deeds in the guise of superhero Thermoman. When not in superhero mode, though, he is George Sunday, an average – but ditzzy – bloke who falls in love with nurse Janet Dawkins.

The scripts – by *May to December* writer Paul Mendelson (see interview in this issue) – are neither offensive nor obscene, but sweet. A nice bit of nastiness, however, is provided by the characters of the pompous doctor Piers Crispin and his sarcastic receptionist, Mrs. Raven.

The BBC has made *My Hero* a comedy priority. Smart move, because they have a star in Ardal O'Hanlon and a show that will appeal to a wide audience.

MORE FAKE TV

During the 90s, there were a number of successful "fake TV" programs, such as *Knowing Me, Knowing You...with Alan Partridge* and *The Day Today*. These were brilliant spoofs of recognizable television genres. *Alan Partridge* totally trashed talk shows, their hosts, and even the concept of "light entertainment." Watch all six episodes of the exceptional *The Day Today* and you will never view another evening news program in the same way.

There were a couple of worthy successors to these shows recently. Both parodied the fly-on-the-wall style documentaries that claim to take viewers into the life of a normal person. And both succeeded beautifully because they could easily be mistaken for real.

People Like Us starred veteran comic Chris Langham as documentary filmmaker Roy Mallard, who spent time with folks in various professions trying to get a feel for what it's like to be an average working stiff. Like Alan Partridge, however, he ended up making a shambles of everything and a fool of himself. He also angered those he's trying to profile with his general ineptitude.

The results were hysterical. In one memorable scene at a school, a Spanish teacher was shown rattling on while the camera made it obvious that the students didn't have

a clue as to what she was saying. She finally asked a question of one poor student, who simply gave a confused look before sheepishly replying, "enchilada."

One of the cleverest things about the show was how Mallard was only heard off camera and very rarely seen. "Roy spotting" then became a game among viewers and indeed, look closely and you can catch brief glimpses in such places as shop windows.

People Like Us ran for two seasons and the program's brilliant attention to detail and beautifully understated acting made it an award-winning success.

A similar premise was used in *The Office*, one of the most critically lauded shows of the past couple of years. Ricky Gervais was wonderful as David Brent, the inefficient manager of a paper company in suburban Slough.

Anyone who has ever worked in an office for an idiot of a boss will be able to relate to this program. If you haven't worked in such a place, this will probably make you think twice before sending out your next resume.

Once again, it was the beautiful attention to detail and understated acting that made *The Office* brilliant. The mind-numbing boredom of typical office work and petty rivalries between co-workers were wonderfully and accurately shown. Best of all were David's failed attempts to liven up the office atmosphere and be pals with his underlings. These were pathetic and painful (yet hysterical) to watch.

There's a big difference between these characters and the ones we Americans have come to know and love. Roy Mallard and David Brent are not broad, farcical monsters like Hyacinth Bucket or Basil Fawlty. They are subtler and quieter, but in their own way just as monstrous. Nor is there a reliance on physical comedy or heavy *Blackadder* style sarcasm. Programs such as *People Like Us* and *The Office* raised a laugh not because of punch lines, but because the characters and situations were so close to the truth that they could almost make us squirm.

INTO THE FUTURE

Though many of the classics have now run their course, quality programs such as *The Office* and *People Like Us* show that there is still reason to be optimistic about the future of British comedy. Plus, many of the "stalwarts" are still relatively young and have much more to offer.

Blackadder co-writers Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, who also wrote *The Thin Blue Line*, continue to flourish. Curtis

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has turned into the master of the romantic comedy with the screenplays to several successful films (*Four Weddings and A Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*) under his belt. And fans can only hope that he'll find time to write another season of *The Vicar of Dibley*.

Meanwhile, Elton is still massively prolific. In the past couple of years he wrote and directed his first feature film (*Maybe Baby*, based on his novel *Inconceivable* – see review in this issue), and the books for two West End musicals – *Beautiful Game* (with music by Lord Andrew Lloyd Weber) and *We Will Rock You*, with music by the rock band Queen.

Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders are still busy as well. They continue to work together on occasion and there's no telling what Saunders will do with *AbFab*. French recently teamed with former *BallyK* star Stephen Tompkinson in a romantic comedy called *Ted and Alice*. French played a small-town woman who called off her engagement and then fell in love with a man who was everything her former fiancé wasn't. The man of her dreams, however turned out to be an alien. Sadly, the terrific cast couldn't save the poor script and bad direction of this mini-series.

