



AYE AYE CAPTAIN
HARDEE IN 2003
ABOARD HIS
HOUSEBOAT SEA
SOVEREIGN AT
ROTHERHITHE



"THERE'S A MADMAN ON THE LOOSE!"

Comedian Malcolm Hardee was a compulsive nudist, expletive fiend, occasional criminal and the father of Alternative Comedy. OK, maybe not so much the father but the weird uncle, but fuck it — he was funny

Words by Roger Lewis
Photograph by John Fleming

Great clowns often know by instinct more than they could ever articulate or analyse in an interview or debate. Groucho Marx, for example, was highly esteemed by TS Eliot, yet when they met for a long-awaited parley, the comedian and the writer found they had nothing to say to each other. Marx tried to reverse the conversational bottleneck by tossing in quotations from *The Waste Land*. Eliot responded with a series of weak puns and an attempt to recite "Hail, Hail Freedonia!" from the court room scene in *Duck Soup*. "Now it was my turn to smile faintly," Groucho told his brother Gummo afterwards.

The point being — there is no requirement for comedians to be celebrated thinkers. Yet, it is the comedian who, after his own fashion, has paid perhaps more attention to the fundamental problems of human freedom than even John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is the comedian whose work is a critique of pure reason who asks — as Chico Marx does when running rings around the English Language, as WC Fields does when sinking the fatal third dry martini, as *The Goons* do when machine-gunning authority figures, as Benny Hill does when grabbing girls' tits — why can't I live as I like? Why should anyone obey anyone else? Why are we allowing ourselves to be coerced and controlled and held in thrall — and in the name of what? For the sake of what?

To keep back anarchy, would be the short answer. Do exactly as you please — which was Peter Sellers' wish — and you'll become a formidable nuisance. You'll be abusing liberal morality, holding people in contempt. To witness a prime instance of this, undergraduates reading for the *Metaphysics Tripos* should forget their Rousseau ("He is truly free



"FREEDOM," SAID Sir Isaiah Berlin, "is self-mastery, the elimination of obstacles to my will" — such obstacles being for example the opposing wills or behaviour of others, codes of culture, and so forth. The late Chichele Professor Of Social And Political Theory at All Souls College, Oxford might have found his beliefs in the concept of individual liberty taking a bit of a knock, however, had he ever encountered Malcolm Hardee, whose own philosophy could be boiled down to, "If in doubt, wobble and fall over. If that doesn't work — knob out!"

Hardee was a stand-up comic of sorts (he did an impersonation of General De Gaulle by putting a pair of spectacles on his semi-flaccid penis, his testicles doing duty for the president's cheeks); a talent spotter (he told Jo Brand "You

should do comedy on stage," after listening to her play Beethoven at the piano); and a compere (he'd tell the audience reassuringly that, "The next act's probably a bit shit"). He managed a club called *The Tunnel*, situated in the back room of a pub called *The Mitre*, in Greenwich. When that closed in 1988, he opened *Up The Creek*, "The Tunnel with A-Levels", again in southeast London. Here the likes of Paul Merton, Harry Hill, Vic Reeves and Harry Enfield honed their routines, realising that if they could survive Hardee's crowds, they could survive anywhere. The heckling was inspired. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Jim Tavaré and I'm a schizophrenic," said one aspiring performer. "Why don't you both fuck off then?" responded a voice in the crowd, to Hardee's delight.



BALLOON ANIMALS
HARDEE'S UNIQUE ENTERTAINMENT INCLUDED DANCING THE CHA CHA, NAKED BUT FOR BALLOONS, WITH DAVE BROOKS (CENTRE) AND MARTIN SOAN (RIGHT)

who desires what he can perform, and does what he desires”) and their Johann Gottfried Herder (“We live in a world we ourselves create”) and study instead Harpo Marx systematically reducing Sig Rumann to a nervous wreck in *A Night At The Opera*, chopping up ties and straw hats. Here is a pure example of what I mean when I maintain there’s an element of terror and aggression involved with comedy.

