SUNSHINE ON PUTTY

The Golden Age of British Comedy, from Vic Reeves to *The Office*

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HARPER PERENNIAL

1
On the Launchpad

The Reeves and Mortimer despot/democrat trajectory is about to commence

'The present time, together with the past, shall be judged by a great jovialist'

Nostradamus

'You'll never guess what I just saw backstage . . . Nicholas Witchell with a barrage balloon Sellotaped onto his back, trying to convince all these termites that he was their queen'

Vic Reeves

In a late-nineties BBC TV documentary about Steve Martin, the stadium-filling stand-up balloon-folder turned Hollywood leading man recalls looking around him at the angry political comedy which prevailed in his homeland in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam protest era. 'Hmm,' Martin remembers his mid-seventies self thinking, 'all that's gonna be over soon . . . and when it is, I'm gonna be right there. And I'm gonna be *silly*.'

It would not be the act of a madman to imagine Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer making a similar plan in downtown south-east London a decade or so later, with Margaret Thatcher as their Richard Nixon and Ben Elton as their Richard Pryor. If you hadn't ever spoken to them. But once you've listened to them talking about what they do (in this instance, over tea and biscuits at the BBC, at around the same time the Steve Martin documentary goes out) it's hard to conceive how the massive cultural impact Reeves and

Mortimer have had on this country in the past decade or so could possibly have been a matter of prior calculation.

They have always been endearingly incapable of guessing which of their ideas will go down well and which won't ('You imagine everyone will like everything when you first think it up,' Vic muses, 'then when you actually do it, you think "Oh, maybe not" '), seeming to clutch to their hearts with especial tenderness those comedic sallies which are greeted with total incomprehension on the part of their audience.

Vic remembers an infamous early appearance at the Montreal Comedy Festival: 'There were 7,000 people, one of the biggest crowds we've ever had, and it was absolute silence for twelve minutes. We went out and we had the lucky carpet with us. The basic joke is Bob comes on and says, "I've been having some bad luck." And I say, "Well, have you got a lucky charm?" And I turn out to have a lucky charm which is too big to carry . . .'

Vic shakes his head contentedly: 'You could hear people in the audience saying, "That carpet's too big" – they just couldn't accept someone having a twenty-foot roll of carpet for a lucky charm.'[18]

Bob has similarly fond memories of 1998's notoriously impenetrable BBC2 series *Bang Bang . . . It's Reeves & Mortimer*. 'We have this hope,' Mortimer insists, rather poignantly, 'that if there's anyone left bothered about us in fifty years' time, that will be the one they'll remember.'[19]

It seems jokes nobody understands are like pop stars who die young. They never get the chance to let you down.

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[18] 'It's a very English thing to make an arse of yourself,' Vic notes later, with regard to the transatlantic comedic divide whose existence was confirmed by this Canadian communications breakdown. 'American comics tend to say, "We're the same as you". Whereas with us, it's more likely to be "We're not the same as you – we wear bad shoes and we're completely thick." '

[19] 'In fact,' Bob recalls poignantly on another occasion, '*Bang Bang* . . . was our real attempt at making something commercial: our official, formal show to be something everyone would like!' 'Fucking hell,' Vic shakes his head. 'We never explained what the humunculus was, or why he was in the desk.' For those boiled eggs that kept coming out of dead people's mouths, though, an explanation is eventually forthcoming: 'That was their souls.'

'There's such a thin line between what works and what doesn't,' argues long-time Vic and Bob associate and *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* catalyst Jonathan Ross (while pretending not to care whether any fellow customers have registered his presence in a Soho Starbucks in the early summer of 2002). 'It's all delivery and perception and context. And I think they understand that better than anyone. That's why they never get beaten down – because *they* find what they do genuinely funny. That's what makes them different from what you might call more workmanlike comedians, or some of the sort of stuff I do,' Ross grins.

'You sit down and write material which you think people might find funny,' he continues. 'Then you try and hone it so they definitely will do, but you're not living life for yourself. It's purely work. It was never like that for Vic and Bob, though. They're not a service industry: even when they're doing things to pay the rent, they're still enjoying themselves. And something like that time in Montreal – where they were doing stuff with a miniature Elvis and some monkeys on a plate to a bemused bilingual audience – they just enjoyed the whole experience. For them, it doesn't represent the death of an act or a step back in a possible career plan, it's just another funny moment in an already amusing day.'