TALENTS TO WATCH FOR

As the new millennium continues, Britcom fans can look forward to new seasons of *As Time Goes By*, *Last of the Summer Wine*, *My Hero* and *Coupling*. However, there are new major talents to watch out for as well.

First is Dylan Moran, a 31-year-old Irishman who got his big break by winning the prestigious Perrier Award for his stand-up show at the 1996 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Moran then teamed up with *Father Ted* co-writer Graham Linehan to create *Black Books*. This terrific sitcom was set in a small, cluttered bookshop run (poorly) by Moran's character – the loveably scruffy Bernard Black.

Then there's Paul Whitehouse. Whitehouse is not "new," so to speak. He's been around for ages and is best known for his sketch comedy work in *The Fast Show*. In 2001 he showed a depth that had only been hinted at when he co-wrote and starred in *Happiness*.

The premise was daring for comedy, though *Happiness* may be more accurately termed a "dramedy." Whitehouse played Danny Spencer, a man in his 40s who unexpectedly becomes a widow. Along with the feeling of loss, however, Danny also finds himself feeling a renewed sense of freedom. Along with Whitehouse's marvelous performance, the scripts were alternately funny, sad and thought provoking as they showed

Spencer dealing with this mid-life crisis. Though Whitehouse is the "elder statesman" in this group – he's in his 40s – I think the best is yet to come from this talented writer/performer.

Gimme Gimme Gimme star James Dreyfus also has the talent to be a major player. After all, as the fey Constable Goody he almost stole *The Thin Blue Line* right from under Rowan Atkinson's nose. I compare Dreyfus to beloved *Are You Being Seerved?* star John Inman and not just because he currently has the market cornered on camp characters. Like Inman, Dreyfus is enormously likeable and has the potential to be an all-round entertainer.

The female contingent is headed by Jessica Stevenson, a slightly overweight, normal-looking everywoman who had a small role as Denise Royle's friend in *The Royle Family*. She then co-wrote and co-starred in *Spaced*, another mismatched roommates comedy, for which she won the Best Comedy Actress award at the British Comedy Awards. Stevenson has just signed to write and star in a film about a nanny who happens to be a spy, so producers have woken up to her considerable talents as a writer and an actress.

In the "let's hope he's not just a one-trick pony" category is Sascha Baron Cohen, a Cambridge graduate who hit the jackpot with his character Ali G. This white rapper/gangsta wannabe from the suburban town of Staines became a cultural icon among British youth who began to dress like Ali in Tommy Hilfiger gear and spout his numerous catchphrases. The public so far hasn't tired of the character. A recent Ali G movie did well and spawned a single that topped the UK pop charts. The character is great, but let's see if Cohen can do more – and if his fans will accept him doing something else.

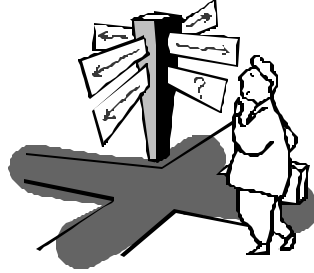
Of course, we can't forget the *Coupling* duo of Richard Coyle, who played the nerdy Jeff, and Gina Bellman, who played the off-the-wall Jane. Out of a strong cast, these two stood out and in other projects have shown that they are able to do drama as well as comedy. Coyle starred in an update of the classic *Lorna Doone* and Bellman was in the drama *Blackeyes*.

MY FINAL WORDS

Over the past few issues *The Insider* has taken a look back. It's essential, however, for Britcom fans to look forward and keep eyes and ears open for new favorites. Broaden your horizon and there's no doubt in my mind that you'll find something wonderful.

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Where Are They Now?



Wonder what some of your favorites Britcom stars have been up to recently? *The Insider* has the answer.

Are You Being Served?

Name: Frank Thornton (Captain Peacock)

Current age: 81

Recently seen: In the Academy Award winning film *Gosford Park* and as “Truly” Truelove in the new seasons of *Last of the Summer Wine*.

Name: Trevor Bannister (Mr. Lucas)

Current age: 66

Recently seen: Still doing theater, most recently in Canada.

Name: Mollie Sugden (Mrs. Slocombe)

Current age: 80

Recently seen: Retired and living a quiet life in Surrey.

Name: Wendy Richard (Miss Brahms)

Current age: 56

Recently seen: Still playing Pauline Fowler in the BBC Soap *EastEnders*.

