



With comedy booming as never before, age is no barrier to those brave enough to try their hand at stand-up, as some of our most promising 'undiscovered' acts are proving ▷

THE OLD ROUTINE

Words **Bruce Dessau** Photographs **Paul Stuart**



IT SEEMS AS IF YOU'RE NEVER MORE THAN TEN YARDS AWAY from a comedian these days. Stand-ups are constantly on TV, regularly filling arenas and smiling from the covers of DVDs at Christmas. And some of our comedy legends are still going strong well beyond Freedom Pass age. Joan Rivers recently turned 80, Billy Connolly is in his seventies, Victoria Wood has just reached 60 – they can't need the money, can they? Maybe it's the laughter they're addicted to.

So perhaps it is no surprise that comedy is seen as an increasingly attractive career option for people who have already had one or two careers. As with popes, age is no barrier. Comedians have a joke they often tell variants of, 'Laughter is the best medicine... although apparently penicillin is pretty good too.' Anecdotal evidence certainly seems to suggest it can be good for your health. George Burns and Bob Hope were both still cracking gags as centenarians. Another Bob, Bob Monkhouse, got great material out of his seniority: 'You'll be glad to hear I can still enjoy sex at 74. I live at number 76 – it's no distance.'

There are now dedicated competitions for older performers, such as the Leicester Comedy Festival's annual Silver Stand Up Award for comedians aged over 55. Marc Lucero, this year's winner, recently played to an audience of nearly a thousand in Cambridge with one-liner king Milton Jones. And it can certainly be lucrative at the top. Micky Flanagan, 50, is playing seven nights at the O₂ Arena in London this autumn – that's a longer run than Beyoncé's.

There are some courses available to study the craft of stand-up comedy, but all you really need to be successful is something to talk about. A hinterland. A life that can be weaved into a humorous, witty, pithy story. And our senior stand-ups certainly have that.



Sarah Moloney, 67

Take a slice of Penelope Keith, add a dash of Christine Hamilton and you have Sarah Moloney, from Steeple Morden near Cambridge. 'If you want to know what Middle England likes, come to me,' she smiles.

Sarah currently leads a double life. She is also a successful novelist, as Sarah Harrison, with 33 books under her belt, but has now caught the stand-up bug. 'You're not allowed to get old without having a challenge, are you?'

This nattily dressed mother and grandmother steers clear of gags that

are simply about age. 'I don't want to end up in the token female or the token old person ghetto. I talk about babies, even though it was a long time ago, and gap years. I did a gig recently where I talked about marine mammals. The song of the whale? Yeah, right. Beyoncé can rest easy in her bed. When did a whale last headline at Glastonbury?'

Sarah likes to approach comedy from a more 'sideways' angle. 'I'd like to tell stories, but it is hard when you are doing a short set and you have to get a laugh in the first 20 seconds. When you get

'Once you've done it you realise just how hard it is to make people laugh for a whole evening'

that laugh it's a terrific high. Getting that sound to come out of someone's mouth is the scariest thing I've ever done.'

Before embarking on her stand-up career she had done some public speaking, so felt she could make an audience laugh, but a comedy club can be a bit of a bear pit. 'It is heart-stoppingly terrifying when you embark on a story and they are not laughing and you've got to get to the end of it.'

Her husband is supportive, 'though he cannot imagine why I do it'. Recently, however, he came with some friends to a show that didn't go so well. 'I tried to go off-piste and it didn't work. I might dissuade them from coming in future.'

But the good experiences more than make up for the bad ones. She regularly goes to gigs and enjoys Michael McIntyre and Micky Flanagan, and younger comedians too. 'My daughter introduced me to Russell Kane. He is very clever.' Victoria Wood is her favourite.

Now she is a comedian herself, her admiration for those at the top of gagsmithery's greasy pole has increased dramatically: 'Once you've done it, you realise how hard it is to make people laugh for a whole evening. I'd laugh at anybody just to make them feel all right!'

Marc Lucero, 60

Dapper Marc Lucero always felt there was a stand-up comedian inside him bursting to get out while he was busy failing at other jobs: 'I was unemployable. I worked on building sites and ran market stalls. I was the worst bricklayer in the world. I was always getting the sack.' His epiphany came in his forties: 'My market stall was struggling and I was broke, and I thought, "I could have followed my dream and been skint". That was the turning point.'

As soon as the wild-haired North Londoner got onstage he realised he had

made the right decision. I knew something was calling me but I didn't know what until I did stand-up. Other comedians have it, too, when everything feels right. Jack Dee called it the "Oh yeah" moment and I'm afraid I can't put it any better.'

Marc did not train to be a stand-up. 'I'm naturally a sociable person, I like talking, so it was an extension of that.' He did, however, briefly do a drama course to help him with stage technique. 'Sometimes I'd turn up at a pub and there would be no microphone to hold so I didn't know what to do with my hands.'

He plays regularly to audiences of all ages, but likes it when the people in front of him are of a similar vintage. 'I think "you are my people". I can see them respond well when I talk about something they've experienced, like going into hospital. When I make light of it, it makes them feel better.'

The stand-up scene is very egalitarian. You are judged on merit, not age. Marc has really noticed only one difference between younger and older stand-ups. 'It's when you share a car on the way to a gig. The first thing young ones ask you is, "Who are you with?" They want

'I'm not keen on society's view of the over-60s. I spend more time in clubs now than in my twenties'

to know who your agent is. They are much more ambitious.'

