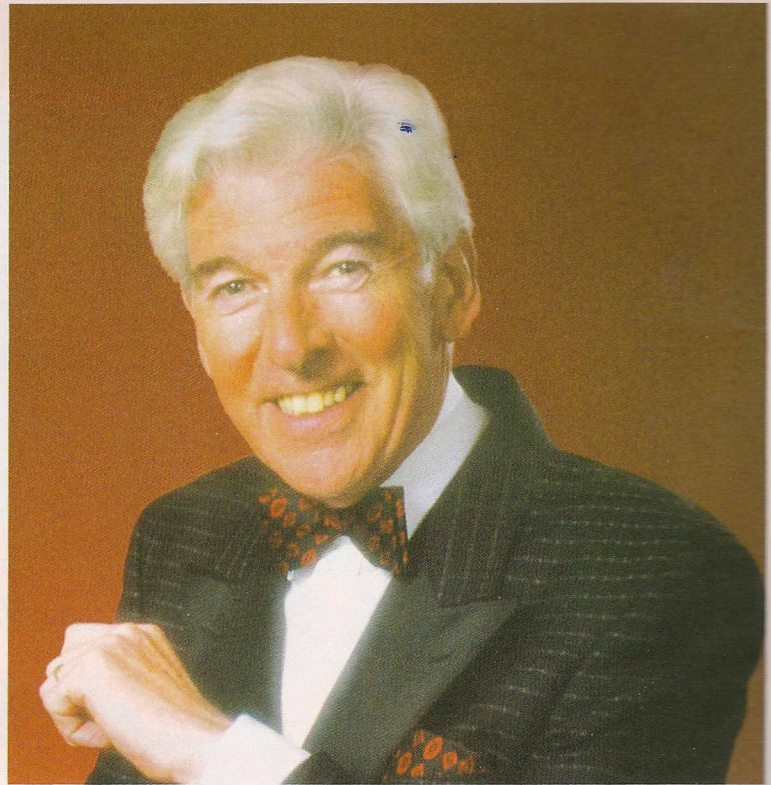


In the Comedians - I was Rubbish

Tom O'Connor talks EXCLUSIVELY to

Celebrity

interview by Ken & Angela Ross



Mention Tom O'Connor and you know exactly who we mean, Tom is one of Britain's top entertainers, a household name and probably everyone's favourite son. His fame has come from years of hosting top television shows such as London Night Out, Wednesday at Eight, his own show The Tom O'Connor Show, as well as the countries top game shows, Name that Tune, Gambit, Zodiac, Password, I've Got Secrets and A Question of Entertainment.

Tom, like many of our top comedians, comes from of Merseyside and it was when working as a maths teacher and assistant Head Master at his local school he first developed his interest in being a comedian. Whilst many in Liverpool would immediately laugh and say being a teacher you were already half way there, for several years Tom lived a double life, sometimes not getting home till three o'clock in the early morning, having a few hours sleep and then going of to teach at school.

"Luckily for me" Tom explains "I soon realised I had a full diary of club bookings for the coming year, so I took the plunge, hung up my teaching cap and gown and became a full time professional entertainer" - here Tom talks of how and why it all happened.

The first big break I had was on the top television show The Comedians, it was good for my career around the clubs, but it was also a very important learning curve in my life. I did four of the shows and to be honest I really thought I was the 'bees-knees'. I was on television and I was a star, and at the time, like everyone does, I thought I had made it, as far as I was concerned - I was Mr Showbiz.

Unfortunately, later I looked at the tapes and realised I wasn't that good after all, in fact 'I was rubbish'. I had four shots on the programme and to be honest, possible two more than I really deserved. But in retrospect, it was possibly my best break. I was disappointed with my performances and felt I had actually not done as well on the show and having a couple of years to sort my act out wasn't as bad as it sounds. I changed my act completely, not just stand up gags, now more of a look at life and situation comedy.

Suddenly there was this new television show, Opportunity Knocks, it was the most popular show of the year with the biggest viewing figures ever. I was invited on and spent weeks grooming my act, obviously I was nervous but everything went well - I was the

and no comedian had ever done so well. So if you think of that and add the show I finally didn't win and then the winner's show, that was five weeks on the trot, it was like my own mini series. It was all fantastic stuff, great days and only then did I truly feel I was doing well and ready for bigger things.

What I didn't know, was that on the night of the winners show when I was on, Mr Bernard Delfont himself was in the control box watching the show and asked one of the producers 'who is this guy'. The producer answered, saying that I was a comedian who was or had been maths and music teacher - Delfont answered saying he had a brand new quiz show starting and he needed an entertainer who knows music and maths. So it was decided there and then between them to offer it to me. So I was still on stage when my whole life was turned around - and I didn't even know it, but by the time I walked off that stage I was already the newest star on television, hosting one of the most popular game shows ever, 'Name That Tune', what a break".