Name: John Inman (Mr. Humphries)

Current age: 67

Recently seen: Occasionally does pantomime and other theater work.

Keeping Up Appearances

Name: Patricia Routledge (Hyacinth Bucket)

Current age: 73

Recently seen: Playing a woman falsely accused of murder in the TV drama *Anybody's Nightmare* and in Alan Bennett's one-woman monologue *Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet*. Recently had to bow out of a stage production on the advice of her doctor, who told her to rest.

Name: Clive Swift (Richard Bucket)

Current age: 66

Recently seen: In the British TV movie *Young Arthur* and in the comedy/drama *Born and Bred*

Name: Geoffrey Hughes (Onslow)

Current age: 58

Recently seen: Playing Vernon Scripps in the long-running police drama *Heartbeat*. Also had a small recurring role as Twiggy in the award-winning comedy *The Royle Family*.

Name: Judy Cornwell (Daisy)

Current age: 62

Recently seen: In a TV production of *David Copperfield* playing Clara Peggotty Barkis.

Fawlty Towers

Name: Prunella Scales (Sybil Fawlty)

Current age: 70

Recently seen: Appearing with Geoffrey Palmer in a three-part series about the life of novelist Charles Dickens. She also did the BBC radio series *Ladies of Letters* and *Ladies of Letters Log On* with Patricia Routledge.

Name: Andrew Sachs (Manuel)

Current age: 72

Recently seen: In the drama *Attachments*, about an Internet company, and also narrating a radio special called *The Jewish Experience*.

Blackadder

Name: Tony Robinson (Baldrick)

Current age: 56

Recently seen: On the latest telethon for the Comic Relief charity and as presenter of *The Real Macbeth*, a documentary about the real man behind the Shakespearean character.

Name: Tim McInerney (Lord Percy Percy and the various incarnations of Darling)

Current age: ??? (He won't tell!) :)

Recently seen: Appeared in *102 Dalmations* and in a television series with the intriguing title *Don't Eat the Neighbours*.

Vicar of Dibley

Name: Liz Smith (Letitia Cropley)

Current age: 76

Recently seen: As Peg Slidersken in a TV adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* and as Nana on the comedy *The Royle Family*.

Name: Emma Chambers (Alice Tinker-Horton)

Current age: 38

Recently seen: Following a two-year break from acting she is currently appearing in a production of the play *Benefactors* by Michael Frayn.

Name: James Fleet

Current age: Not telling either. Anyone know?

Recently seen: In the courtroom comedy *Chambers* and as Merlin in a television adaptation of *Young Arthur*.

Waiting for God

Name: Stephanie Cole (Diana Trent)

Current age: 61

Recently seen: In the TV drama *Back Home* and also with Richard Wilson in the comedy *Life As We Know It*.

Name: Graham Crowden (Tom Ballard)

Current age: 79

Recently seen: Will be seen in the upcoming film *Possession* starring Gwyneth Paltrow.

Mulberry

Name: Geraldine McEwan (Miss Farnaby)

Current age: 70

Recently seen: In a 2002 British movie called *The Magdalena Sisters*.

Name: Karl Howman (Mulberry)

Current age: 49

Recently seen: Well, this isn't recent, but in 1998 he appeared in the poorly received series *Babes In The Wood*. Sad. A real talent being wasted. Occasionally does pantomime and commercials.

Paul Mendelson

...A Writer Speaks



Interview by Brian Sturges

Paul Mendelson was born in 1951 in the industrial city of Newcastle. He received a law degree from Cambridge and after a few years of practice shifted gears and went to work in advertising. While still churning out ads for the likes of Heinz, he wrote the romantic comedy *May to December* in his spare time. The series became a hit and finally allowed him to give up the day job to concentrate on writing.

His second series, *My Hero*, premiered in 2000. Like *May to December*, this was another romantic comedy about a relationship that shouldn't work, but does. Instead of being about an older man/younger woman, however, *My Hero* deals with the relationship between a superhero from outer space and a nurse. This series has become a hit among viewers and a third season is on its way. Here Mendelson talks about his career, the inspiration for *My Hero*, and his thoughts on the future of British comedy.

How did you get into comedy writing?

PAUL: I do tend to think in high concept. I am unusual for a comedy writer in that most British comedy writers come through sketches and radio whereas I came through advertising. I was an advertising copywriter for twenty years. In advertising there are only two sorts of things, high content and redundancy so you are taught to think in high concept. The first thing I wrote for the BBC, although not the first thing made, was something called *So Haunt Me*, about a house that is haunted by a Jewish mother.

