

ON THE UPSIDE

Peckham-born actor and Inbetweeners' star Blake Harrison on his new role in Prime Suspect 1973

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Blake Harrison is best known for playing the loveably goofy Neil Sutherland in BAFTA-winning E4 comedy *The Inbetweeners*, and for his unforgettable dance moves in the subsequent film (which, incidentally, were filmed in south London's notorious Infernos nightclub on Clapham High Street). But when we meet for our exclusive shoot at the John the Unicorn pub in Peckham, not too far from the estate where he himself grew up, there's lots more to talk about. Not least of which is his role as DS Spencer Gibbs in ITV's *Prime Suspect 1973*, the hotly awaited prequel to the original *Prime Suspect* show starring Helen Mirren. Jokingly, he promises that we can expect 'a majestic moustache, all self-grown, complete with side burns, and beautifully blow-dried hair.'

Despite the fact that Harrison is keen to move away from being typecast as dumb (the exception being his role as Private Pike in the *Dad's Army* remake – because when else would you get to work with Michael Gambon, Bill Nighy and Tom Courtenay?) his sense of humour is very much present as he poses upside down on the Unicorn's shabby chic furniture.

On a more serious note, he tells me, Gibbs is a multi-faceted character. 'He's

an intelligent guy, but he's a bit hot-headed,' he explains. 'As far as he's concerned, the end justifies the means. He'll go to extreme lengths to get his man.' But despite the fact that he takes his job very seriously, Gibbs is still human. A fan of Marc Bolan and Bowie, he has a rather dubious fashion sense involving frilly red shirts and snakeskin boots. 'He's a bit of a peacock and fancies himself as a ladies man,' laughs Harrison. 'He definitely has a wit and a playfulness about him. I think humour was a huge part of the social dynamics in the forces back then – but like a lot of the men of that era who were brought up in the rougher parts of London, there's still a real steel to him.'

The show succeeds in fully immersing the viewer into 1970s Hackney, with costume, soundtrack, and characterisation utterly on point. The flagrant sexism and class divides played out in the forces is something that also strikes me from the very first episode. Stefanie Martini's character, 22-year-old Jane Tennison, has the double bind of being both a WPC (woman police constable) in what was still a man's world and an upper class girl from Maida Vale to boot, and so much of this is centred around her. Harrison notes that misogyny is played out in the script much more so than the class aspect. 'There's a





Harrison shot to fame with Simon Bird, Joe Thomas and James Buckley

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sense of it just being the norm back then,’ he says. ‘It’s not played on the nose, but it’s there in the subtle things – when a junkie throws up in the cells, it’s one of the female officers that cleans it up.’

Speaking of the past, I wonder, does Harrison – who moved to Kent after the runaway success of *The Inbetweeners*, and now has a three-year-old daughter himself – harbour much nostalgia for his own childhood here in Peckham? ‘Not really,’ he laughs honestly. ‘As much as Peckham is changing, when I was a kid it represented a kind of anxiety to me. I didn’t have too many friends and I didn’t totally fit in because I wanted to sing and dance,’ he admits. ‘Growing up in Peckham and New Cross in the Nineties, I felt like I had to be quite vigilant. My mum grew up in Brockley and my dad grew up in Deptford and little things stay with you – it was always like, don’t be an easy target. Don’t leave that there, someone might nick it.’

‘Having said that, driving past the Toys R Us on the Old Kent Road, you think about when you’ve had a birthday and you’ve saved a bit of money to get a computer game or a Power Ranger or whatever – and it does fill you with a little bit of fondness and nostalgia. I’ve got a brother four years younger and he’s got a real fondness for Peckham. But he was tougher than me, and he was very good at football – so he had all the attributes

he needed to get by and be cool – whereas jazz hands didn’t go down too well on the estate.’

Harrison had always wanted to break into showbiz, and can’t even remember the first time he said he wanted to act. Starting out at a performing arts group on Wednesday evenings in Brockley, he went on to the prestigious Sylvia Young’s and then studied at the Brit School. ‘I didn’t really waiver with it,’ he says. ‘Looking back, I think fortune was on my side, because I think it’s tougher coming from my kind of background. You thank your lucky stars even more when your parents have no links to the industry.’

Although he has always been drawn to comedy, and grew up with Robin Williams, *Wayne’s World* and *Ace Ventura*, he is not averse to playing more Machiavellian roles – and what he aspires to most now is variety. ‘The success of *The Inbetweeners* has put me in a position where I can choose where my career is going to go next – rather than just whoever will pay me,’ he says.

‘A lot of people go to work and it’s the same every day. It’s exciting working with new people and getting your teeth into characters that are different from what you’ve done before. I was a massive comic book geek as a kid and a huge Buffy fan, so I’d like to tick something like that off the list – but ultimately, as long as I’m playing a mix of characters, I’ll be happy.’

Prime Suspect: 1973 continues Thursdays at 9pm on ITV



Prime Suspect 1973 is a gritty show following the investigations of a Hackney police force



Harrison also starred in the remake of classic British sitcom *Dad’s Army*