

Geoff Whiting

Mr Comedy

Interview Steve Wright

Bath comic Geoff Whiting is the UK's biggest comedy promoter. His company, Mirth Control, now books for almost 100 clubs nationwide. Geoff himself has over 3,000 gigs behind him, and comperes every Sunday night at the Comedy Cavern in Bath: he's also just started a weekly £3 comedy night at the Volunteer Tavern in Old Market, Bristol.

But this vocation wasn't set in the stars. Just over ten years ago, Geoff was an out-of-work former food salesman turning to comedy as a last resort. A little while later, during Mirth Control's early days, he was working 90 hours a week – and using a Bath phone box as his office because he couldn't afford a telephone at home.

I was 37, on state benefits, without two pennies to rub together, struggling at interviews for selling shoes or as a coffee-machine marketing consultant. Then I saw an ad for the Daily Telegraph Open Mic Award. I was at rock bottom, so I had nothing to lose.

For the first three months of Mirth Control I ran the company from a phone box in the centre of Bath. I'm a creature of habit and I used to get down there early and settle in for hours. I took my Filofax and a bunch of paperwork with me and made calls chasing work. People were very helpful on the whole and would call me back there at set times. It's hard to believe now, with mobiles, laptops et al, that this was only ten years ago.

Bath now boasts at least four professional comedians as residents: Noel Britten, Russell Howard, Mike Tombs and myself. As far as comedy's concerned, the place is enjoying a purple patch.

The worst gig I have ever seen was the Comedy Terrorist [aka Aaron Barschak who, in 2003, crashed Prince William's 21st dressed as Osama bin Laden]. He was doing a one-man show in Edinburgh, just weeks after he broke into Windsor Castle. Aaron is basically a good guy who wants to be Spike Milligan, but he has the madness without the genius.

I don't believe you can teach someone to be funny. I do believe that you can improve someone's act if they have the basics in place already. However, the real genius comics are in no need of training – in fact, to attempt to do so would take something away from them.

One of the strangest evenings I've compered was when we had Daniel Kitson at the Cavern a few years ago. Two drunks came staggering in from the street and materialised on stage in the middle of Daniel's act. One of them grabbed the mic and said that she was a performance poet. She wouldn't give the mic back and started spouting poetry, until a woman from the crowd jumped on stage and pinned her to the floor.

The secret to a good audience warm-up is to think like a punter. Don't just do gags as you would at a comedy club, but take on board the fact that they have not come to see you and are actually waiting for someone else to come out and do a show. Once you get this into your head, you can quite enjoy some banter and self-deprecation with them.

Sometimes a guy will call me and ask for a female act to be replaced because he needs a good show! That kind of bias against women is rare, but still very depressing. We refuse to book for anyone who tried to exclude women from their shows.

I've been doing warm-ups recently for Mitchell and Webb, who were charming, and Russell Brand, who was very

generous. I once warmed up for Anne Robinson – she was harder to please.

SEE GEOFF EVERY SUNDAY AT BATH'S COMEDY CAVERN FF: WWW.COMEDYCAVERN.CO.UK
COMEDY AT THE VOLUNTEER TAVERN, BRISTOL
FF: WWW.MIRTHCONTROL.ORG.UK/CLUBS-SOUTHWEST-BRISTOL.HTM