Where did you get the idea for MY HERO?

PAUL: Although as a child I used to read the superhero comics and books like all other children, the idea for *My Hero* actually came from real life experiences. I like to write about relationships. I wanted to write about a relationship where the man's job was so important that it had to come before

everything else. One of my closest friends is a very senior international lawyer and in many ways his job had to come before anything else. If an important client phoned, it didn't matter what he was doing, on holiday or anything, he had to go.

I thought of this and wondered how I could make it more high content, odder and bigger. What if he was a Superhero and has to save the world? He would have to go even if his wife had the dinner on the table or the parents were coming around. It sort of evolved from there.

Was the character Thermoman written for anyone in particular?

PAUL: No, not at all. In fact although I did write the characters I was amazed that anyone wanted to play

(continued on next page)

them. The part wasn't written for Ardal O'Hanlon, in fact I think the original character was American because I have always thought of Superheroes as American.

Did you write MY HERO for The BBC or just on speculation?

PAUL: I wrote it speculatively and gave it to John Stroud, the director who is a friend of mine and had directed *So Haunt Me*. He had just started a production company and he took it to The BBC. We then did a rehearsed reading and then a pilot.

The pilot had an Australian actor playing Thermoman, Craig McLachlan, from the Australian soap, *Neighbours*. He was very good but after some research they thought why is an Australian soap actor playing an American? People are very conservative about comedy. Before they will laugh they need to see somebody they know is funny.

Ardal O'Hanlon had been offered a sitcom a week after *Father Ted*. I asked Ardal why he had chosen to play the part to which he replied, "Because I could see it", which meant a lot to me.

How much control did you have once the scripts were written? Were there many changes?

PAUL: I did have control of the scripts but there were many changes but we work on them together. I work with another writer, Paul Mayhew-Archer who wrote *The Vicar of Dibley*. Paul is a superb script editor and he worked on the script. The first two shows (*May to December* and *So Haunt Me*) I wrote entirely on my own, but I realize now with the speed that things have to be and the number of gags that it's great to have other people to work with.

With the new series of ten episodes, I am writing four and other people are writing the rest but I tend to provide a lot of the ideas, which I think is one of my strengths. Even on some of the ones I don't write, I may actually give them the storyline. Paul will work on one of my scripts and I will work on one of his and we work together.

Was there any particular comedy writer that influenced your writing?

PAUL: I don't think there was anyone in particular. I tend to look to the American writers. I think because I am Jewish, the American style of comedy has always

touched me in places where the English didn't quite so much. It's more emotional; it has some of the same speech rhythms that I am used to from my own culture. I don't know that in what I write you would necessarily see the influence of what I am talking about but I think, more in what I have enjoyed and grown up with.

If you were given carte blanche to write a comedy series with any four comedians, past or present, who would they be and what would be the scenario?

PAUL: (After some deliberation) Mel Brooks, Nancy Walker, Rowan Atkinson, and Tony Hancock. The scenario? Well, I think it would have to be along the lines of a Jewish alien from a Jewish planet. Mel Brooks would have to direct it.

How do you see the future of British Comedy? Mainstream or abstract?

PAUL: There seems to be less and less of British comedy as a whole. The things that seem to be doing better are those that are less mainstream. I think the future is in the realm of very clever, alternative comedies, which I think is a shame, as they tend to appeal to a very limited audience. They tend to appeal to the critics so everybody gets a warm feeling and think they are changing the face of comedy but they are not. The vast majority of people in Britain are not watching them.

There is so much competition from the docusoaps and quiz shows and the lifestyles series its getting harder and harder to get a sitcom off the ground. I have to ask myself, once *My Hero* reaches its natural lifespan, have I got the energy? Because getting a sitcom off the ground is just so hard, you tend to think there must be an easier way to make a living. On the other hand, when it becomes a hit, it is tremendously satisfying.

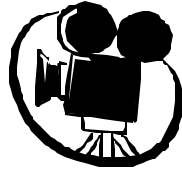
Mainstream comedy is very hard to write and I think a lot of people don't want to even go there.

Brian Sturges is the webmaster of www.britcoms.com. This interview copyright©britcoms.com 2001.

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The Insider Review: Maybe Baby

Terrific cast.... talented writer. Does it equal a great movie?
The Insider lets you know.