Reeves and Mortimer used to commemorate the jokes which no one got with a weekly memorial service in the 'tumbleweed moment' running gag on *Shooting Stars*. Now that they themselves are verging on institutional status, it's hard to remember just how roughly they once rubbed against the comic grain. But when the *Big Night Out* first appeared – in a succession of (to use Vic's characteristically art-history-informed adjective) 'Hogarthian' south-east London pubs, in the second half of the 1980s – the ideological tyranny of alternative comedy was still at its height.

'It just didn't interest me,' Vic remembers scornfully. 'I hate being preached to. I can make my own mind up: tell me something new.' In Vic's case, something new meant a potent blend of old-fashioned vaudeville and a spirit of the purest comic anarchy.

Consider for a moment the *Big Night Out*'s warped talent contest 'Novelty Island' (in which Mortimer's increasingly poignant *alter ego* Graham Lister strives to impress the unfeeling Reeves with a series of doomed variety acts, such as pushing lard through the

mouth and nostrils of a picture of Mickey Rourke). Now cast your mind back to its most obvious comedic precursor, 'Alan Whicker Island' – a vintage Monty Python sketch about an archipelago inhabited entirely by people who look and behave just like the abrasive TV travel-show presenter turned spokesman for American Express. The fundamental difference between these two comic conceits is that the latter addresses the entertainment apparatus it is attempting to deconstruct from the top down, while the former does so from the bottom up.

This levelling tendency in Vic and Bob's work is balanced from the first (for example, in the marvellously arbitrary adjudications of the terrifying Judge Nutmeg) with a healthy respect for the comic potential of absolute rule. Their unique ability to combine the insurrectionary fury of the eighteenth-century mob with the icy *hauteur* of the pre-revolutionary aristocrat is the basis of what rocket scientists of the future will term 'The Reeves and Mortimer despot/democrat trajectory'.

3. Primary Ross/Reeves interface

As with the initial encounter between Lorenzo de' Medici and Michelangelo – to which it has often been compared – the bare physical facts of the first meeting between Jonathan Ross and Vic Reeves are a matter of historical record. It was the start of the second series of *The Last Resort* in the autumn of 1987, and after the runaway success of his début season, Jonathan Ross was looking around for fresh inspiration in the midst of a 'horrible second album moment'.

His brother Adam, who was running a club called The Swag at Gossips in Soho at the time, had mentioned a 'slightly crazy DJ guy . . . the only person he knew who admitted to liking prog-rock when no one else would even acknowledge that stuff. He'd put on a record like "Alright Now" by Free and mime to it while wearing a horse-brass round his neck.'

When Ross senior discovered that this individual also did 'strange paintings of Elvis', his curiosity was definitely piqued. A meeting was set up at a Japanese restaurant in Brewer Street, where Reeves

would bring his pictures and Ross would pick up the tab. Fifteen years later, the latter remembers the occasion in tones endearingly reminiscent of one of those scenes in a TV dating show where someone goes to the toilet between the starter and the main course to tell the cameras how it's going.

'I liked the way he looked,' Ross remembers. 'I liked what he'd done with his hair – he was the first person I'd seen with what was sort of the George Clooney cut. I'd always been interested in the evolution of male style but never really had the courage to do anything about it. Jim [it is a tribute to the power of the Vic Reeves persona that even people who know him really well seem slightly uneasy about using the name on his birth certificate] certainly led the way there.[20]

'I'd never seen anyone who was quite so comfortable about looking ridiculous for the sake of style,' Ross continues, 'which is something I deeply admire in people – that almost complete sublimation of the ego in pursuit of "the look". He was wearing all black, and he had his hair done very short. He looked great and very unusual – kind of like a mod, but those early ones who were inspired by the American beats. Anyway, it was a very interesting look and I knew he'd done it consciously, so that really impressed me.'

What was the atmosphere like between the two of them? 'It was reasonably friendly, but a little awkward. I was slightly embarrassed at the time about the way people might perceive me as being the epitome of Thatcher's young man. I suppose it was because of the shoulder pads – shoulder pads equating in a post-*Dynasty* kind of way with flash and success. Anyway, I was very conscious of going out of my way not to seem like that person.'

And yet Ross felt comfortable buying two paintings (for a hundred pounds each, though Vic only asked for ten) on the spot – one of which featured Elvis ironing Tommy Trinder's trousers?

