

Comedy

Control freak

Geoff Whiting had hit rock bottom before he started to see the funny side and become a workaholic. By **Malcolm Hay**

Ten years ago, Geoff Whiting was an ex-fod salesman who'd only been to one live comedy show in his life. 'I was 37, on state benefits, without two pennies to rub together, struggling at interviews for jobs selling shoes or as a coffee-machine marketing consultant.' Then he saw an advert for the *Daily Telegraph* Open Mic Award. 'Friends had suggested that I try comedy. I was at rock bottom, so I had nothing at all to lose.'

He made the semi-final of the competition. In 1998 he won through to the final and his career as a stand-up was under way. But another ad had also supplied him with a different kind of foothold in the business. A venue in Plymouth advertised for comedians to play the opening night of a club. Whiting was the only one to turn up. 'I did 15 minutes and was paid £30. The owner asked me if I'd come back the following week and bring another comedian with me. In effect, it gave me my first experience as a booker.'

Now Whiting heads the booking and management company Mirth Control, as well as continuing to perform himself. The figures go something like this: He worked 90 hours a week to start with, operating from a phone box for the first three months because he couldn't afford to get a telephone put in at home. Since then, he's driven 217,000 miles to gigs in every part of the UK, going through seven cars in the process. He's done more than 3,000 stand-up gigs. He's played the Comedy Store, Jongleurs and other leading clubs. He's done studio warm-ups for TV shows such as 'Celebrity Fame Academy'. As a booker and promoter, he's opened 92 comedy clubs around the country. He's sent British comedy to places like Siberia, Croatia, Estonia, Russia, Bahrain, Greece, Spain and France.

How does he do it? 'Work rate,' he reckons. 'And there's a fantastic Mirth Control team. I also believe 100 per cent in what I'm doing.' As a comedian on the circuit, Whiting also sees promising new acts a lot earlier than most bookers. He gave Jimmy Carr his first-ever paid spot. He provided highly talented American Reginald D Hunter, now a more or less permanent fixture in London, with just his second gig over here.

'I feel privileged to be in this business,' he declares. But, inevitably, there's a downside. In this category are 'comedians who think bookers owe them a living just because they've been around a few years'. Conversely, there are those who pontificate about how things should be after six months on the front line. More seriously, there's the blinkered thinking of people running venues who expect a comedy club to take off immediately. 'It takes time. I tell them, but they don't lis-



Net mirth Geoff Whiting has built a comedy empire

ten. They make money on the first show, they lose a little on the second and they want to abandon the idea.'

He's no fan of comedy courses. 'They attract the wrong people. That's to say, people who won't be much good. If you advertise for people, you tap into the "X Factor" and "Pop Idol" mentality.' He's even less enamoured of sexist morons.

'Sometimes a guy will call me and ask for a female act to be replaced because he needs a good show!'

'Sometimes a guy from a club will call me and ask for a female act to be cancelled or replaced. On the grounds they need 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.'

Whiting reserves particular scorn for comedy websites that carry hopelessly outdated reviews of acts: 'I've known of a comedian who's almost lost his living

because of a viciously scathing review on a respected UK website.' Criticism is legitimate, he agrees, but carrying over opinions from the very distant past, possibly because it sustains the volume of reviews on a website and thereby increases advertising revenue, counts as one of the more cynical ploys in the business.

By comedy standards, Whiting has been around for a long time. But cynical he isn't. 'Booking the clubs is a labour of love,' he maintains. 'I take low booking fees in most cases and, what with paying staff, it only leaves a small profit. The benefit of having 90 clubs, though, is we can almost guarantee any act we sign on the management side that they'll earn a living from comedy.' It's TV and corporate work that brings in the big bucks. 'Once you have a Jimmy Carr or Russell Brand on the books, that creates real income. We haven't cracked that yet. But we have acts that will follow in their footsteps very shortly.'

Geoff Whiting hosts a tenth Anniversary special at Mirth Control West Hampstead on Wednesday. He also appears in the 'Laugh's On Us' Benefit at the Comedy Store on Monday.

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