Maybe Baby is the big-screen writing/directorial debut of Ben Elton. Elton first appeared on the comedy scene in the early 80s as co-writer of *The Young Ones*. He then co-wrote the last three seasons of *Blackadder* as well as *The Thin Blue Line*. His impressive resume also includes several novels that were UK bestsellers and a number of successful West End plays. Having conquered every other medium, Elton has now adapted his semi-autobiographical novel *Inconceivable* into a screenplay and directed it himself.

My, how Elton has changed. The left-wing radical who once likened Mrs. Thatcher to the devil has certainly mellowed. *Maybe Baby* is a traditional – sometimes even schmaltzy – look at a couple's desperate attempts to have a child.

Elton's *Blackadder* pal Hugh Laurie stars as Sam Bell, a successful BBC commissioning editor who wants to be a writer but just hasn't hit upon that one great idea. While Sam is more concerned with creative fulfillment, his wife Lucy (Joely Richardson) is focused on fulfillment of a different kind. She wants to become a mother.

This is proving impossible for the couple, who are forced to go through endless testing and fertility treatments. On the plus side, this proves to be a real bonanza for Sam's creativity. In a "eureka!" moment he's inspired to write a screenplay about – guess what? – a couple attempting to have a child. Sam then relentlessly mines every experience they go through – even reading his wife's diary to get more material for his script. He's ecstatic that the writer's block is gone.

His screenplay is deemed brilliant and filming begins. One big problem, though. Sam has never told Lucy about the script because he knows she'll be horrified that their intimate story is on screen for all the world to see. Sam can't find the right time to tell her that the script is

already being made into a film by that hip, trendy Scottish writer/director Ewan Proclaimer.

Lucy finds out about the film by mistake at the absolute worst time and is left feeling devastated and betrayed. I don't want to give too much of the ending away, but I will say that it's a sort of happy.

The film is full of cameos by many of Elton's pals. Rowan Atkinson plays Lucy's gynecologist, Dawn French sparkles in her brief appearances as an Aussie nurse and Emma Thompson plays a vegetarian hippy. Joanna Lumley also has a great role as a lesbian (!!!) talent agent.

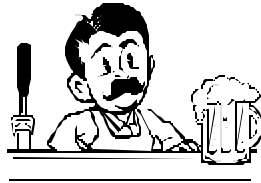
Laurie and Richardson are appealing as Sam and Lucy while the supporting cast contains some of the Britain's most talented young actors. James Purefoy smolders as sexy Carl Phipps, an actor Lucy finds herself fancying. Best of all is Tom Hollander (Saffie's horrid fiancé Paolo in *AbFab: The Last Shout*), who absolutely steals the show as Ewan Proclaimer. The scene where Proclaimer pitches a *Trainspotting*-type script about Scottish heroin junkies as "total comedy" is one of the film's highlights. The character of Proclaimer allows Elton to make some sharp observations at the current state of British TV and film – especially how many talented Brits are now fleeing to Hollywood at the first opportunity.

In the end, Elton allows his intriguing premise to get bogged down in a script that has too many clichés and Hallmark moments. As good a writer as he is, he's always needed of a strong editor and this is no exception.

Maybe Baby, now available on VHS and DVD, is worth seeing for its terrific cast and for Paul McCartney's nice version of the title song. But it's hard not to think of how much better this could have been.

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CLASSIC FLASHBACK:



'Allo, 'Allo!

Some Serious Silliness in Wartime France

by Garry Berman

Most Britcom fans across the U.S. may be surprised at just how many different British comedies have appeared on PBS affiliates at one time or another over the years. And it is equally surprising how some of the very best of these shows never quite made it to household-name status--at least not yet.

'Allo, 'Allo! is one such classic. A genuinely hilarious comedy series, it enjoyed fabulous success in the UK and indeed around the world during its eight-year run. It has made some inroads here in America, but fully deserves recognition along the lines of such long-time favorites as *Fawlty Towers*, *Are You Being Served?* and *Keeping Up Appearances*. Why? Let's take another look...

'Allo, 'Allo! was the creation of one of the most successful comedy writing teams in British TV history, David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd. They also created *Are You Being Served?*, and rarely considered a joke or sight gag too silly to include in their work--which was especially true of this series.

'Allo, 'Allo! was a spoof of television and movies dramatizing WWII, but in particular a take off on the BBC series *Secret Army*. It was set in the small French town of Nouvion, during the German occupation. Our hero was a humble--and admittedly cowardly--cafe owner named Rene Artois, who found himself a reluctant participant in the French Resistance against the Germans. Much to his chagrin, Rene's cafe was designated a safehouse by a beautiful and mysterious Resistance leader named Michelle.

