

## Club News

The Concert in September was well attended and a great success.

Next year's Summer Garden Party will be held on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2008. Please make a note in your diary in the hope that you will be able to join us at Birdbrook Hall.

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### Have I got news for you ... I'm happy

Paul Merton is full of wit. You could even imagine him delivering a punch line at his own funeral. But sometimes the comedian must feel more like a punch bag. He would have cracked jokes through blizzards and bullets on the retreat from Moscow, but his personal life has often been less amusing; mental illness, divorce, the death through cancer of his second wife and – more recently – separation from the woman who pulled him through his last depression.

Even the best comedian would struggle to find a gag in that, but he does: at his lowest ebb he was so unshaven a wino offered him a tinny, seeing a fellow spirit.

Still, as *l'enfant delightful* of British laughter slowly faces up to adulthood – he will be fifty next year – he finally seems able to savour the least expected punch line of all. Merton is – almost – at one with himself.

And rather than any great burst of joy in his private life, it seems to be the Have I Got News for You panellist's first passion, work, that has rekindled his enthusiasm. Simply, the constant invention of very, very funny jokes has humoured him.

Although we should also record that there have been reports of him being spotted with a 'stunning brunette' (funny how it is never 'a rather drab brunette'). The armchair psychologist – okay, gossip columnists – suggest he fears his own company, a suggestion Merton only partly denies: *'I don't mind being on my own so long as I know I'm seeing somebody at the end of the day. I think we need people. I think we get good stuff from people.'*

So how, I ask, would he assess his current state? *'I am content with life,'* he says almost bashfully. *'I have to say I think my work is going pretty well. Everything I do is so different.'* As well as Have I Got News for You, he does Just a Minute, Room 101 and much else besides. But it would be overstating it to say Merton has Done Anguishing.

He describes his work, modestly, as a 'desk job', but that ignores how driven he is. The day of our chat he only returned from Liverpool, where he was performing, at 3am. With his myriad television slots he does not need to do this stuff, but he does. Just as he has appeared almost every Sunday evening on stage at London's Comedy Store.

Negotiations for this rarest of rare interviews were only marginally less protracted than de-nuclearising Iran: yep he would do it, er no he wouldn't: he would talk about this, but not that. While his comedy is brilliantly spontaneous, the serious business of being Merton must be planned meticulously.

Any question encroaching on personal territory is repelled by the impregnable fortress of his humour. When friends asked his wife Sarah Parkinson about her health before her death three years ago, Merton would butt in breezily: *'Oh, she won't see another Christmas.'* This from the man who devoted himself so absolutely to her care he drove the length of Britain seeking everything from spiritual healers to juicing equipment, supporting her attempts to fight cancer through natural remedies rather than undergoing chemotherapy.

The couple, holed up in their Sussex retreat, were inseparable after Sarah rode from her wedding on a white horse. She died in his arms aged 41. News of her terminal illness had spread almost as fast as her cancer, but even the tabloids were sympathetic.

Her very public death was almost impossible for this quietly turbulent man to bear. When he fell in love once more with fellow comedian Suki Webster seven months later, Sarah's parents were reportedly upset, but it is indicative of Merton that when the affair was revealed it was news even to some of his friends.

He admits he developed his drollery as a defence, a barrier if you will: *'Comedy expresses that other side you can't express in day-to-day interaction. I remember very clearly a birthday party when I was seven,'* he says in quiet tones unlike his madcap television persona. *'I realised I could make kids laugh. I was very shy and it was a release. I also remember being aware my routine would have to be better at the eighth birthday party – that's forward planning for you. I knew I couldn't continue recycling jokes from the Beano such as "What's yellow and white and goes 120 miles per hour? A train driver's egg sandwich".'*

Is he still shy at heart? *'Not any more really, but I am quiet. I'm not the life and soul. I don't feel the need to perform. My show-off gene is sated by television, and even on that, if someone else is doing well I'm happy to listen.'*

A relaxed answer. He puts his earlier, brief breakdown and stint in the Maudsley hospital in the late 1980s down to 'over excitement' about his TV breakthrough in sketches and game shows. His life wasn't all grim at this juncture, however, meeting as he did his future wife, Caroline Quentin, on the comedy circuit. Their wedding was in 1991 but the marriage ended in divorce eight years later. It was through Quentin, ironically, he met Sarah, who was her understudy in the appropriately titled Live Bed Show.

