

# CultureCast: Talk

Paul Merton discusses 'The Comedians'



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*The Comedians*

Interview with National  
Portrait Gallery

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Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

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Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

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(Male presenter)

‘Comedians: From the 1940s to Now’ is a fascinating exhibition of photographs that puts the spotlight on British comedy from the 1940s to the present day.

‘Comedians’ is an exhibition created in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, on display at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens from 4th April until 21st June 2009.

In an interview with the National Portrait Gallery earlier this year, the comedian and television personality Paul Merton spoke about many of the

comedians featured in the exhibition, and about the changing face of British comedy since the 1940s.

(Male presenter finishes)

(Paul Merton begins talking)



The National Portrait Gallery has many, many portraits of people who have contributed to the British way of life. And amongst their collections of kings and queens and engineers and politicians and prime ministers there's a beautiful selection of British comedians. British comedians who have influenced the British way of life, perhaps in their own way as much as George III did.

The first of the really big post-war comedians was a guy from Birmingham called Sid Field, who people wouldn't really remember these days but he was an enormously popular comedian and very influential as well. He first appeared in the West End in a show in 1943 at the Prince of Wales theatre called 'Strike a New Note'. Two 17 year old comics who were forming a double act used to watch him in the wings every night. And that was Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise. Sid Field was considered such a funny man that he quickly made two films. He was going to go to Hollywood. But unfortunately, like a lot of comedians who toured around the music halls and variety theatres in the 1930s and 1940s, he had a big drink problem. That shortened his life. He died in his early fifties. And now most people don't

know who he is because he was around before television and radio. There's very little live examples of him at work.

Sid Field was the kind of comedian that was a character comedian. He wasn't a stand-up comedian. He would play various parts. He'd play a 'spiv' character, somebody with very wide lapels who could get you anything on the black market. And then he also played a photographer's assistant, a very camp, fey character. Such was the impact of him that he became an overnight star, having been touring the provinces for about 20-30 years before coming into the West End. I've spoken to people who saw him live and one man said to me "The guy in the seat next to me in the stalls was rolling around the floor with laughter, just holding his sides".

Certainly after the war, there was a huge demand for live entertainment. The variety theatre was still going at that point. And if you look at the attendances of the football matches and the attendances of live theatre, immediately after the war, you'll find that they really hit a peak.

By the beginning of the 1950s, radio became a very important medium for the working comedian. Before that most of them had been playing at variety halls and music halls in the 30s and 40s. They'd be travelling around the circuit, they might be playing Glasgow, Shepherd's Bush Empire or somewhere in Birmingham. And in those days, particularly before radio really took hold, there was a North/South divide. There was such a thing as 'Northern comics' and 'Southern comics'. A Southern comic like Max Miller, who's based in Brighton, he wouldn't go beyond Birmingham. He was once asked why he didn't go to Glasgow, and he said "I'm not a missionary". And equally, Scottish comedians would find it very difficult to come down to London. They generally didn't. So before radio came in, in terms of the comedian being able to work in that medium, people thought "well, they're not going to understand the accent".

Tony Hancock in the 1950s was one of the comedians of the decade. His radio show, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, was incredible, beautifully written and constructed piece of work. Anthony Hancock, Anthony Hancock, Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock as his fictional name gave him, was a man of the 50s. He had hope, he had desires, he had to deal with petrol rationing, he was sometimes very disappointed by the circumstances he found himself in. Sometimes he would boast about all kinds of family connections. He once claimed his father was a duke and one of the lines he said "I could claim Argyleshire if I wanted to". And somebody said "Well, why don't you?" and he said "There's nothing in Plymouth to interest me".

In the Hancock series', we see Kenneth Williams was in the show, Sid James was in the show, Hattie Jacques was in the show, half of the people who went on to make the 'Carry On' films started in Hancock's half hour.

And the other show in the 1950s that was really, incredibly influential was The Goons show. Written primarily by Spike Milligan, starring himself, Harry Secombe and Peter Sellers. If you look at the Goons show, really every episode is really about surviving the second world war. People get blown up the whole time, there's terrible explosions happening, and it's about comedy in a battlefield. The noises, the strange sound effects...you'd suddenly have a grand piano crossing the Atlantic at speed. And you'd just hear the sound of a piano being played really quickly.