Among other ongoing headaches, Rene and his wife Edith (whose cabaret singing was so bad the customers stick cheeses wedges in their ears) were forced to hide two British airmen on the premises until they could be returned to England. At the same time, Rene needed to keep the bumbling local German officers appeased by helping them with their own schemes. Colonel von Strohm and Captain Hans Geering planned to smuggle and sell a valuable painting, "The Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies," once the war was over and kept

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it well-hidden inside a sausage. Added to this mix were another German officer, the softspoken Lt. Gruber (who had a crush on Rene!) as well as the evil Herr Flick and his domineering assistant Helga.

That should have been enough for Rene to worry about, but there was more. He also had to come up with creative ways to explain to Edith why he was always being caught in compromising positions with one of the beautiful waitresses. Plus, Edith's very demanding mother lived with them and added complications to Rene's already complicated life.

'*Allo, Allo!* was a true comic soap opera, with a continuing storyline running from one episode to the next. Rene began each episode by speaking directly to us as he recapped the complicated story up to that point. The farce then picked up where it left off, brimming with absurd plot twists, ludicrous dialogue, and slapstick sequences of sometimes-breathtaking energy and comic invention.

The plotline was so convoluted that even the writers had trouble keeping up. Croft once admitted that he had to call his secretary to ask what had happened in the last episode before they could start on the next one.

The regular cast of 18, all accomplished comic actors, was headed by Gorden Kaye as the exasperated Rene. Kaye was already a member of the Croft and Lloyd "repertory company" before '*Allo, 'Allo*, having appeared in episodes of *Are You Being Served?* He had also co-starred with Mollie Sugden in one of Croft and Lloyd's rare failures – 1978's *Come Back Mrs. Noah*.

Perhaps the funniest aspect of the show was that out of all of the eccentric participants in the

various schemes to either foil the Germans or return the two stranded British airmen to England, Rene was the only one who saw the utter lunacy of the missions he was coerced into carrying out. Someone was always lurking about in an unconvincing disguise, or making an ill-timed delivery of a vital parcel, such as a shortwave radio or explosive device (one such bomb was disguised as a Christmas pudding).

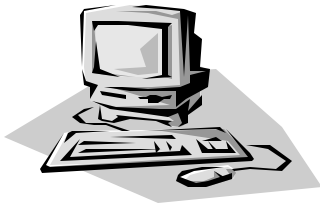
In addition, the show often went on location to film scenes deemed impossible to create in the studio. The added dimension of the location shoots enhanced the story possibilities and resulted in some of the series' most memorable gags.

Despite its relatively low profile in the U.S., '*Allo, 'Allo!* has been the biggest selling Britcom internationally, and has been sold to more countries than *Fawlty Towers*. In 1986, it was also adapted into a stage play at the London Palladium starring most of the original cast members, and enjoyed a run twice as long as originally planned. However, in January of 1990 Kaye was involved in a serious car injury and had to take off six months to recuperate.

Allo, 'Allo! finally ended its long run in 1992 after 85 episodes, making it Croft and Lloyd's longest-running sitcom. (*Are You Being Served?* came in second with a total of sixty-nine.) Not bad for a brilliantly written and performed series that can delight in being so shamelessly silly--without making apologies for it.

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Garry Berman is the author of *Best of the Britcoms*.



SPOTTED ON THE INTERNET

Reviews by David Darryl Bibb

Colinland: An Unofficial Colin Farrell Website
<http://www.efanguide.com/~colinfarrell/>

The site began June 8, 2001 and is devoted to the "...hot up-and-coming Irish actor..." Last updated in July 10, 2002 the site is the work of a truly devoted fan. It offers discussion boards, biography, filmography, news articles and photographs, and a good list of links to other Web sites. A rather small but growing web site.

Rating: 3 mouse clicks

Summer Wine On-line
<http://www.area5.co.uk/summer-wine/>

"The only Summer Wine website based in Holmfirth, the town where the series is filmed." This site offers a lot of information for fans of the show and is the "Welcome to the official web site of the Summer Wine Appreciation Society." These folks take the series very seriously and yet manage to keep their Web site fun. There is a moving welcome message from Tom Owen (son of Bill Owen), a good overview of the show, representative dialog from the cast's characters, a quiz, and offers a CD of music from the show. A well-done and informative site.

