

What is Funny? Week 4

Cheeky chappies: Max Miller, Benny Hill, Jim Davidson, Freddie Starr, Derek & Clive...

A lot of comedy is funny because it's forbidden, daring, dangerous, taboo, vulgar, disgusting, extreme, and so on. And a lot of comedy is funny *although* it's forbidden, daring, dangerous, taboo, vulgar, disgusting, extreme and so on. In other words, there's the comedy and then there's the material, and sometimes the two are quite separate. One comedian can stand up and talk about a potato, and it's funny, just because it is, or because he is or she is funny, or because the combination of that comic and a potato is just funny. It just is.

Then another comedian can take that routine a little further and somehow get an innuendo about potatoes into the routine and bring in something about sex or race or something dangerous, and the audience knows where this is going and they know they shouldn't laugh but they can't help it, because it's so funny. And then another comedian will take it even further and suddenly it's not funny because the routine is too explicit: the comic uses offensive words, words that hurt people. Then people in the audience or watching at home on the TV get unhappy, and then the comedy fails because comedy doesn't work when most of the people listening are made to feel unhappy.



Max Miller was probably the greatest comedian of innuendo there ever has been. His jokes were smutty, risqué, near-the-knuckle, blue, a bit close to the mark – all those things.

Barry Took, a comedy writer, wrote "What made Max Miller a legend was his ability to make sex a cheerful business, something to enjoy and be happy about." He always worked to get an audience on his side. He confided in them. It was him and them against the authorities, the police, the censor, the manager.

Max encouraged his audiences to be naughty, to escape, to break the rules and be themselves and have a great night out. He had two books of jokes, the White Book, fairly clean, and the more notorious **Blue Book**, which held stronger material. His timing was immaculate – he knew just when to come in with a remark, a double-entendre, an innuendo, an ironic aside.

Here's part of his routine, which may seem a bit tame by today's standards:

'I said to my father: "Dad, I want to get married."

He said: "Alright son, who do you want to marry?"

I said: "I'd like to marry Miss Green".

He said: "You can't".

I said: "Why not?"

He said: "She's your half-sister. When I was a lad I had a bike and I got around a bit."

I said: "Alright, I'll marry Miss White."

He said: "You can't, she's your half-sister. Forget about it."

Well, I was a bit despondent and I walked around and my mum said to me: "What's wrong with you?"

I said: "Well, I said to Dad I wanted to marry Miss Green and he said I couldn't because she's my half-sister. I said, "All right, I'll marry Miss White." He said: 'You can't, she's your half-sister."

She said: "Look, you go and marry which one you like. He's not your father anyway!"

Here's Max on stage – see how he gets the audience, especially the women in the audience, on his side: he's their dodgy friend, their confidant -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBBonVMU1FY>

And here's part of one of his most famous songs, **The Girls I Like** or **The Girls who Do**

I never fall in love,
With the first girl that I meet.
I like to find out first
If she lives down my street.

I play the waiting game.
On that you may depend.
You'll find the girl I'm looking for –
I'll get her in the end.

And so on to one of many punchlines...

'I like the girls who do.

I like the girls who don't.

I hate the girl who says she will and then she says she won't.

But the girl I like best of all, and I think you'll say I'm right, is the girl who says she never does but she looks as though she...Here!'

And here's a song and patter routine that works well (listen carefully):

http://www.whosdatedwho.com/tpx_9121958/max-miller/tpx_23862495



Innuendo: Monty Python's Nudge nudge, wink wink sequence (Oct 1969) The group of phrases, "Nudge nudge, wink wink, say no more," have passed into the English language as shorthand for a certain leering, prurient, cheesy Here's the script:

Two men in a pub

Norman Is your wife a...goer...eh? Know what I mean? Know what I mean? Nudge nudge. Nudge nudge. Know what I mean? Say no more...know what I mean?

Him I beg your pardon?

Norman Your wife...does she, er, does she 'go' - eh? eh? eh? Know what I mean, know what I mean? Nudge nudge. Say no more.

Him Well, she sometimes goes, yes.

Norman I bet she does. I bet she does. I bet she does. Know what I mean? Nudge nudge.

Him I'm sorry, I don't quite follow you.

Norman Follow me. Follow me. I like that. That's good. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind bat, eh? (elbow gesture; rubs it)

Him Are you trying to sell something?

Norman Selling, selling. Very good. Very good. (hand tilting quickly) Oh, wicked. Wicked. You're wicked. Eh? Know what I mean. Know what I mean? Nudge nudge. Know what I mean? Nudge nudge. Nudge nudge.

(leaning over to him, making eye gesture; speaks slowly) Say...no...more.
(leans back as if having imparted a great secret)

Him But...

Norman (stops him with finger which he lays alongside nose; gives slight tap) Your wife is she, eh... is she a sport. Eh?

Him She likes sport, yes!

Norman I bet she does, I bet she does!

Him She is very fond of cricket, as a matter of fact.

Norman (leans across, looking away) Who isn't, eh? Know what I mean. Likes games, likes games. Knew she would. Knew she would. Knew she would. Likes games, eh? She's been around, eh? Been around?

Him She's travelled. She's from Purley.

Norman Oh...oh. Say no more, say no more. Say no more - Purley, say no more. Purley, eh? Know what I mean, know what I mean. Say no more.

Him (about to speak; can't think of anything to say)

Norman (leers, grinning) Your wife interested in er... (waggles head, leans across) photographs, eh? Know what I mean? Photographs, 'he asked him knowingly'.

Him Photography?

