

Les Barker

A short biography from the age of three until nearly teatime.

Les Barker writes strange poems and comes from originally from Manchester, but he's now Welsh. He was an accountant before he became a professional idiot. He's written 79 books, which sell in large numbers at his gigs because people don't quite believe what they've just heard. His poems have spawned a number of folk heroes: Jason and the Arguments, Cosmo the Fairly Accurate Knife Thrower, Captain Indecisive and Spot of the Antarctic, to name but two.

Les began his career as assistant to Mrs Ackroyd, a small hairy mongrel who lay around in folk clubs, bit people and became famous. Mrs Ackroyd was the only dog ever to own her own record label. Since her sad demise, Les is mainly a solo performer, though he has taken to working with humans from time to time. The Mrs Ackroyd Band gradually evolved from an ever-changing who's who of the folk scene into a tightly knit, well-rehearsed group.

Les has several solo albums to his credit: 'Dogologues', 'An Infinite Number of Occasional Tables', 'A Cardi and Bloke', 'Up the creek without a poodle', 'Arovertherapy' and 'The War on Terrier'. He has travelled the length, breadth and height of Great Britain, as well as Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and - both solo and with the band - the United States and Canada; and he's won assorted prizes for writing and performing in Welsh in the Learners' Pavilion in the National Eisteddfod, performed a couple of times in 'Talwrn Y Beirdd', a fascinating (and to Mr Barker almost incomprehensible) programme on Radio Cymru, and somehow won a Stomp (a Welsh language poetry slam) despite the presence of a number of much better poets.

The Mrs Ackroyd Band - supplemented by guest members such as June Tabor and Martin Allcock - has released five albums; 'Oranges & Lemmings', 'Gnus & Roses', 'Tubular Dogs', 'Yelp!' and 'Dark side of the mongrel'.

In addition there are five highly acclaimed albums of his serious work; the folk opera 'The Stones of Callanish', 'Some Love', 'The Wings of Butterflies', 'Airs of the Dog' and 'Twilight of the Dogs', all involving a galaxy of talent. His serious songs have also featured on albums by Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick, and by June Tabor. June invariably includes a smattering of Mr Barker's serious and comic songs in her live performances. The Kingston Trio and Tom Paxton have also recorded Mr Barker's songs.

Les and the Mrs Ackroyd Band burst furtively onto national radio with a series of six programmes for BBC Radio 2 entitled 'Mrs Ackroyd explores her roots'. A new, and much larger audience were led in ever decreasing circles by Mr Barker's strange mind. A growing number of radio programmes worldwide are featuring his recorded work. Dr Demento has included the Mrs Ackroyd Band's performance of 'Dachshunds with erections can't climb stairs' on one of his compilations, and 'Will the turtle be unbroken?' on another; and 'Reinstalling Windows' on the next one.

There is also a double CD of Mr Barker's work performed by a vast number of TV & radio personalities, 'Guide Cats for the Blind', a sequel, 'The Missing Persians File', a third - 'Top Cat, White Tie and Tails', and the latest 'Catnav', featuring - amongst many others - the Archbishop of Canterbury in both English and Welsh.

And 'The Mrs Ackroyd Occasional Table Book'; a collection of his greatest hits (up to about 1998) mixed with a selection of his photographs taken on his travels, followed by 'The Mrs Ackroyd Periodic Table Book'.

What else can one say about Les Barker? He was Old York Victoria's footballer of the year in the season when they finished top of the Altrincham League. He has run a marathon in two hours forty one minutes; but he was younger then. He's very difficult to describe. But there's only one of him. Go and see him (and buy some of his books).

A selection of quotes:-

...he may be the best writer of parodies and wordplays that the English-speaking world has ever heard.

-Tom Nelligan, Dirty Linen

There are subtleties which you didn't notice the first time round, and there are clever puns and turns of phrase so good you look forward to hearing them again.

-Caroline Walker, Folk Roots

This man is a genuine genius of comic rhyme who appeals to people of all ages with a truly entertaining family show. I have seen him reduce a whole marquee full of festival goers at Victor Harbor to a mass of helpless laughter and aching sides.

-Ron Ashton, Port Lincoln Times, Australia

Les Barker is the greatest comedy talent we possess....This is probably the funniest tape I have ever heard. He's a master at exploiting the idiosyncracies of the English language, weaving in myth and history to build bizarre stories.

-Agraman, City Life

Idiot Returns

South Australian newspaper headline

Les, long known as an inveterate punster who reads his improbable verse monologues to increasingly hysterical audiences, wrote that serious and attractive tale, the Stones of Callanish. But it was the comic Barker that then entertained this audience with his other new direction, the Mrs Ackroyd Band.

