



## Nearfield Magazine – full interview with Nick Steel

- What brought you to the southwest from Yorkshire?

One of my brothers was starting a company and asked if I'd like to help him. I jumped at the chance as I was looking for something to do other than the various random jobs I had up North, and it felt like the time to escape and discover something new. We were originally going to Cambridge, to which I was looking forward - the rest of the family hailed from that area, I knew Cambridge was a beautiful city and I had a fine memory of punting down the Cam late one night with a couple of chaps I'd chauffeured to the racing, three girls from a pub and a chap with a banjo and an antique lamp (a story for another time...) But at the last minute another brother who already lived in Bath found us a wonderful flat on Great Pulteney Street and we came to live here instead. The place was formerly part of the ballrooms of the old Connaught Hotel so the rooms were rather grand, 30ft square with marble pillars and period features. My 'second' bedroom had an ensuite jacuzzi bathroom down a few stairs from the bedroom – altogether quite a nice introduction to Bath living!

- What was Bath's cultural scene like back in 1997? What has it lost and gained?

I soon discovered certain parts of the local cultural scene – I went to the Hat & Feather in my first week in town, and within two weeks had fetched a Hammond organ from Ilkley and was playing there with a band on a Saturday night. I met a lot of people I still know at the Hat – so many musicians and interesting people would frequent the place, and the Bell, Farmhouse, Porter Butt and other places now sadly lost. I loved the fact that live music seemed to abound, and immediately felt at home. After a year when my brother moved to London and asked if I was coming with him, I said no, as we had modems then so I could remotely attach to his company computers without having to be on site, and anyway, I was in a band, playing at Glastonbury, putting on gigs at Bath Fringe and meeting more and more people. Bath had become my home very soon after arriving and I wasn't going anywhere. Thankfully I was on a salary (the only time in my life) and managed to get a mortgage to buy a flat in Widcombe, which in my mind at the time was just a bit of the road on the way to Sainsburys and Bristol, but I soon learned was a village within the city, or at least the struggling remains of one. I'm still there to this day and have played my part over the years in Widcombe's transformation into what it is today – again, lots of things to tell another time.

- How did you get involved in comedy? Was it very different back then?

In a word, Edinburgh. I met a chap called Brian Hennigan at a party in London who was running a venue underneath a pub during the Fringe, who invited me to stay with him during the Edinburgh Festival and help out however I could – making posters, manning the stage door, (and drinking the sponsor's beer!)...it was here I started meeting comedians, many of whom were just starting out but are now hugely famous – the likes of Jon Richardson, Greg Davies and their generation were wet behind the ears, doing spots for £20 cash and eager to perform. I also met Doug Stanhope whom Brian first brought over from America in 2002,

and was a revelation. I started to understand how important an art form live comedy is. After six or seven years of running that venue, Brian became Doug's manager and moved to LA, but by that time I'd made quite a few friends and connections and was already bringing the aforementioned comedians down to Bath to headline cabaret events I'd started putting on at the old Widcombe Social Club. One thing led to another and to cut a long story short, I now run a three-week Bath Comedy Festival every April featuring hundreds of performers in multiple venues across the city, plus year-round Bath Comedy Club nights and various one-off tour shows and special events.

- Do you deliver standup yourself?

Nooo...I leave it to the professionals – the vast majority of my shows star professional comedians of great experience. Having said that, I do try to give opportunities to up-and-comers to join bills and gain progression in that way, and the Festival boasts a New Act Competition which over the years has discovered many stars of the future. Though I've learned a lot about comedy, I'm certainly not a performer. I do sometimes introduce shows, with a little witty banter, and at least I know how to keep it brief! I'm more of a producer and promoter – an impresario if you like – though I can be funny, and lurking somewhere in the attic of my brain is a comic character called Nigel Keighley, a bit of an unreconstructed end-of-the-pier comedian crossed with many a Yorkshire pub bore...he may see the light of day in public sometime, perhaps even as my on-stage alter ego!

- What's unique about the southwest's comedy scene? Does it get the support it deserves?

I don't think any live comedy scene gets the support it deserves, though it would probably be easier for me to create the Festival and events in other cities. Bath needs it though, and I put my all into bringing the best I can to our city. Since the pandemic it's been even harder – sponsorship has been very thin on the ground and it's nigh on impossible to make the Festival's ends meet on tickets alone. Cue for your readers who run businesses – there are myriad ways in which supporting the Comedy Festival can be beneficial – I'm always more than happy to discuss, so why not get in touch?!

- How can local young comedians get started?

There is a burgeoning amateur comedy scene in Bath with opportunities for new budding comedians to get stage time, and stacks of open mic nights in Bristol too. Go to as many as you can, you'll meet lots of people in the same boat and learn a lot quite quickly. Take the plunge and get on stage, as many times as you can. And when you have a tight five minutes of material, you could always apply to take part in Bath Comedy Fest's New Act Competition

- Do you have a manifesto for Bath Comedy Festival?

Bath Comedy Festival presents household names in the world of comedy alongside promoting the big names of tomorrow, while encouraging young hopefuls in the form of the

New Act Competition, plus events involving children, women's comedy and disabled performers.