Hardee, who was no oil painting, was tough-minded, ruthless and essentially infantile, as if he was deliberately refusing to be civilised or to learn manners. He wanted life to be a series of escapades and pranks, and he stripped off in public so often it was as if he even didn’t want to be constrained by clothes — let alone by embarrassment or shame. Johnny Vegas, one of Hardee’s protégés, is on the edge of this — particularly in his TV series *18 Stone Of Idiot*, where he enjoys a pub lock-in and is spitting and slobbering. Here is comedy reduced to basic bodily functions and needs, a mockery of sophistication that has come a long way from Cole Porter. Or has it? In the love song “You’re The Top”, the object of adoration is variously the Colosseum, the Louvre, an O’Neill drama and Whistler’s mama, but the singer himself is a low-life, a total wreck, a flop.



WE’RE WITH THE BAND...
HARDEE AND MARTIN SOAN PERFORM AT THE LAUGHINGAS CLUB, 1984. BELOW WITH COMEDIAN MATTHEW HARDY 2003

Prison is the only form of education from which you can’t be expelled

Hardee was born in the Tuberculosis Ward of Lewisham Hospital on 5 January 1950. He was immediately placed in an orphanage and his parents didn’t see him for two years. Frank, his father, pulled barges up the Thames with a tug boat. When in his cups he’d give a rendition of Maurice Chevalier’s “Thank Heaven For Little Girls”, except “he wasn’t French and couldn’t sing”. His mother, Joan, is an absent presence from any of the



published sources — but one assumes she was long-suffering, as Hardee was a natural delinquent who knew no timidity from the outset. He trapped a boy with leg-irons on a tricycle, set it alight with oil-soaked rags, and pushed the spectacular result down a hill, for example. He set fire to a cinema. He set fire to the piano at Sunday School “to see the Holy Smoke”. He tampered with the organ pipes in the church so that when they were played coloured powder paint rained down upon the congregation.

Hardee was soon a regular at the Greenwich Juvenile Court, and was expelled from St Stephen’s Church Of England Primary, Colfe’s Grammar School and Sedgemoor Comprehensive. Allowed to return to sit his O levels, Hardee wore pyjamas “as some sort of protest”. The institution he remained at longest was Gaynes Hall Borstal, from which he escaped, dressed as a monk. “Prison,” he reflected, “is the only form of education from which you cannot be expelled.” He did his porridge in Exeter, Lewes, Wormwood Scrubs and Ford Open Prison. He’d be released, steal a car to drive home in, get arrested again immediately and be banged up once more. He stole scooters and a Mini Van, but “I never took flash motors, except a couple of Jags, an Austin Healey and a Rolls Royce,” the latter belonging to Peter Walker, Conservative MP for Worcester and Minister Of Agriculture, Fisheries And Food. His license revoked, Hardee then applied to the DVLC for a replacement, claiming his name had been misspelt. Hardee also purloined jewellery, radios, “even a photographic enlarger”. He was done for cheque fraud, burglary and “stealing a key worth 75 pence”.

TO LISTEN TO Hardee it seems the adults he encountered growing up, whether teachers or the screws at detention centres, were sadists and perverts — so what sort of example were they setting? When arriving at Gaynes Hall Borstal, the young offenders routinely had their skulls smacked against the wall. Hardee was exempted, because of his outsize spectacles. Nevertheless, he

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE TAYLOR / IREX

learned to be fearless. “Violence doesn’t scare me at all,” he always insisted. An evening out would commonly involve fisticuffs. When he landed a job at an advertising agency, on his first morning Hardee got drunk on cider “and wanted to fight everyone, including the office manager, Mr McKenzie”.

Hardee had pathological problems with authority. If there is any connection between criminality and comedy it is in the way Hardee’s chaotic and restless personality sought expression in making people laugh — for apart from becoming, as he said, a mini-cab driver, how else can an ex-con respond to the misfortunes of humanity other than by going into show business? He even tried politics, standing for election in 1987 under the banner of The Rainbow Alliance, Beer, Fags And Skittles Party. He promised to build a cable car to take pensioners to the top of Greenwich Hill, and polled 174 votes.

Hardee’s connections with the entertainment industry were tenuous. Val Doonican had lived in a nearby street, as did the man who went on to invent Mr Blobby. Somebody from Dire Straits was a neighbour, “though I never talked to him”. Miss Whiplash was seen in the vicinity. As for flamboyance, there was an uncle who wore a fez “because he was completely off his head” and had visited Morocco.