There was one joke I remember, one character's hiding inside a piano and someone says "What are you doing in that piano?", and he says "I'm hiding" and he said "Don't be ridiculous, Haydn's been dead for years".

Tony Hancock, of course had a very sad end to his life. He committed suicide in 1968, long after he had left Ray and Alan and gone to work with other people. And I think sometimes that does influence the way that we look at him. We look at him through the filter of the sadness of the end of his life. And really we should think more about how he was when he was working, when he was popular, and what great fun he was, and what a joy. He wasn't always a depressed man. It seems a shame that we sometimes feel as if that's the only way we can look at him.

A show called 'Beyond the Fringe', which opened in the early 1960s, was an extremely influential show. It starred Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore and Peter Cook. And those four people, first of all the show was a massive hit in Edinburgh, then it became a big hit in the West End stage, and then they went to America with it. But what also happened in the 1960s was television. The growth of television meant that these people who had appeared on stage at a popular show could then build a television career. So what happened with the 'Beyond the Fringe', particularly Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, came a template for all the other Oxbridge comedians that came after them. And this was a new breed of comedian. The people that we mentioned before generally had writers. They didn't write the material themselves. But this new breed of guys, coming out of Oxbridge, very clever, very shrewd, very smart people, they moved from doing successful stage shows into writing for television shows and then doing their own television shows. They wouldn't have been in show business for 20-30 years before that, because to be a working comedian then meant travelling around the country for not a great deal of money. Suddenly television is there. You can go from being an unknown to being a television star quite quickly, the

money's better, the work is better. If it wasn't for television then John Cleese would probably have been a lawyer.

Before 'Beyond the Fringe', there wasn't really what you would call much satire around, in terms of the stage or the broadcasting medium. In fact, Harold MacMillan, who was prime minister at the time, went to see 'Beyond the Fringe'. Peter Cook, this was considered rather scandalous at the time, did an impression of Harold Macmillan in the show. To impersonate the current prime minister on stage was too much for some people, although it seems very mild now. And actually, it was quite a gentle, affectionate send-up, it wasn't a particularly vicious attack. But people at the time were rather surprised that people were allowed to get away with this sort of thing.

I don't want to give you the impression that the 1960s was just full of comedians from Oxbridge. There were also people like Benny Hill who started in the late 50s. I suppose was one of the first comedians to grasp the concept of television and make television part of what he was doing. He would often do scenes where he would play three or four characters in the same set. And you'd see the three or four of them next to each other with the magic of television. And one particular sketch that he did that really had a big influence on me was a sketch about a bad continuity man who couldn't get things right. So you had a situation where Benny Hill was talking to Patricia Hayes, the actress, in a room. Just two of them in a room just talking to each other. He turns and looks in the mirror and in the mirror there's a party in the room. And he turns around again and there's no party there. When I saw that when I was six or seven, I thought that was a sort of magic. I suppose it is.

Frankie Howerd was another comedian who was very big throughout the 1960s. There's various stories about writing for Frankie. He didn't write his own material. So some writers would put in the "oohs" and the "aaahs", and he'd say "What's all this oohs and aaahs, I can put them in meself, you don't have to put those in". And if you didn't put them in he'd say "Well, where's all the oohs and aaahs?". So he could be quite difficult for writers.

I went to see him live many, many years ago and he had this marvellous act with this pianist, who just looked at him, this female pianist. And he'd look at her and he'd say "It's chilly it, isn't it dear? Yes, yes, chilly, yes". And then he'd look at the audience and say "Chilly? I'm sweating like a pig". (Laughs). It just always made me laugh because she hadn't said anything. That was an act that he did for 30 or 40 years. He revived it every 10 or 12 years when people had forgotten it and he was rediscovered by another generation.

There are some comedians who are just naturally funny in the way they look, the way they walk. Tommy Cooper is one of those, Eric Morecambe and Spike Milligan used to quote him as their favourite comedian. His physicality

was so amusing, he could hit himself on the head with a rubber hammer or something and he'd do this little dazed (expression) and it was just hilarious. Or he'd come on stage with a suitcase full of props and he'd open up the suitcase, and he'd look up to the audience and say "This isn't my suitcase? Who's suitcase is this?". And sometimes the corniest jokes but told so beautifully that you could forgive him anything.