Merton's shrink, incidentally, was so doubtful of this curious patient's claim to be a television comedian he insisted Merton produce a video of his performance. Only then did he accept Merton was not suffering from delusions.

Merton, who has campaigned for mental health charities, is painfully aware of the cliché: the crying clown, but unlike so many depressive comedians, he reserves his tears for his pillow, not a promotional spot on Parky.

He was brought up in south London, son of a Tube driver and a nurse. He was sent to a former grammar school in Wimbledon but says he was made to feel like the dim oik who didn't belong. His moment of revelation came in 1971. While

contemporaries were into prog rock, he saw a poster at Tottenham Court Road Tube station advertising the screening of an old, silent Buster Keaton flick at a cinema in Oxford Street. *'It's now an M&S,'* he says ruefully.

*'Before that I had never seen a Buster film, which is a bit like being a fan of Sixties music and never hearing the Stones. Terry Jones (of Monty Python) told me he also used to go there. A lot of us must have been hidden in the dark.'*

Merton was hooked, acquiring an 8mm projector to watch 1920s classics at home. Which all sounds rather solitary: *'I couldn't really get my friends looking at black and white sheets so I did not enthuse to others.'*

His second great comedic awakening was seeing Alexi Sayle in 1980. *'He was performing a "stream of tastelessness" and I had never seen anything like it. He just stood there angry in a tight suit, swearing. It made me feel I had to try it.'*

By now Merton was working in a south London employment office but – to his parents' consternation – quit to make it as a comedian.

*'My parents were worried about me in bedsit land,'* he recalls. *'I told myself I would give myself five years to break through. It is the working-class thing: I was an apprentice comedian. I lied to the Comedy Store and told them I had stage experience.'*

He performed a sketch he had written in that grim bedsit about a policeman on acid giving evidence. Astutely Merton read his script from the copper's black book, so despite nerves *'at least there was no chance of forgetting lines. The audience loved it'*, he recalls mistily. *'I remember walking all the way back from Soho to Streatham after the show.'*

Other gigs were more challenging, such as the Front Line club, Brixton, during the riots. Again he risked his policeman on acid routine. *'It was 50p entry. The room was packed but after my act the entire audience got up with a bass guitar and went on stage.'* Everyone had been paid to perform. *'The early success of the policeman really helped me through the next 18 months of mediocre gigs.'*

Merton owed the success of that sketch to his *"education"*: lonely learning from the greats, in particular Keaton's deadpan expression. *'The humour lay in him not understanding that he was being funny,'* says Merton, who has perfected just that baffled look.

He uses a new series, Silent Clowns, to explore his comedic influences, and when Merton gets going you realise he is a scientist of humour. His gags may look effortless but they are the product of graft. And this leads him to reveal surprising tastes. *'I don't watch a lot of contemporary comedy. I haven't seen Green Wing.'*

He is equally ambivalent about classics, even Python, whose mere mention has most gagsmiths clutching their sides. *'I wasn't as fanatical as others. I knew it came from the Goons, which came from the Marx Brothers. I have only seen the parrot sketch twice, though I do know it by heart.'*

Bizarrely, he reckons the funniest television show of the past 15 years in *One Foot in the Grave*. *'Victor is in bed with an 85-year-old woman who has been dropped off by mistake. He is wearing an eye mask so doesn't realise. Then his much younger wife arrives and it is the look of astonishment on his face as he sees this woman with no nightgown and old teeth who he has been in bed with. And he turns to his wife and says: "I thought she was you".'*

Who would have thought Merton had such mainstream tastes. *'You say mainstream, but One Foot in the Grave goes into dark areas, and it makes me laugh out loud.'* What does he make of contemporary political satire? *'On Have I Got News for You when they talk about the Home Office I can't move on fast enough. I like stories like the goldfish that burns the house down. I was in my element when Bruce Forsyth was guest presenter.'*