'I do remember thinking immediately afterwards, I hope I haven't offended him in some way. I was always concerned about the north–south thing as well . . . especially back then. It was very important at that stage for any vaguely sensitive southerner not to act like a

[20] Though Jonathan Ross's fashion sense must surely rank quite highly on any list of things one wouldn't want to be credited with inspiring.

prick in any way to do with money or status or feeling proud of being brought up in the nation's capital city when in the company of northern gentlemen.'

Vic and Bob seem to have had a talent for reflecting this feeling back at people. 'Yes, but very *nicely*, never in an anti-southern kind of way . . . It was almost a casual acknowledgement of who they were. One of the things that always really attracted me to them was that they were clearly from the north-east, yet it wasn't like "Hello, we're northerners, look at us". Their unapologetic use of phrases and terms that either were peculiar to their region, or seemed like they might be to people from the south, made the whole thing feel kind of true, even when it was anything but.'

Ross first encountered the two of them together a few months after the Brewer Street meeting, when he went down to see Vic DJ-ing at Gossips. 'There were about three people in the audience and some bloke pretending to be a playboy singing "I'm the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo". Bob turned up afterwards and I assumed he and Vic were a gay couple, because they seemed quite tender with each other. Bob was concerned that it hadn't gone well and I didn't understand that they worked together, I just thought, Oh, he's gay and this is his little partner. So when Vic said "I'm doing a thing with Bob" I just thought "Oh fuck, it's a Linda McCartney situation". But of course, it wasn't.'

Right from the start of his own TV career, Ross seemed keen to rehabilitate British comedy's old guard – the Frankie Howerds and Sid Jameses – who had fallen by the ideological wayside in the 1980s.[21] Was one of the things that impressed him about Vic Reeves the way he seemed to be referring to a pre-alternative tradition?

'I think early on I was just struck by his originality and his fearlessness . . . the way he presented himself as an exotic figure, not so much in terms of being from the north-east, just in a kind of "Hello,

[21] 'Sometimes I wasn't sure if I *was* actually championing things,' Ross remembers, 'or just enjoying the idea of saying I was. Coming out for Frankie Howerd, for instance, was something I was really pleased to have done, but with, say, *On The Buses*, I would probably have said "Wow this is great", where actually it wasn't.'

I'm Spike Milligan's illegitimate son" sort of way. It's just that unique manner Vic has of observing things and presenting himself . . . It's not so much courage, because courage is when you know that you might fail. It's more like an insane confidence in his own world view.'

2. Seven days in the sitcom wilderness: 'Listen very carefully, I will say this only once'

There's a great bit in Graham McCann's 1998 biography of Morecambe and Wise where, as a means of establishing the weight of expectation resting upon his subjects' disastrous 1954 small-screen début *Running Wild* (the one which caused the *People's* television critic to pen the somewhat premature epitaph 'Definition of the week. "TV": the box in which they buried Eric and Ernie'), the author outlines the other entertainment on offer on Britain's only small-screen channel on the night Morecambe and Wise staked their first claim on the medium. Bear in mind that this was a time when, in McCann's suitably austere phrase, 'Hours of viewing, like public drinking, were limited in the interests of temperance'. Thus, the early evening newsreel was followed by the rather Reevesian-sounding *Coracle Carnival* (with its exciting coverage of people paddling up and down a river in Roman-style boats). Then came that eternal televisual staple, 'Association Football' (Aldershot versus the Army), followed by *Gravelhanger*, a drama so bad it made *Heartbeat* look like a mouth-watering prospect. The ill-fated *Running Wild* was next up, before the evening reached a somewhat anti-climactic conclusion with a discussion of the situation in Indo-China, followed by the national anthem.

There would seem to be plenty of ammunition here for those who claim that the now unthinkably large audiences often cited as evidence of the superiority of previous generations of TV were actually just a result of there not being anything else on. Yet *Running Wild* got dreadful viewing figures with no competition, while more than half the nation would watch *Morecambe and Wise* Christmas shows a couple of decades later when it had two (count them, two) other channels to choose from.

Anyway, to extend the reach of McCann's licensed-premises based viewing metaphor, British TV at the start of the 1990s ha left behind the old Scottish Highlands and Islands Keep the Lord' Day Special scenario, but was still a long way shy of the non-sto twenty-four-hour lock-in that would be the digital epoch. In short this was an era of limited Sunday opening and the occasional late night extension.