Rating: 3 mouse clicks

BeebFun: Last of the Summer Wine
<http://www.beebfun.com/lsw.htm>

If you are a fan of this show you must download the desktop theme for the show. The page offers a small amount of information on the show but its main purpose is to entertain you through the desktop and offers screen shots of the software. If you want more information the page offers links to other web site

Rating: 4 mouse clicks

BBC America: Coupling
http://www.bbcamerica.com/genre/comedy_games/coupling/coupling.jsp

A good promotional site offered by the BBC. It offers an Encyclopedia, Character list, polls, and discussion groups. The current poll is, "Will Patrick and Sally couple in the new season (Season 3)?" I give the site a 2.5 out of 5 mouse clicks. Although it is informative it leaves me with a bit of a canned site feeling, unlike some other BBC Web sites.

Are You Bring Served?
http://www.stuart.cann.freeuk.com/are_you_being_served.htm

This is one of the oddest and most interesting sites I've come upon. It contains nothing but scanned photographs. Each photograph is autographed. There is nothing else, no information, no links, no episode list, and no games. It is interesting to see that autograph of the stars and the photographs are interesting as well. Needless to say people using a non-graphical browser such as LYNX are out of luck but given the content it is forgivable in this instance.

Rating: 3 mouse clicks

Also Recommended

To purchase videos: <http://www.bbcproducts.com>
General information: <http://www.phill.co.uk>

David Bibb is a Missouri-based British comedy addict.

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Bill Owen (cont'd. from page 1)

He decided to become an actor at the age of 14 when he and a friend won a talent competition at a local movie theater. His parents could not afford to send him to drama school, so at 18 he began a career playing drums and singing in London nightclubs. This salary allowed him to pay for a drama course and he was soon working in cabaret, repertory theater and also entertaining at holiday camps.

His career was put on hold when he went into the service during World War II, but an injury during a grenade explosion brought him back to England and to acting.

His first film role was in 1945's *The Way To The Stars*, a war drama that starred Michael Redgrave and John Mills. Other roles followed as he appeared in several of the bawdy *Carry On* films, the 1966 hit *Georgy Girl* and Lindsey Anderson's *O Lucky Man*.

Yet his true love was being on stage. He was deeply involved with the Unity Theater, a company whose politically charged productions allowed Owen to express some of his more radical beliefs. He also played Mack the Knife in a London production of *Threepenny Opera*, was George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and even wrote a West End musical called *The Matchgirl*.

His most memorable theatrical performance, however, was when he played Touchstone opposite Katherine Hepburn in a New York production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Owen's restless creativity led him to pen plays as well as lyrics for pop songs that were recorded by the likes of Engelbert Humperdink, Sir Cliff Richard and Pat Boone.

His life changed in the early 70s when he was cast in a one-off Comedy Playhouse production called *Last of the Summer Wine*. Comedy Playhouse was often a launching pad for successful series such as *Are You Being Served?* *Summer Wine* also blossomed from that one episode into a series and from then on, Owen - by birth a Cockney - became the archetypal Yorkshireman.

It was not a part of Britain he was very familiar with. Owen first visited Yorkshire during the war when he was posted to the Officer Cadet Training Corps in Bradford. During his last interview he recalled how the first time he spoke with a real Yorkshire native he couldn't understand a word the man said. Needless to say, he mastered the lingo years later.

Owen visited the area again while traveling in stage productions but didn't get to know it well until the town

of Holmfirth was chosen to be the setting for *Last of the Summer Wine*. He fell in the love with the place, and the residents in turn fell in love with him.

Holmfirth's idyllic beauty was no doubt a good part of the reason for the show's success. But so was Owen. Compo became arguably the best-loved and best-known of that trio of aged miscreants. Of course his appearance - shabbily dressed in the infamous hat, wellies, and ill-fitting jacket - might have had something to do with that. However, Owen brought a true mischievousness and sense of fun to the role. Viewers never tired of his pranks and his continued attempts to win the heart of Nora Batty, who was pretty infamous for her own fashion sense. Can I just say curlers and wrinkled stockings? Sadly, Compo's love was to remain unrequited and Kathy Staff, who played Nora, left the show soon after Owen's death.

Whereas some performers turn their backs on the characters that made them famous, Owen never regretted playing Compo. There were, however, many differences between the man and the character.