When we suggested that normally, like in the case of comedian Stan Boardman, you go on Opportunity Knocks and then get a place on a show like the comedians after wards, Tom laughingly agreed and admitted that he was possibly the only entertainer who had did it the wrong way around.

Tom Continued "It was all happening for me, from that I got about six or seven games shows, but I always said that I don't want to be just a question and answer man, that I want to put some humour into the show with a few gags. Even when I now guest in Countdown, I still put three or four gags in every show".

We then mention Tom's break into serious acting, where he was hugely successful in the BBC series 'Doctors'.

"To be fair I didn't even consider it as acting on my part" (Tom breaks into laughter), I mean the character, Father Tom, was a grey haired Liverpool Catholic priest called Tom" (here we all laugh), well yes we agree but probably normally priests don't tell jokes we say, Tom laughs, "well actually I did manage to get two jokes in during the series."

"After my appearances in Doctors, I keep getting offered parts but it's accepting the right part that's important and I want to play a villain, a badie is always best on television. There is a



"At the moment I am in a ITV series called 'The Way We Were', which is a programme where you get three actors, Ken Dodd, me and a young actor from Coronation Street, and we all talk about what it was like when we were ten years old – of course the difference between some one like Doddy, who is eighty now and the Corrie guy, who is twenty one, talking about when they were ten is amazing. The changes and conception of the past is surreal, I mean Doddy's ten is not the same as a twenty-one year olds ten is it? It's really is a great show".

Have the days of stand up comedians gone we ask? – Tom reflects, "It seems so, what we get now is very fine comedian entertainers but not necessarily stand up comedians, they are just acting or reciting the script. Its good, but cannot compare it to the quick fire repartee of the old fashioned seasoned comedian – but that's the age we live in and I accept that."

Once the palladium finished where did the comedians all go we ask, "yes this is a problem, most comedians became quiz show hosts, which of course was the new music hall of its day. Now its shows like the one I am doing, 'The Way We Were', which is one of the few vehicles left for good comedians like Stan Boardman and Mick Miller. It is also the age of the instant-celebrity, look at how quickly they appear and then of course when they disappear just as quick, it is total burn out, they are gone forever."

"Now it has gone another way, it is the newsreaders that are hosting the quiz shows. Do you know the only actual comic who is hosting a quiz show at the moment is our mate, Jasper Carrot."

"I have a new series hopefully coming up, where I present a show for the Olympics, all part of the fund raising, but you go into the studio and the Producer looks about fourteen years old and the Director, twenty one.

Trouble is when I started doing the pilot they brought in the old writers from years ago who gives you a script, but you have to bite your lip because the jokes they gave me, I was telling twenty years ago. So it's a case of half suggesting changes with them, and let them think it was their idea. So I suppose it is good that we are now getting young newcomers, they have the enthusiasm now and new ideas, which is what we need."

"Talking about new young people, I recently flew to do a one night stand in Guernsey and when I landed I was told they wanted a television interview at the airport, so of course you

strapped to her shoulder, a bit like a parrot sitting there. So it was just her, on her own and she passed me a little microphone and asked me if I wouldn't mind just interviewing myself as the she had the camera and sound equipment to handle. So I am stood there with a microphone in my hand, just talking to myself. I mean she was in fact the producer, the director, camera-operator and the editor – all in one."

"Things have changed throughout entertainment, in the old days you would walk into a venue where you would meet the seven-piece orchestra, dancers and the musical director, but it is all different, those days have gone. Now you have to learn to work on your own, I have a big seven seated Chrysler and that holds all my equipment. You have to be self sufficient. I can go with that vehicle and host anything, a golf day, corporate game show, even do cabaret – an entertainer today has to have everything on hand".

Do you ask for anything we enquire, "Yes only one thing I demand, not to go on after eleven o'clock, because by then the audience have sometimes had too much to drink and probably don't want to stop talking?"

Although last week I turned that around, it was a rugby dinner and I went in and they were all pissed by six o'clock, so when they ask what time I wanted to go on I said as late as possible, then if they don't sober up, at least they will have all fallen asleep".

Of course Tom O'Connor has other hidden talents, he has several top selling humorous golf books to his credit (with a new book being written now) and is one of the countries top requested after dinner speakers.

Tom has made a perfect career in entertainment - comedian, game show host, television presenter, after dinner speaker and author – yet he has done all this and made many friends along the way. He is as popular within the business as he is with his audiences and fans – Tom O'Connor, a great entertainer and a nice guy.

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