Though not as well-connected as the Mitfords nor any of this adding up to form a background to rival that of Lady Antonia Fraser, Hardee’s career began when he called himself Wolf G Hardee, a DJ in a mobile disco. Despite appearing alongside the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, this failed to take off. After another three-month stretch in Exeter Gaol, however, Hardee found himself in Salcombe and teamed up with a man who was putting on an obscene Punch & Judy Show, which included “a bit of swearing and all sorts”. Indeed, the puppets kept coming out with “knob” and “cunt” and had a go at anal sex. Mr Punch announced, “I want to ’ave a fuckin’ piss!” and from beneath the stripy booth a bottle of Lemon Squeezy washing-up liquid was squirted at the audience.

Within a year, Hardee and his confederate, Martin Soan, joined by Dave Brooks, a jazz bagpipe player, were calling themselves The Greatest Show On Legs and had appeared at the Comedy Store in Soho, where Alexei Sayle was the compere, distinguishing himself by saying “wanker” and “cunt” a lot.



IN THE DRINK
HARDEE’S WIBBLY
WOBBLY PUB, WHICH
WAS MOORED JUST
METRES FROM
HIS HOUSEBOAT, SEA
SOVEREIGN. BELOW
NAVIGATING THE
THAMES

Brooks later “buggered off to Cornwall” and was replaced by Martin Potter and then by Martin Clarke, “who had a posh voice and looked a bit like Tony Blackburn”. The group’s most notorious stunt was the Balloon Dance — the three men, stark naked except for their socks, doing the cha-cha while using the balloons to cover their genitals. On one occasion they used photographs of Mrs Thatcher “to cover our bits, and when we turned round it was to reveal our penises sticking out of her mouth”. The blessed ghosts of the membership of the Bureau De Recherches Surréalistes, Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, André

Breton, Max Ernst, and the rest of the phantoms, will have been thronging the upper air that night, glimmering and swaying.

In January 1981, Chris Tarrant invited Hardee and his friends to perform the Balloon Dance on OTT, the series he presented for Central Television. OTT was a late-night magazine show, a successor, after a fashion, to Tiswas, in which cartoons and interviews with minor pop stars were punctuated with buckets of water being splashed around. Dated now no doubt, three decades ago this was the closest we got to the Surrealist injunction to break apart the mind’s fetters, even if it must only be by getting a hosing down with pink foam or a slap in the chops with a custard pie. On OTT, Bob Carolgees’ Spit The Dog spat at people and Alexei Sayle came on to scream “cunt” and “wanker”. But I’ll personally never forget seeing The Greatest Show On Legs, which has, for some of us, similar status to hearing about Kennedy’s assassination or Diana’s death. It was so simple and daft — and Hardee said that at the Comedy Store “we were a bit frowned on because we weren’t cerebral”. They belonged more to the traditional music hall, with leopard skin leotards and moustaches.

Annoyed not to be invited to the end-of-series party, Hardee stole Tarrant’s jeroboam of champagne. “You’ll never work on television again!” cried Tarrant, as Hardee drove away in a Luton Transit. This was an accurate prediction, as it transpired. “He’s not going to get on television because he keeps taking his willy out,” stated the BBC’s head of light entertainment. Hardee was simply not tractable.

In 1986, annoyed at not being invited into the VIP area at Freddie Mercury’s 40th birthday party, Hardee stole the cake, which he gave to a nursing home. The CID crawled around his flat with magnifying glasses “searching for crumbs”. On another occasion, Hardee stole a ventriloquist’s dummy and held it to ransom, sending it back limb by limb.

Larceny and scurrility aside, another problem was that Hardee couldn’t be doing with arse licking. →

He was no diplomat. “Hello, Paula. A serious case of mutton dressed as mutton,” he said to Paula Yates, who presented the Channel 4 rock-scene programme *The Tube*, which Hardee hoped to appear on. “Oh, yeah, he’s brilliant since he got rid of that beret and stopped doing that ‘Oooh, Betty!’ stuff,” he said of Frank Skinner. He tested the resolve of the most seasoned fan of Alternative Comedy by opening his act with the words, “Nelson Mandela. What a cunt!”