His material draws on his life and his philosophy of challenging expectations: 'I'm not keen on society's view of the over-60s. I spend more time in clubs now than I did in my twenties.' The only drawback is energy levels. 'If I work from Thursday to Saturday, Monday is a write-off.' As he explains in his act, he compensates by trying to eat healthily: 'I go to organic shops. I once chose a cake described as sugar-free, fat-free, egg-free, dairy-free, wheat-free, gluten-free. I got home and looked in the bag. There was nothing there.' ▶

Ten over-50s comedians who still have 'em rolling in the aisles



Billy Connolly, 70

'Never trust a man who, when left alone with a tea cosy, does not try it on'

Micky Flanagan, 50

'I went to a gym the other day. I lay down on the mat to do some sit-ups and woke up two hours later. I felt fantastic. I treated myself to a frothy coffee and a Kit Kat Chunky'



Jack Dee, 51 **'Studies show one in five British teens is unable to peel an orange... It's a good job they've all got knives then'**

Paul Merton, 56 **'There are various ways to give up smoking - nicotine patches, nicotine gum... My auntie used to pour a gallon of petrol over herself every morning'**



Jeremy Hardy, 52 **'Marriage is like the witness protection programme: you get new clothes, you live in the suburbs and you're not allowed to see your friends any more'**

Victoria Wood, 60

'Sexual harassment at work. Is it a problem for the self-employed?'



Jo Brand, 56 **'My bloody neighbour banged on my front door at 2.30 this morning. Thank God I was still up playing the drums'**

Frank Skinner, 56 **'You know you're getting old when, after they've cut your hair, the barber asks: "Do you want me to trim your ears as well?"'**



Joan Rivers, 80

'I am very happy to be 80 and I am celebrating it with my 80th face'

Jenny Eclair, 53 **'Do you know how many middle-aged men go out for a pint of milk and never come home? Not enough!'**



GROOMING/HAIR/MAKE-UP: TONY WARD/JOY GOODMAN, THIS PAGE: REX

◁ Charmian Hughes 57

Charmian Hughes must be the oldest comeback kid on the block. She was a full-time stand-up comedian 15 years ago, but put it on the backburner when she became a mother. Now her children are teenagers she has thrown herself back into the fray and will be performing every day at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this summer.

She certainly has lots of material for her new autobiographical show *Odd One In*. Her mother used to tell her she'd been muddled up with another baby at birth, and her first teenage kiss was with disgraced former politician Chris Huhne ('I wish I could remember fully the bliss of that kiss, but the inner tension, caused by my history of nervous flatulence, dominated the experience.') Oh, and she once ran away to join the circus.

Comedy the first time round was life-changing as she met her husband at a gig. 'I used to point to my stomach, then point to someone in the audience and say, "I'm expecting a baby in nine months if that's all right with you."' One night I pointed at him. He'd seen me before and had come back, so he was a bit of a stalker. We've now got two kids.' Parenthood also helped generate gags: 'Call me old-fashioned, but wasn't it better in the olden days? When children had jobs. They didn't have all that excess energy after a day up the chimneys.'

Stand-up these days is a more sedate affair altogether. She prefers to go home to East Dulwich in London, but if she

'I'm less nervous now and less likely to blame myself if I have a bad gig'

stays away it is in a B&B, not all-night partying. With age comes a more Zen-like calm. 'I'm less nervous now and less likely to blame myself if I have a bad gig. My self-esteem is not wrapped up in it as it once was.'

As with all other comedians, the high she gets from a laugh is still hugely important: 'I came from a dysfunctional family, which gave me a distorted mirror

of what I was like, so a lot of my comedy was about immediate feedback.'

Superstardom would be nice, but 'other things in life are important too. Comedy is by and large a meritocracy. If you are funny you will make a living, but you've got to have something of the serial killer about you to get to the top.' *Odd One In is at the Banshee Labyrinth, Edinburgh, August 3-24* ♦

Bruce Dessau is the author of Beyond A Joke: Inside The Dark Minds of Stand-Up Comedians (£8.99, Cornerstone). To buy at 20% discount from Saga Bookshop, see page 151



John Lloyd, the writer and producer of *Spitting Image* and *Blackadder* and the creator of *QI*, is about to do stand-up for the first time at 61



'At university I'd wanted to make a career as a writer and performer but ended up a producer - Rowan Atkinson called me the 'comedy plumber', fixing things

for everyone else. Then last year - in front of 3,500 people - I went onstage for 15 minutes at a charity event and I made people laugh. It was the most

brilliant feeling. I thought that maybe I should have been doing this for the past 40 years after all!

'It's never too late to try something new - I don't feel 61. When I think how exhausted I felt in my twenties and thirties, working every hour of the day and night, today I feel a lot fitter than I ever did then.'

'I often ask my wife for advice, but my real mentor is my 22-year-old son Harry.

He's very funny and I bounce ideas off him. And my director Patricia is there for the nuts and bolts.

'One of the advantages of starting at my age is that I've had a lot of life experience. I'm a bit dented - three children, a long marriage and hard work do that to you - but I've got a lot of positive things to say. Everyone who works at *QI* looks at the world with the

enthusiasm of a five-year-old. I want to carry that passion into my show and give people an hour when they say "Wow! That was so funny and interesting" and have them leave feeling entertained and positive. I hope it's all going to be a terrific lark.'

John's show Liff of QI is at the Underbelly Dairy Room throughout the Edinburgh Festival Fringe this month