The worst episode, he recalls was either the "car crash" of Neil Kinnock presenting or the one with Edwina Currie and Derek Hatton. *'They were not good friends. It was an awful atmosphere. Sometimes MPs come a cropper when they have a reputation for wit in the house, but that humour doesn't work so well on the show. Jerry Hayes's jokes bombed but he ploughed on.'*

Have I Got News for You is, one senses, just the day job. Merton's love remains those silent movies. *'I think what entrances me about the 1920s is that people's appetite for movies was huge – they had a ton of fun. There was one routine about three very fat men bumping into each other, and they made a dozen films of it. And all these friends were influencing each other, it was very stimulating. These guys were young, famous and rich: of course it was exciting.'*

Merton realised young his talent lay in talking, but the heroism of the pre-talkie era leaves him in awe. *'Keaton went to the doctor, who asked him: "How long have you had a broken neck?" It turned out he had broken it on a stunt and had carried on working. The stunts were pre health and safety days, amazing.'*

*'I spoke to some kids who had just seen the new King Kong and they were a bit disappointed: it had so obviously been computer-generated. But Keaton's stunts still bring gasps today.'*

In one Keaton flick, the front of a house falls on him. He survives as he is standing where the door is, but it only clears his head by two inches. *'His co-director was so appalled by the stunt he refused to attend, praying in a hotel room with a Christian Scientist.'*

Merton does not have houses fall on him, but he does trek back from Liverpool in the small hours: and it is that dedication that drives his life.

*'I can spend two days unsuccessfully trying to think up a sketch about a lighthouse – just staring out of the window. It's all work,'* he laughs, realising how absurd that must sound to many – not least, one imagines, his parents.

*'They only felt happy when they saw me perform on TV. Then they were immediately all right with it.'*

His dedication makes him a bit of a trade unionist for the jokes trade. The only time he bristles is recalling Sir Alan Sugar's stint on room 101.

*'He said the most extraordinary thing: "I'm the only one who can make a camera crew laugh." He was going down the Thames in a speedboat and he had said to the crew: "Donald Trump couldn't do this: his wig would fall off." Well, you could say "f\*\*\*" to a film crew and they would laugh. I suspect Sugar is surrounded by people paid to find him very funny.'*

And with that Merton is off back to the joke kitchen, with much talent but surprisingly little confidence: 'You can never guarantee you will ever say anything funny again.' Yet he instantly disproves that by suggesting Have I Got News for You, in it's 32<sup>nd</sup> series, could go on until Ian Hislop, his fellow regular, resembles a 'Cyril Fletcher figure'. Tonight Merton will be at the Comedy Store once more. 'The same people are in the audience, it's very social,' he laughs. 'It is play. The only caveat is it has to be entertaining.' And entertaining, despite the caveat of his long, silent anguish is what Merton has always been.

*From the Sunday Times  
Jasper Gerard talks to Paul Merton*

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### **What will happen if I stop taking my lithium?**

Tragically, those patients who stop taking lithium after successful treatment may find the medication ineffective if they suffer a relapse. This is particularly true if an extensive amount of time has elapsed between the withdrawal from lithium and the onset of an episode. In addition, research indicates that patients who stop taking their lithium and then start again have a significantly higher rate of re-admittance to psychiatric hospitals than do those who kept taking their medications. For patients who no longer respond to lithium, clinicians find that a combination of medications, such as lithium with Risperdol, is effective.

*Why am I up, why am I down?  
Roger Granet, M.D. & Elizabeth Ferber.*

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### **Is there any particular group that has a higher risk for Bipolar Disorder?**

Possibly. Definitive studies of bipolar patients are challenging because so many sufferers go undiagnosed or misdiagnose. Bipolar Disorder appears to be about ten to twenty times higher among people involved in the creative arts as opposed to the general population. However, what constitutes creativity makes this complicated. Alcoholics seem to be a greater risk for the illness as well.

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*We love to hear from patients, carers or other supporters of our charity on any topic relating to either the newsletter or matters concerning the work we do. We are always happy to publish articles sent into us when requested to do so by the author.*

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