Norman Yes. Nudge nudge. Snap snap. Grin grin, wink wink, say no more?

Him Holiday snaps?

Norman Could be, could be taken on holiday. Could be yes - swimming costumes. Know what I mean. Candid photography. Know what I mean, nudge nudge.

Him No, no we don't have a camera.

Norman Oh. Still (slaps hands lightly twice) Woah! Eh? Wo-oah! Eh?

Him Look, are you insinuating something?

Norman Oh...no...no... Yes.

Him Well?

Norman Well. I mean. Er, I mean. You're a man of the world, aren't you...I mean, er, you've er... you've been there haven't you...I mean you've been around...eh?

Him What do you mean?

Norman Well I mean like you've er...you've done it...I mean like, you know...you've...er...you've slept...with a lady.

Him Yes.

Norman What's it like? [*Enormous artificial laugh on sound track.*]

And here's the sketch: [DVD Episode 3 'How to recognise different types of trees from a long distance...' **from 001 2 men in pub to "What's it like?" 2:12"] or: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ona-RhLFRfc>**

Benny Hill is an acquired taste: he was definitely vulgar, he is very dated (check the hairstyles) but then so is Monty Python, and so obviously is Charlie Chaplin - and yet you can't help laughing at some of his sketches, and you can't help groaning at many others. But he was funny, sometimes, in a very innocent, very cheerful way.

Ernie (The Fastest Milkman In The West)

(No.1 in UK charts, 1971)

You could hear the hoof beats pound

As they raced across the ground

And the clatter of the wheels

As they spun round and round

And he galloped into Market Street

His badge upon his chest

His name was Ernie (*Ernie*)

And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west

Now Ernie loved a widow

A lady known as Sue

She lived all alone in Linley Lane

At number twenty two

They said she was too good for him

She was haughty, proud and chic

But Ernie got his cocoa there

Three times every week

They called him Ernie (*Ernie*)

And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west

She said she'd like to bathe in milk

He said Alright, sweetheart

And when he finished work one night

He loaded up the cart
He said you wanted pasteurised
'cause pasteurised is best
She says Ernie I'll be happy
If it comes up to me chest
And that tickled old Ernie (*Ernie*)
And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west

Now Ernie had a rival
An evil looking man
Called Two Ton Ted from Teddington
And he drove the baker's van
He tempted her with his treacle tarts
And his tasty wholemeal bread
And when she saw the size
Of his hot meat pies
It very near turned her head

She nearly swooned at his macaroon
And he said now if you treat me right
You'll have hot rolls every morning
And crumpets every night
He knew once she'd sampled his layer cake
He'd have his wicked way
And all Ernie had to offer
Was a pint of milk a day
Poor Ernie (*Ernie*)
And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west

One lunchtime Ted saw Ernie's horse and cart outside her door
It drove him mad to find it was still there at half past four
And as he leaped down from of his van
Hot blood through his veins did course
And he went across to Ernie's cart
And he didn't half kick his horse
Whose name was Trigger (*Trigger*)

And he pulled the fastest milk cart in the west

**Now Ernie rushed out into the street
His gold top in his hand
He said if you want to marry Susie
You'll fight for her like a man
Oh why don't we play cards for her
He sneeringly replied
And just to make it interesting
We'll have a shilling on the side**

**Now Ernie dragged him from his van
And beneath the blazing sun
They stood there face to face
And Ted went for his bun
But Ernie was too quick
Things didn't go the way Ted planned
And a strawberry flavoured yoghurt
Sent it spinning from his hand**

**Now Sue she ran between them
And tried to keep them apart
And Ernie pushed her aside
And a rock cake caught him underneath his heart
And he looked up in pained surprise
As the concrete hardened crust
Of a stale pork pie caught him in the eye
And Ernie bit the dust
Poor Ernie (*Ernie*)
And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west**

**Ernie was only fifty-two, he didn't want to die
Now he's gone to make deliveries
In that milk round in the sky
Where the customers are angels
And ferocious dogs are banned**

And a milkman's life is full of fun
In that fairy dairy land
But a woman's needs are manifold
And Sue she married Ted
But strange things happened on their wedding night
As they lay in their bed
Was that the trees a-rustling?
Or the hinges of the gate?
Or Ernie's ghostly gold tops a-rattling in their crate?
They won't forget Ernie (*Ernie*)
And he drove the fastest milk cart in the west

Here's the video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwaOvaR7slQ>

Jim Davidson isn't really the best role model for today's younger person, but he was a great stand-up comedian,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjmsRsWl7jU>

and he was recently charged with various misdemeanours.

Freddie Starr was very vulgar and was rumoured to have put his hamster in the microwave. Here is Frederick Pruning Shears:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vj99WZW3XPk>

Derek & Clive...

Probably the most disgusting comic pair ever to record disgusting comedy. In the 1970s, the comedy pair Peter Cook and Dudley Moore were in New York, bored, and hating each other's guts, but dependent on each other for their fame: thus were born Derek & Clive:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJl1P8plf1o&list=PLkoFj56_vqo_sm8gthYM9KipSxdwBMA_XI [from about 2:20 – stop dead at 4:31 “I tell you the worst job I ever had...”]

Our question is not, were Derek & Clive good or bad or offensive or disgusting? Because they undoubtedly were. But were they funny? And if they were funny, can we say what was funny about jokes about lobsters and Jayne Mansfield, and worse (or better)? On the

principle of less is more, covert is stronger than overt, latent better than blatant, would it have been funnier to rely on innuendo? On *Nudge nudge, wink wink, say no more?*