

# Bob's full life

Bob Monkhouse was one of TV's most popular and gifted comedians. Steve O'Brien reveals how he made a career comeback in the Nineties after going decidedly out of fashion

**W**hen the news of Bob Monkhouse's death was announced in 2003, the tributes came thick and fast, even from comedians not born when he started his career. 'He had this reputation for being cheesy and smarmy,' said Private Eye editor Ian Hislop, 'but he had millions of good jokes. Nobody could stop him, he was like a machine gun.'

We suspect Monkhouse would have been not only gladdened,

but surprised by the outpouring of love from younger people after his death, as, just 20 years before, his brand of rat-a-tat joke-telling had been completely torpedoed by the alternative comedy set. Even his politics at the time made him appear, in the world of light entertainment anyway, hopelessly anachronistic. While the punkish up-and-comers were largely Labour-ticking lefties, Monkhouse was a proud Conservative, with even his humour being informed by his right-leaning views. 'Neil Kinnock was first in the queue at the Ideal Home Exhibition,' he once wrote in his famous book of jokes. 'Someone told him it was full of Labour-saving devices.'

That rejection from this new generation of comics hurt Monkhouse deeply. Comedy was something that he considered himself almost a scholar of. A long-time devotee of the art form, he was a collector of silent film comedies and owned one of the biggest private libraries of vintage TV shows in the UK. Not just that, but he'd been making audiences laugh since the Fifties, first as a writer and then as a stand-up.

As an actor, he'd appeared in the very first Carry On movie, Carry On Sergeant (1958), headlining as a handsome newlywed, who finds himself conscripted on his first day of marriage; and was the lead in such fondly remembered comedy flicks as Dentist in the Chair (1960) and A Weekend With Lulu (1961). But it was game shows that made Bob a household name.

Do You Trust Your Wife? (1956) was his debut, but The Golden Shot (1967-75) turned him into a star. Add Celebrity Squares, Family Fortunes, and Bob's Full House and you'll understand why he was the face of quiz shows in television's golden age.

## TOUGH TIMES

Yet despite the smoothness that Monkhouse exhibited on TV, off screen his life wasn't quite so calm. Married young to Elizabeth Thompson in 1949, he fathered three children, but the union frayed amid infidelity on both sides (they divorced in 1970). He owned his part in his tell-all autobiography, Crying With Laughter, admitting to countless liaisons, including a fling with Diana Dors, whose wild sex parties he later quipped made orgies 'awkward – afterwards you're not too sure who to thank'.

His eldest son, Gary, was born with cerebral palsy and died aged 40 in 1992. The middle child, Simon, meanwhile, drifted into estrangement and heroin, dying alone in a Thai hotel room in 2001 at 46. Only the comedian's adopted daughter, Abigail, outlived him.

Monkhouse remarried in 1973 to producer Jackie Hyde, a partnership that lasted until his death and provided the quiet anchor his private life often lacked. 'She is the dearest friend I have ever had,' he wrote movingly in his autobiography, 'and my very best love affair.'

Though Monkhouse survived the alternative comedy boom of the Eighties, in 1995 he was dealt another blow when two of his precious leather-bound notebooks, where he would jot down any jokes, sketches and one-liners that occurred to him, were stolen. After handing over £10,000 to the thief, the books were returned and, although the culprit was arrested, the charges were eventually dropped.

## JOKES GALORE

Thankfully, the last years of the comedian's life saw Monkhouse's reputation restored. After a period where stand-up comedy had been defined by rambling, personal anecdotes and angry satirical barbs, his style of pure gag-telling saw a resurgence in the late

Nineties and 2000s, with newer comics like Jimmy Carr and Tim Vine mimicking Monkhouse's rapid-fire delivery. He was even invited, aged 69, onto the TV panel show Have I Got News For You in 1994 and proved so popular that he was asked back three years later.

'People who hadn't noticed me, or who had written me off as a game show host, started to reassess me,' Monkhouse recalled of this late-period comeback. 'There were people who hadn't seen me as a stand-up artist and liked it. Suddenly I was in fashion again.'

Which makes it especially cruel that prostate cancer claimed him, just as he was basking in this second coming. Being Bob, of course, he was working until the end. He once claimed, 'I'll never stop working, I want to die in the saddle. A day is wasted for me if I haven't done something even mildly creative'. He was hosting the quiz show Wipeout until a few months before his death, aged 75.

Yet, 22 years after his passing, Bob Monkhouse's influence looms large. Contemporary standups such as Lee Mack, Michael McIntyre, Peter Kay and John Bishop all owe a clear debt to this master joke-teller, so much so that, in 2018, The Daily Telegraph described the late comic as 'modern comedy's unlikely hero'.

For a man whose on-stage persona was often labelled as smarmy, he could, however, be hilariously self-deprecating. 'When I first said I wanted to be a comedian, everybody laughed,' he once said in one of his most famous quotes, adding with perfect timing, 'well, they're not laughing now!'



Bob on a TV show with his great friend Benny Hill

Bob in happier times with son Simon, wife Jackie and daughter Abigail