-Barry Seddon, Manchester Evening News.

The Lancashire monologist equivalent of Tom Lehrer....Scintillating daftness, absurdity run amok.

-Ken Hunt, Q Magazine

'Mrs Ackroyd Explores her Roots' is not about national or regional identity. Radio 2's gentle, modestly off-the-wall comedy is a discovery...mild-mannered presenter Les Barker blends Edward Lear's nonsense, Stanley Unwin's wordplay, the surreal inconsequentiality of Reeves and Mortimer and the demotic robustness of Stanley Holloway monologues.

-Martin Hoyle, Financial Times

...his jokes, having slipped the surly bonds of earthly logic, go marching on.

-Nick Beale, Folk Roots

This man even sells his own underwear. He was a big hit at the Winnipeg and Vancouver Folk Festivals in the summer with the Mrs Ackroyd Band. Now he's tackling Canada all by himself.

-Steve Edge, Rogue Folk Club

The man's a comic genius with a solid presence in folk music and at folk festivals.

-Don Mills.

Depending on your state of health this man could be a real tonic to your wellbeing or fatal. Mostly he's a ray of sunshine capable of brightening up the darkest day.

-Kevin Meehan

He proved a masterful wordsmith, captivating listeners with his quirky verse and playful personality, touching on occasional tables, snails in a fast food restaurant and dachshunds with erections. His gallery of unlikely heroes included Cosmo the fairly accurate knife thrower, Arnold the Armadillo and Spot of the Antarctic. Truly a prince of the pun and sultan of the surreal.

-Jo Laval

Les Barker proves that poetry can indeed be entertaining, dazzling the audience at Artworks with poems from his huge range of published works. His cardigan clad, unassuming manner on stage as he peers shyly at the audience through his spectacles, and his soft Manchester accent delivers the brilliant flow of words and ideas, leaving the listener gasping with laughter.

-Gulf News, New Zealand

The Attic continued to explore the rich diversity of the folk scene' by headlining Les Barker, who regularly reduces audiences to tears. Les Barker is a real alternative to what passes as 'Alternative Comedy' today - gentle humour, fabulous timing, excruciatingly funny, sometimes poignant poems. And it wasn't just the poems - Les would be almost as successful as a mime artist. It is difficult to escape Les Barker in the English speaking world as he has already found ways of creeping up on unsuspecting audiences in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Those that know him claim that he has a serious side and has composed and created many serious songs but there was no evidence to support such wild claims based upon his performance at the Attic. This was another wonderfully successful Attic event marked out because there was no music.

-Jas Reedman

At his best, he is an inspired genius. The only man who could produce work to match 'Deja vu' was the late great Spike Milligan.

-Dai Woosnam

Bardd Brenhinol y sin cerddorol amgen. Llon, eto'n adrodd cerddi yn ei ffordd unigryw ei hunan. Dyn doniol iawn, sy'n ysgrifennu cerddi annaeorol e gwych sydd wedi creu beth ellir eu galw'n anwyr gwerin. Jason and the Arguments, Cosmo the Fairly Accurate Knife Thrower, Captain Indecisive a Spot of the Antarctic i enwi dim ond dau. Bachgen o Fanceinion oedd yn gyfrifydd nes iddo droi'n dwpsyn proffesiynol, mae wedi ysgrifenni 76 o lyfrau sy'n cael eu prynu gan nifer o bobl gan fod y rhai sy'n gweld Les ddim cweit yn credu eu clustiau! Mae wedi teithio dros y byd i gyd, cael ei gyfres o chwe rhaglen ar Radio 2 gyda Band Mrs Ackroyd ac yn aml yn gadael cynulleidfaoedd yn eu dyblau dros America, Canada, Awstralia a Seland Newydd. Gwelwch Les ac fe ewch adref dan wenu. - Pontardawe Festival

...a piquant mix of hard to categorise skewed humour with purple flourishes. Stories of small animals and large furniture...

Clive Pownceby

...a poetic onslaught of humor and thought....able to go bouncing through ludicrous situations.

-Sing Out

Les Barker is more than silly; he is probably one of the silliest performers ever to grace Godfrey's stage, and in a way that only a Brit could be silly. Part poetry, part monologue, but surely one of the most side-splitting evenings you can have. If you enjoy hearing the pun elevated to a true art form, this is the place to be. How can intelligence be so damned funny?

-Mike Space, Godfrey Daniels

Cafwyd ychydig o ddryswch pan ddaeth Les Barker ymlaen ar ei ben ei hun i gystadlu yn y "deialog i ddau", ond daeth pethau'n fwy clir pan ymddangosodd Sooty o'r boced ei got!!

-Papur Fama, Yr Wyddgrug