The festival focuses on creating new audiences, new venues and exciting possibilities for participation against the backdrop of our beautiful World Heritage city.

We try to bring Bath to life with a colourful, vibrant, inclusive and dedicated mix of comedy in all its many guises, including stand-up, street theatre, film, theatre, writing, art, workshops, music and mystery tours.

- What's your favourite (outlandish) memory from it?

Oh gosh there are so many – I've been promoting gigs for nearly 30 years, and the Festival is now in it's 16<sup>th</sup> year (I think?)

One favourite would be anything and everything on our flagship annual event The Wine Arts Trail (TWAT for short). 140 would-be wine critics transported on a big red bus (sometimes driven by transport minister Baron Hendy no less) to Jane Austen-free secret corners of our city. A glass of wine and a 'happening' at each stop. A short-sighted Nana Moussaka demolishing a display stand in Specsavers anybody? Christopher Biggins judging the enroute hat competition? Lorraine Chase in her guest clippie hat shouting "Luton Airport!" to all and sundry from the bus platform? An amateur theatre group rehearsing a spurious Agatha Christie whodunnit in a village hall? Tommy Cooper miraculously revived in the rarified atmosphere of an art centre? And all those pickled egg raffles of course!

- Favourite booking? Or a holy grail booking you would give a big to have perform?

I'm very proud of Widcombe Rising, which was a huge street party I co-organised in Widcombe over several years, and for helping bring world class comedy to venues from 30 seaters up to 1500 at Bath Forum. Bringing Bill Bailey "home" to Bath was a long-standing goal, and I managed to arrange a Gala show for 2020 where he was to headline. Sadly that was part of the Festival that never was, due to Covid, and alas we've haven't been able to make the date work since...but there's time yet!

- You've also played in prog-rock bands and are otherwise known as The Wind-up Merchant; what inspires you to do your own thing, even if people aren't necessarily on the same wavelength?

Yes, I played bass and then keyboards for many years in bands, at the height of which my keyboard collection numbered over 35...people said my studio looked like Rick Wakeman's car boot sale! I loved proper old Hammond Organs and Leslie speakers, Mellotron and Mini Moog – a lot of definitely prog-inspired glorious nonsense and fun was had! I also still DJ with wind-up gramophones and 78s – I have about 7,000 jazz, swing, dance and rock n roll records and invented the world's only 'Pramophone' – a Silver Cross pram which holds two 1930s portable HMV gramophones which I can wheel about weddings, parties and festivals without the need for power.

What inspires me? I've been very lucky to be pals with some comedy greats now sadly missed – like Barry Cryer, Terry Jones, Neil Innes and Jeremy Hardy to name but a few. I feel very privileged to wake up to a genuinely new day every day, and to still be discovering more and more wonderful talented funny people, which gives me a life rich in laughter and job satisfaction, (if not money!) – John Moloney introduced me to a famous comedian once as Nick – “you should work with him as he's from the heart, not the box office”. I like that, says a lot in a few words. It's never about the money – rather, as Churchill said when they tried to cut the arts during the war: “What are we fighting for..?”

- What or who are your biggest inspirations?

My grandad, who in his last words to me encouraged me to keep on *doing*, not to waste any opportunity, and inspired me to believe that in this way one might never have any regrets, and also realise what he and his generation went through in order that we can enjoy life the way we do. My Mother, who gave me the most amazing start in life, and currently at 94 years young is still the most incredible support, as well as an exemplar of not ever stopping...

In the business of comedy and music, many hundreds of interesting, funny and talented people I've had the privilege to meet and work with.

- Widcombe, which you're very much embedded in, has a bit of a history of creating comic theatre (Natural Theatre Co); is that something you've got involved with?

Yes, I'm proud to have at times been closely affiliated with the Naturals, especially in the campaign to create a Widcombe bypass, now happily achieved. The famous Widcombe Rising street festivals were co-produced by me and the NTC supremo Ralph Oswick, and of course the Comedy Festival has used their beautiful studio for cabaret style events. We've raided their props department, borrowed their chairs and I even modelled a baddie outfit when Ralph was testing his fabulous costumes for the Greenwich Theatre's pantomime. Our collaborations were mostly to do with the regeneration of Widcombe as Bath's most vibrant urban village. Amongst other things I helped steer the progress of the demolishing and rebuilding of Widcombe Social Club, and ran it when it was open all the time; instigated the annual Christmas trees along the street; created an intimate fringe venue upstairs at The Ring O Bells and am currently organising the live music events at The Ram pub, where I am Deputy Manager. So, no wonder people call me Mr Widcombe!

- Finally, how important is community when it comes to building creative and cultural scenes?

We have community in spades in Widcombe, and in Bath as a whole, partly because of its size, and a lot of us know each other. I've been saying for many years how important it is for all us creatives to work together, or at least talk to each other. Various bodies have existed over the years with this in mind, but time always seems to run away and they dissolve; though the new Bath Arts Creative group is great, as it's run by energetic people who are in the game, not pen-pushers or those just after making themselves a wage (sounds as though there's some history there...yes you're probably right, ha!)