By the 1960s, what television had done really, it had removed that divide between the idea of the Northern comic and the Southern comic, and basically everybody could understand each other. Morecambe and Wise in the 50s thought that they were a Northern act, they weren't sure they'd ever work in the south. By the end of the 60s they were watched by ten million people all over the country.

Look at a programme like 'The Comedians' which featured these working class comics who'd play the working men's clubs in the North. People like Bernard Manning and Frank Carson and George Roper and all these other Northern comics. Ten years before that, they'd have thought "You can't put this on television, nobody will understand it". But now, everyone did get it and it wasn't a problem being able to hear a comic from the North. It became a normal thing.

It seems extraordinary now, but when Billy Connolly first played London in the early 1970s, he was a big name in Scotland and some people thought "well it's never going to work in London because they're not going to understand you". In fact, he hired the London Palladium on a Sunday as his big entrance into London and it backfired a bit because everybody in the audience was a Scot. Ex-pats living away from Scotland came to see him. But it was considered then that he had to have a particular campaign to break him into the South, because he was a big name in Scotland and yet nobody knew who him. And it felt that he had to come and break London. And it seems ludicrous now because a comedian can appear on television and be seen throughout the British Isles and there's no problem with understanding him because he's from Kilbride, it doesn't come into it now.

Somewhere in the mid 1980s Rolling Stone magazine in America came up with this phrase that "comedy was the new rock 'n' roll" and what they meant by that was that what was happening in America and what was gradually happening here as well, was that comedians, instead of just playing clubs and doing a tour of theatres, were playing big stadiums. Suddenly Lee Evans or Eddie Izzard could play Wembley Arena and have 30,000 people there. You've got the big screen and people watching you on that big screen because you're such a tiny figure so in a strange way when you're there it's live television what you're watching.

And there's an extraordinary desire for good comedy, for people to go into a comedy environment, and now in this credit crunch as it's called.

Entertainment will be the last thing that people give up. Because it's a way of getting out of the present circumstances. You can be feeling pretty glum, low, but if there's 30,000 of you in an arena and you've come to see one man, the surge of joy and adrenaline and all those chemicals that are in the air when somebody walks on stage, it's a "WHOOSH" and it takes you into another place. And that's something that is new to comedy. Certainly if you were a big comic act 50 years ago, yes you would play the theatres, but you wouldn't play one big gig where 30,000 people could see you. That is very new.

In the 1990s we see people like Reeves and Mortimer, Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, who came along and they had a very surreal take on stuff, as indeed I did, as indeed Eddie Izzard did, many other comics as well.

Surrealism in comedy is something that pre-dates the term surrealism. If you look back at the turn of the century, there are music hall comics then who are doing strange routines. There was one guy called Dan Leno who talked about walking around all day as a floor walker. And he said "I walked around so long that me feet wore out and I had to turn me ankles up at the top and fold them over" and talking about all this stuff. People would roar with laughter about this. These were surrealistic images before the term was actually coined.

So comedy has always been about the surreal. Put two opposing things together, a squirrel and a cricket ball, and put a top hat on the cricket ball and then give it to the squirrel, and get these elements... Ross Noble does it today as well where you get disparate elements, a chair and a trombone, a nun drinking a cup of coffee, anything. Obviously those aren't particularly surreal examples, you get them in everyday life, but you know what I mean.

One of the surreal ideas that I did in a television series- 'Paul Merton- The Series' I called it, simply because at the time there was a film called 'Batman- The Movie'- and we used to have a dolphin that would come up into a newsagent's kiosk. A half dolphin, from the waist up, and a man from the waist down, a kind of a mermaid in reverse I suppose. And lots of people didn't get it. "What's the joke about the dolphin?". "It's just a dolphin". There's no significance, just a dolphin. And they had difficulty with it, but I used to love it. Dolphin coming up and buying a packet of cough sweets. (Laughs). Immediately that's amusing, why would a dolphin want a packet of cough sweets. But he did. And we used it several times. I've still got the foam rubber head somewhere at home.