"It was a persona," said his son Tom, "and my father was a quiet, very well-dressed man when he finished with Compo. Then he would get into the wellies and the scruffy little hat and suddenly that little rascal would come alive."

Off-screen, Owen was a tireless supporter of numerous charities. He was made an MBE (Member of the British Empire) in 1976 for his work with the National Association of Boys Club and also for his role as chairman of the Performing Arts Advisory Panel. Later in life he served as a honorary member of the Holmfirth Rotary Club and other local organizations.

While filming the *Summer Wine* millennium special in France, Owen was taken ill and died soon after from pancreatic cancer. Not even *Summer Wine* writer Roy Clarke realized how sick Owen was and, true to his professionalism, Owen worked until almost the very end. He was laid to rest in the churchyard at Holmfirth, a place he had helped raised money to restore. He left behind two children and his second wife, Kathleen. One of his children, Tom, was hired to play Compo's long-lost son on the series.

The 23rd season of *Last of the Summer Wine* recently aired on the BBC. Despite changes, the longest-running sitcom in television history has remained strong. But fans no doubt miss the mischievous little guy in the wooly cap and the talented man who brought him to life.

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(As Time Goes By – continued from page 4)

While Sandy is still in limbo, a demonstration of his new attitude causes Judy to say yes to Alistair. Then comes the stress of planning the big day and Jean helps with her usual efficiency. Alistair wants a major do with the London Symphony Orchestra playing at the reception, but Judy wants a small, intimate wedding at Rocky's country home. That's what she gets, along with the help of Lol and Mrs. Bale. (Note: actress Joan Sims, who played Rocky's wife Madge, passed away before the taping of season nine. To explain her absence Rocky says that she's off in Egypt.)

Meanwhile, there's still the issue of Harry and Sandy. That's all sorted out as well when Harry sees the errors of his way and Sandy goes to Canada with him. That leaves Jean and Lionel as they started almost forty years earlier – just the two of them together. Jean had told Lionel that she wanted things to work out for everyone and that's what happens.

A terrific ending, but a sad one since it's the finale. Dame Judi wants to concentrate on stage and film work, but at least she agreed to this last season so that everything could be wrapped up.

As Time Goes By will be missed for many reasons. First, it didn't use vulgarity or profanity to get laughs. It didn't need to - Dame Judi and Geoffrey Palmer could say more with a look at each other than other actors could say with pages of dialogue. It didn't rely on the "babe factor" to pull in viewers. It didn't present situations that were totally out of sync with the experiences of the average person, so most viewers could watch and relate. (OK, not everyone gets to weekend in a beautiful house in Hampshire, but you get my drift.) It gave some extraordinarily talented actors some top-notch scripts and came up with a winner.

Call me nuts (go ahead – you won't be the first person), but when I think of *As Time Goes By* I can't help but think of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. No disrespect whatsoever to Princess Diana, but Charles and Camilla were probably meant for each other from the start. They were probably together in private, sure, but the fact that after so many years they finally **are** together publicly and may even marry is an optimistic story. And that's what *As Time Goes By* always was – a hopeful tale showing that sometimes things do work out in the end. Just like Jean wants them to.

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AS TIME GOES BY TRIVIA

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

A.) True/False

- 1.) When the series began, Judy's last name was Hanson.
- 2.) Rocky's catchphrase is "Let's get rockin'!"
- 3.) In a season eight episode Lionel accidentally sees Sandy in the bath.
- 4.) Before starting the secretarial service Jean was a nurse.
- 5.) Penny's husband Stephen works as an architect.

B.) SHORT ANSWER

- 1.) What product did Lionel grow when he was in Kenya?
- 2.) What health problem does everyone think Lionel has at the beginning of season seven?
- 3.) What scene in the mini-series does Lionel have the worst time writing?
- 4.) Where does Sandy go on her first "date" with Lionel?
- 5.) What are the names of the TV men Lionel talks to about his series?

Answers

- A.) 1.) True 2.) False – he always says "Rock on!"
3.) True 4.) True
5.) False – he's a dentist

B.) 1.) Coffee 2.) Everyone thinks he's going deaf, but it's only wax build up in his ears. 3.) The scene where he and Jean first make love. 4.) To a fancy do at the Guatemalan Embassy. 5.) Mike and Sy...which turns into Mike and Lol when Sy goes a bit crazy.

IF YOU GOT SEVEN OR MORE ANSWERS RIGHT, CONSIDER YOURSELF AN EXPERT!

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