

George makes a stand

George Formby is remembered for his feelgood films, but in 1946 he showed a more steely side, by going up against the South Africa government, reveals Steve O'Brien

In 1946, George Formby was at the peak of his fame. In the previous 13 years he'd made a whopping 19 films and, just half a decade before, had inked a contract with Columbia Pictures for an eye-watering £500,000. He'd also just been made an OBE. In the UK at that time, there were few bigger movie stars than the ukulele-playing Lancastrian.

So when George Formby (plus wife and manager Beryl) decided to embark on a tour of South Africa, it was a big deal. Pathé even covered the couple's arrival with a news report showing a group of black tribal dancers putting on a show for a beaming Formby and shots of a throng of fans welcoming the movie star to their country. If there was such a thing as Formbymania, it's there to see in that newsreel. "In Cape Town," the narrator tells us, "George and his wife had an equally rousing reception and, judging from the artificial snowstorm, the fans have been saving up their waste paper for months."

Except those clips of George and Beryl in that audience should have tipped him off. The dancers may have been black, but every one of the faces around the couple are white. Though apartheid hadn't yet been formalised in South Africa, racial segregation was very much



Let George Do It! sees George Formby's character, who becomes a spy by mistake, poke fun at Hitler

the norm, something the Formbys would discover to their horror.

But what did the South African government expect from Britain's favourite movie star? The clues were already there that he was likely to be no supporter of their discriminatory policies. If they'd have caught George's 1940 film *Let George Do It!*, they'd have seen our hero parachute into the Nuremberg Rally and call Adolf Hitler "a windbag" before belting him in the face. During shows for the troops during the Second World War, he instructed the officers to move from their front row seats to allow the privates a better view. Though his films were frequently dismissed as throwaway entertainment, there was a code to them – a celebration of the working man, and a healthy distrust of authority. When the Lord's Day Observance Society castigated Formby for entertaining the troops on a Sunday he simply responded: "I'll hang up my

uke on Sundays only when our lads stop fighting and getting killed on Sundays... as far as the Lord's Day Observance Society are concerned, they can mind their own bloody business. And in any case, what have they done for the war effort except get on everyone's nerves?" (They left him alone after that.)

So when George and Beryl (who was no shrinking

violet herself) were told that he would only be allowed to perform in front of segregated audiences in South Africa, he instead headed out to the townships to play – free of charge – to black South Africans in their own villages. At one point he told reporters, who asked him why he was doing this, that there are two types of potatoes – red and white – yet when you peel them, they're both the same colour. "That was quite a powerful statement then," Formby biographer David Brett told BBC Radio Lancashire in 2021.

Things came to a head when George was approached by a little black girl, armed with a present of a box of chocolates. Being decent people, Beryl picked up the girl and kissed her, while George gave her a hug. All around them cheered. It was too much, however, for Daniël François Malan, the leader of the country's

National Party and the man who, just two years later, would be elected (by whites only, naturally) Prime Minister, enshrining apartheid into law. Enraged by what had happened, Malan telephoned Beryl to vent his wrath. She listened patiently and then said, "Why don't you piss off, you horrible little man?" before slamming the phone down.

TRAILBLAZERS

The Formbys were duly escorted to the airport and the man who organised their concerts for them was reportedly shot.

In the years after, many artists, notably Dusty Springfield and Stevie Wonder, refused to play South Africa, in protest at the cruelties of apartheid, while others, such as Frank Sinatra and The Beach Boys, shunned the boycott. But George Formby (and indeed his formidable wife) were trailblazers in denouncing the then-racist policies of the country nicknamed the 'rainbow nation'.

Beryl died in December 1960, of leukaemia, with George following her just two months later of a heart attack. Sadly, it would take until 1994 for apartheid to crumble, upon which Nelson Mandela became the country's first black President. It's easy to jump on a bandwagon once others have spoken out, but to be the first to protest a whole regime, well, that takes courage and conviction, and 62 years on from his death, it's an act that stands tall in George Formby's legacy.



DID YOU KNOW?

George and Beryl set up several charities including the Jump Fund which provided home-knitted balaclavas, scarves and socks to servicemen. He also gave free concerts for worthy causes, and raised £10,000 for the Fleetwood Fund on behalf of the families of missing trawlermen.

George met Beryl in 1923 when she and her sister had a clog-dancing act