When I first saw Alexei Sayle perform it was about 1981 and it was a little London theatre. There was only about 200 people sitting there. And he was just incredibly magnetic. He came out, this big man wearing a tight suit, and just aggressive, annoyed about everything, really angry stuff. When the



comedy store opened, there was a whole new opportunity for people, but he was such a big fantastic comedian, you'd never seen anybody like this on television over here, the sheer aggression of what he was about. There nothing 'light entertainment' about him. You couldn't imagine him introducing a singer on a variety show or something like that. He was anarchic and aggressive. Only on stage, of course, in real life he's a pussy cat. But he's one of the major comedians since the war, because his attitude to stand up comedy changed the way people did stand up comedy after him. You get a lot of the attack in the clubs when you're playing to drunk audiences, you have to be aggressive, you have to punch home the gag, make sure they understand it, because if they're a bit pissed they don't always get it. And he (Alexei Sayle) cut all the way through that, he didn't seem to care whether the audience loved him or not, he wasn't seeking their approval. He was there to shout at them, and rant and rave, and get really angry about stuff. People are still doing his styles 25 years later.

I first met Julian Clary when we were both playing some gig in South East London, some dreary polytechnic I think, when we both starting off. Even though neither of us had any money for stage props or special effects or anything like that, Julian made his entrance carrying a box of confetti. I remember him throwing the confetti up in the air as he came on to the theme from 'Gone With the Wind' played on a rather dodgy tape recorder. And I admired that immensely, because although the surroundings weren't in any way glamorous, that didn't make any difference to him. He was still prepared to come on and make the glamorous entrance, and I think that was a real commitment he showed.

He also had a collection of very old jokes, it has to be said, but his enthusiasm for them was marvellous. I remember doing a gig with him in Guildford, the University of Surrey, and he walked the whole length of this hall until he found somebody that was bald, simply so he could say "Oh, what a lovely man. He's spent all afternoon combing his hair and he forgot to bring it with him". And I just admired the fact he took two minutes to find somebody bald just so he could do that joke. (Laughs).

I was doing a show with Julian Clary at the Hackney Empire in 1988 and that was the beginning of Julian's real rise to the top. And there was another act on the bill, Harry Enfield, who at that time was doing a new character called 'Loadsamoney'. Which was basically just standing on stage waving ten pounds notes at the audience, saying "I've got loads of money". And it was very successful straight away. It was clearly something that had hit on the, I think the word is zeitgeist. I think it was an idea, initially of Paul Whitehouse', who at that point was Harry's main writer rather than being a performer in his own right. I think a couple of years later it would have been Paul Whitehouse doing the 'loadsamoney' thing.

Paul is an extraordinarily good actor. I really am a big fan of his. From the stuff he's done on the fast show to the later stuff he's now doing with Harry Enfield. He's got a gallery of characters that do not in any way resemble each other. There's the surgeon that's posh, the young kid that's running loose around a council estate, he can play anything really. I think he is an astonishingly brilliant actor.

In the late 1980s I went to a gay pub called The Vauxhall Tavern, that specialised in talent nights, and there was this act called Lily Savage that was on stage and was absolutely hysterical. And he introducing rather overweight men pretending to be Madonna, and was so funny. He was so in command of the audience, I assumed that Lily Savage had been around for a long, long time. When I was talking to Paul O'Grady, who of course is Lily Savage, afterwards he was telling me he'd only been doing it for about three weeks. So I saw him very early on. And at that point for many years, he never thought that Lily Savage would cross over into a mainstream media. He thought it was simply a thing that worked well in gay clubs but was not the sort of thing that would appear on television.

So when he went to the Edinburgh festival a few years later, he was amazed at how well he did because he honestly thought it was a sort of 'in' thing he was doing, rather than immensely popular.

My favourite comedian, perhaps out of all the ones I mentioned, was a guy called Max Miller who came to prominence in the 1930s. What I like about him is that his style is still very fresh. It feels really modern. You can see acts before him and you can see they were part of the Victorian/Edwardian type of music hall and it feels really old fashioned and dated, but his stuff still works really well. One of his jokes, a big favourite of mine, and I always liked this joke, is when he used to come on in a very floral sort of suit. A bit of a sort of wide boy. With a hat. And a hit with the ladies. A ladies man, that was the kind of image he put across. He said "I went home the other night, I says to the wife "I hear the milkman has made love to every woman in this street bar one". And she said "I bet it's that stuck-up cow at number 54" ". (Laughs loudly).

(End of Paul Merton talking)

(Male presenter)

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(End of male presenter talking)

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Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

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