What we really need to help us understand the dramatic impac of *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* is some kind of contemporary recor of 1990's primitive entertainment landscape. A diary, say, of a whol week's worth of British sitcoms in that last grim Thatcherite winte . . . Thank goodness I kept one![22]

Friday, 21 February

'Allo 'Allo

This failsafe blend of *Carry On*-style innuendo and hoary Worl War II stereotype has entered the national subconscious at such a high level that it's hard to know what to think about it. Excep that the catch-phrase 'Listen very carefully, I will say this onl once' will be remembered long after *'Allo 'Allo*'s source materia – late-seventies BBC drama series *Secret Army* – has faded from the collective memory. And that the only way to truly grasp thi show's ethical daring is to imagine the likely tabloid reactio to a French TV network essaying a comedy series about th humorous experiences of British prisoners in a Japanese POW camp.

Watching

Once the impact of its punkily downbeat theme tune ('It wa boredom at first sight, he was no one's Mr Right') has worn off this amiable chunk of Scouse whimsy actually puts together it clichéd ingredients (interfering mother and put-upon only son in a modestly charming way. Tonight, chirpy Brenda and he lovably gormless motor mechanic boyfriend Malcolm indulgec in a bit of furtive courting aboard a friend's beached pleasur

22. I was getting paid to do this by a magazine. I'm not mad or anything.

craft, and were surprised when the tide came in and they had to be rescued by a lifeboat. Malcolm's last line – 'Nothing ever happens' – made the influence of Samuel Beckett even more explicit than it was already.

Home To Roost

It's hard to believe that this depressing rubbish with John Thaw and Reece Dinsdale in it is actually churned out by the same writer (Eric Chappell) who brought us the immortal *Rising Damp*. And yet, it is.

Colin's Sandwich

Even those who have never previously harboured warm feelings towards Mel Smith have to admit that this is quite good. The prevailing mood of world-weary cynicism recalls the great early days of *Shelley*, and by working through its desire to use the word 'buttocks' in its opening few moments, tonight's edition freed itself from that perennial concern to become genuinely humane. The man whose attempts to take control of his own life are constantly thwarted by his own essential decency, yet he can't help speaking his mind however horrific the situation he has become enmeshed in, is a perennial theme of all great drama, from *Hamlet* to *Ever Decreasing Circles*.

Saturday, 22 February

Not traditionally a big night for sitcoms. Luckily, Keith Barron will soon be back on our screens in *Haggard*.

Sunday, 23 February

You Rang, Milord

Jimmy Perry and David Croft generously stage a benefit night for all their old characters. Lord George and the Honourable Teddy are the same as they were in *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, but in different clothes. Paul Shane, Su Pollard and the other one are the same as they were in *Hi-de-Hi* but in different clothes. The air raid warden in *Dad's Army* is the same as he was in *Dad's*

Army but in different clothes. The story is *Upstairs Downstairs*-style class war but played for laughs, which ought to have been a winning formula, but unaccountably – despite the plentiful opportunities for whisky watering and chamber pots – the whole thing looks a bit tired. In a footnote of modest historical interest, the comedy lesbian is played by one Katherine Rabett, who – had the cookie of royal libido crumbled a little differently – could quite easily have ended up as the Duchess of York.

The Two Of Us

Disgusting piece of Thatcherite slop in which 'Ashley' and 'Elaine' (played by Nicholas Lyndhurst – unwisely striving to shrug off the sacred mantle of Rodney in *Only Fools and Horses* – and the evocatively named Janet Dibley) are a wildly unappealing upwardly mobile couple, currently endeavouring to become entrepreneurs by running a pizza joint in the evenings. Any kind of manual work in a sitcom like this is, it must be remembered, side-splittingly hilarious. 'I wanted a leather-topped desk and a BMW, not a tin of olives and a moped,' Ashley moaned tonight to great audience hilarity. As if all this, another interfering mother and (this is the modern world after all) a businessman with a mobile phone weren't enough, this week's episode also found room for a cameo appearance from Simon Schatzberger, deeply loathed star of the 'French polisher? . . . It's just possible you could save my life' *Yellow Pages* ad.

Monday, 24 February

Desmond's

The fact that the only other non-white character in this entire week of British sitcom is a woman in the dentist's waiting room in Thursday's début edition of *One Foot in the Grave* gives some indication of the burden of representation Trix Worrell's Peckham Rye barber's shop comedy has to carry. In these circumstances, occasional lapses into the all-singing all-dancing tendencies of *The Cosby Show* are probably understandable. The comedy African is quite funny, too.