While we must regret the aborting of Hardee’s concept for a game show, *Lose Your Shirt*, in which if contestants got an answer wrong “their washing machine would be smashed up in front of them”, a mainstream audience’s loss was the Edinburgh Fringe’s gain. Naked, Hardee would interrupt other people’s acts by standing up and singing “Scotland The Brave!” The police were usually called, usually by Hardee himself, who’d say, “There’s a madman on the loose!” By calling his show Aaaaaaagh! he ensured it was listed first in the brochure. Enraged one evening by the applause in the next-door marquee, “I jumped on a tractor, naked, drove straight out of our tent and straight into Eric Bogosian’s and onto the stage. ‘Hello, Eric!’ I said.” Hardee was obliged to pay out compensation — it irritated him that he also had to cough up for the punters “who’d walked out of Eric’s show before my intervention”.

In 1984, he got going with the “Sunday Night At The Tunnel Palladium” divertissements, the enterprise funded by a generous council grant received on behalf of Lilly Wicked, a female, black, single-parent lesbian, who that same week had broken her leg, and whom Hardee put prominently on the programme. In addition to the well-known stand-ups, “Don’t show us yer tits!” bayed the crowd at Jo Brand, Hardee the impresario went in for obscure turns, such as *Madame Poulet And Her Singing Chicken*, a Swede who tap danced on a carpet and a sword-swallower whose routine ended in bloodshed. When a mime artist was going about his business, a wag shouted: “Oh, for fuck’s sake, tell us a joke. I’m blind.”



When the requested joke fell flat, the wag then added, “Carry on with the mime. I’m deaf too.” Quite how well Bing Hitler went down we’ll never know, likewise Eddie Shit. “You don’t hear a lot about Eddie Shit these days, but he’s out there somewhere,” Hardee would assure people, with an air of mystery.

As the posters tended to omit the address, the date and the time, *The Tunnel* was destined for closure, an event precipitated by the police who mounted a raid, suspecting acid house raves were being held. The Mitre pub had its license suspended for seven years. Hardee, unabashed, simply opened the *Up The Creek Comedy Cabaret Club*, situated at 302 Creek Road.

In the upstairs bar, a mural based on Leonardo’s *Last Supper* was installed, featuring Hardee as *Our Lord* and Ben Elton as *Judas Iscariot*. Such blasphemy was appropriate, considering how profane Hardee’s own performances were now becoming. If he needed to urinate, he did so in full view on stage — or from the stage into the

stalls. When he deliberately peed on a punter who’d fallen asleep in the front row, they later became friends.

To the accompaniment of Ethel Merman singing “There’s No Business Like Show Business”, Hardee stuck a firework up his bottom. “Sometimes it’s a Roman Candle, shooting forth increasingly spectacular jets of silver sparkles. Good finish. Difficult to follow.” He set off the alarms at the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, with this climax — a four-hour Russian play with only three minutes left to go had to be evacuated. His legendary impression of Charles De Gaulle now involved the application of Dayglo luminous paint to his testicles, which gained the reputation of being the biggest bollocks in Alternative Comedy. “At puberty they didn’t drop, they

abseiled,” Hardee explained. He feared that if ever he collapsed the paramedics would themselves die of fright when they uncovered his pulsating bright green



LIFE’S A STAGE TOP AT HIS UP THE CREEK CLUB IN LONDON. MIDDLE WITH HIS SON, FRANK. ABOVE THE MALCOLM HARDEE AWARD FOR MOST ORIGINAL FRINGE COMIC

fluorescent tackle. Nevertheless, this “useful addition” to his act was rewarded at Glastonbury when the crowds started singing the “Marseillaise”.

Perhaps because he was stripped to the buff most of the time, Hardee had loads of sex. In a sample week, “I managed to copulate with eight different women (two on Sunday).” His jailbird credentials were particularly appreciated by radical feminists (“I’ve shagged loads of them”), and despite several long-term relationships, including one with Jo Brand and another with a probation officer (“not my probation officer”), he was cheerfully never a convert to fidelity, drawn without much resistance time and again to “bimbo-ish types”. At his wedding, held in Woolwich Town Hall, he was drunk on a German girlfriend’s rum, his new mother-in-

law flounced out, and a bridesmaid set fire to her taffeta dress while having a quick fag. Hardee retired to the toilet and spent half an hour coughing. At the reception, who should be there to deliver a speech but Eddie Shit.

Asked what he'd do if compelled to choose between his wife and the bottle, Hardee chose the bottle — “but I'd miss the wife obviously,” he added gallantly. Ever the romantic, he once rode up to a girlfriend's house on a white horse. “Is Pam in?” “Bugger off, you silly fucker,” said Pam's dad. He wasn't much of a father himself, either. Hardee rushed to hospital to witness the birth of one of his children, peered over the shoulders of the doctors and nurses and heard the midwife say, “You've



SAY IT WITH FLOWERS
“FUCK IT” ABOVE AND
“KNOB OUT” WERE
AMONG THE
FUNERAL TRIBUTES
TO HARDEE,
FOLLOWING HIS
DEATH IN
2005

I managed to copulate with eight different women (two on Sunday)

given birth to a lovely baby girl. Well done, Heather!” He was in the wrong delivery suite. Hardee was often so drunk he couldn't pronounce the word Greenwich and taxi drivers would dump him in New Cross. So then he started to propel himself up and down the Thames in a leaky boat, flying the Jolly Roger flag.

In 2001, he sold his interest in Up The Creek and bought a floating pub, the Wibbly Wobbly, moored at Greenland Dock, near Rope Street in Rotherhithe. Hardee lived on a houseboat, named the Sea Sovereign, located nearby. He drowned while rowing himself in a rickety dinghy between the two — his body was found in the river on 2 February 2005. In his hand he still clutched a beer bottle, and in his pocket was £500 that he'd won at the bookies. In his will, he allegedly left his stash of porn to children with cerebral palsy. “Everyone needs a wank, don't you agree?” he pointed out.

Like Sir John Falstaff, Sir Toby

Belch, Lord Byron or Toad Of Toad Hall, Hardee's life and career might be expected to be viewed by commentators as weirdly life-enhancing and heroic. For, as when Shakespeare appears to praise an appetite for cakes and ale, or when Byron in 1819 boasts about the sublimity of tooling (his word) in a post-chaise, in a hackney coach, in a gondola, against a wall, on a table and under it (“but is it not life, is it not the thing?”), or as when Kenneth Grahame's incorrigible warty toff speeds along the open road in his 12-horsepower Sunbeam-Mabley or Armstrong Hardcastle Special Eight (“Poop! Poop!”), here we have personalities who prefer vehemence and pleasure to reticence and conformity; who are spontaneous and hungry for sensation; and for whom throwing off all restraint is the whole business of existence.

Admirable, in principle — but would you want to fall in with them or their counterparts in the picturesque flesh? They'd be unappealing, these people who assert there's no frontier they will not cross. Were I to have been introduced to Malcolm Hardee I'd have headed quite fast in the opposite direction. Drunken revels and deliberate subversion bring out the Malvolio in me — I turn into the equivalent of a faint-hearted net-curtain twitching Angmering-on-Sea

hausfrau, dusting my furniture made of pine and artificial leather and frowning at the needless noise and confusion. And I'm annoyed with myself, too, for feeling this way. But maybe this is the lesson of the comedian, the jester, the holy fool in his cap-and-bells, that there is no such thing as the rational life, there is only the irrational. Only arbitrariness and ill-concealed immaturity; and the distance between us and them — like the distance between joy and sorrow — is as thin as the whitewash on a wall.

Was Hardee a success or a failure? His significance to me is that he's the best-known example of the discord of comedy, and its way of addressing and defining passion, prejudice, neurosis and human imperfection. When I saw the photographs of his coffin being driven to Hither Green Crematorium in a hearse decorated with flowers lovingly arranged into the words “Knob Out”, and with floral wreaths bearing the message “Fuck It”, I was at least able to formulate a conclusion: Freedonia, Royston Vasey, Railway Cuttings, Fawlty Towers, Moonee Ponds and St Trinian's are not places where you'd in your right mind ever wish to set foot; and a comedian in full cry is a person you don't want to meet. 🍷
Seasonal Suicide Notes: My Life as it is Lived (Short Books) by Roger Lewis is out now