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STEWART LEE

"I'm a relic of the counter-culture"

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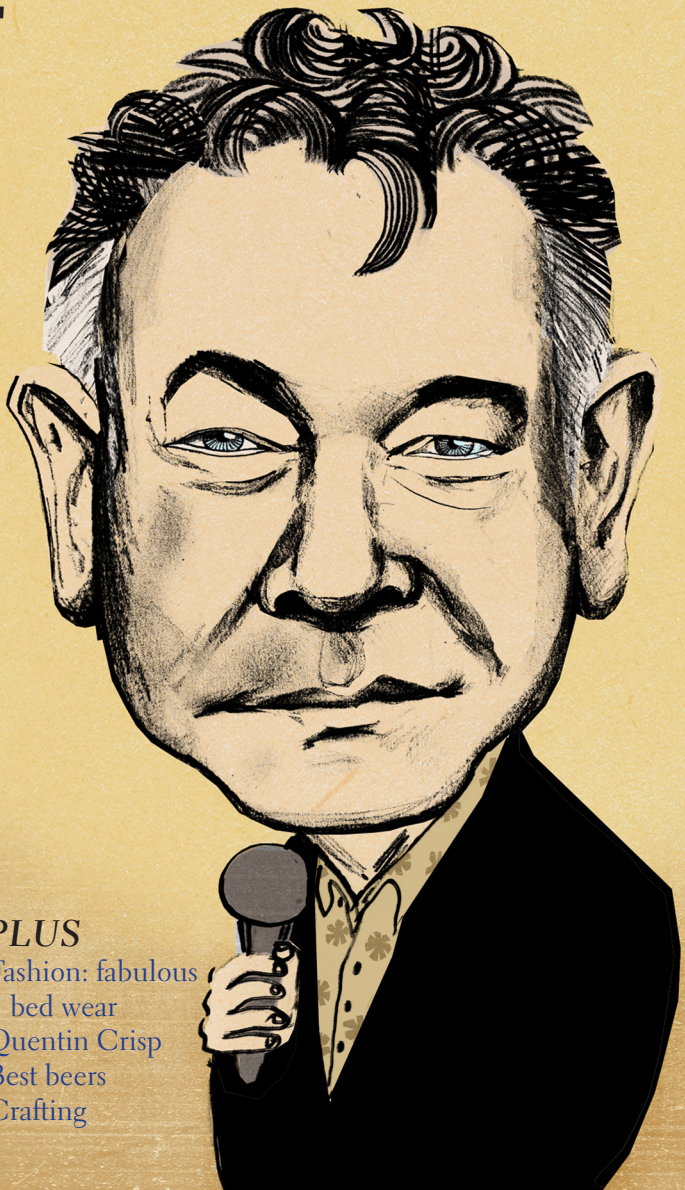

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Stewart Lee

Tom Hodgkinson *meets the hard-working stand-up, still fighting for punk values. Pictures by* Idil Sukan

THROUGH a mutual friend I booked an interview with Stewart Lee. I'd suggested a daytime slot, but he said, via email, that he wrote all day, then picked up his kids, then did his show in the evening. He is in the middle of a gigantic eighteen-month, 200 date tour. So it would be easier to meet after his show in London – and would I like tickets?

I went to his gig, "Content Provider", at the Leicester Square Theatre. Wearing a black T-shirt, black jeans and black trainers, Stew did a two and half hour set with a twenty minute interval. It was the 80th he'd done in a row. In the show he plays the character of an embittered liberal Generation X punk Dad, who prefers vinyl to Spotify and is bemused by the new anti-progressive world, with its Trumps, Farages, *Game of Thrones* (which he has not seen – nor have I) and phone-swiping young people. It's a character not a million miles away from Lee's own, or from any number of post-punk, *NME*-reading, fanzine-hungry children of the seventies and eighties, the rave generation, who are now parents. And in self-aggrandising fashion, he compares himself to the well-dressed man in "Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog", the great 1818 German painting of romantic alienation, and brings a giant blow-up of the picture on stage. It's funny, silly, awkward, challenging, lo-fi and moving in equal measure.

After the show Stew sells and signs CDs and books from a booth at the front of the theatre, much in the manner of a late eighties punk band on the road, selling CDs after the gig. We sit down in the empty theatre and start to chat about how tweeting has replaced getting in the van, among many other things.

We started by talking about the genius of our mutual friend, the actor Ben Moor, who tends to perform at the Idler's tent at the Port Eliot Festival each year.

SL I went to Port Eliot when I was young, when it was a rock festival. It was called the Elephant Fayre. It must have been 1984. The Fall were playing. I really liked The Fall as a teenager and it was difficult to see them in Birmingham. There were very odd licensing laws about, because it was a Quaker town. It was hard to get into clubs. I said to my mum, could I go, and she said "No". But I was actually allowed in the end.

TH That must've been amazing.

SL And just three years later, when I went to Glastonbury, that whole traveller culture was over. There used to be a lot of people who lived on the road for half the year, going to a network of Fayres – spelt with a Y.

TH Yes – my school band played at one, called the Blue Moon Fayre, also in 1984, when we were 16. We just turned up: there was one field, with a stage at one end, and there were naked people selling hash cookies.

SL What sort of music was your school band?

TH Sort of Cramps.

SL The Cramps – I saw them live only once. That was a real education. They did two nights at the Astoria. Lux Interior climbed up the amps during "Psychotic Reaction". There was a big middle eight. And then he just sort of fell off. Hurt his leg, fell on some glass. He was going "ahhh" but he managed to get back to the mike just in time to come in on the beat, and everyone went "Yeah!" A week later I was in a pub in London and I heard some people talking about the same incident at the same gig. I went, "Were you there on the Wednesday or the Tuesday?" and they went "Tuesday" and I'd been on the Wednesday. I went "Ah, fuck, wow, how brilliant!" There is real improvisation, which is good, but there's also making people think that they've seen something special. Lux was an absolute old Vaudevillian master of that. And I totally bought it. Like tonight, there were a lot of things that were new.

TH So how much is improvised?

SL Not as much as it looks. But enough was. Peter Sellars [avant-garde American theatre director] told me I was good at doing what he said, introducing air into an enclosed space … did I say that?

TH Have you been reflecting on these matters since you were very young?

SL It probably started when I did the opera. I helped write the story for *Jerry Springer the Opera*. What we found ourselves at odds with, was that conventional music theatre wants to condense shows to a reproducible grid of actions that can be franchised out. But what we were trying to do was to introduce mess into it. So people onstage had to respond to the audience. It had to be fluid because you didn't know how people were going to laugh.

From then I started thinking about "How do you make things special?" rather than just knocking it out. It's difficult – I'll do this show 200 times.

TH How many have you done so far?

SL This is probably about number 80 or 90. It went through a lull for about about two weeks. I worked out what was wrong with it about five days ago – all the things which had been improvisations had become fixed text. I was trying to fake them, and they weren't achieving anything. Also, on Tuesday, about two minutes from the end, before the painting comes out, a bloke had a sort of heart attack. And I thought: "If people are having heart attacks, the show is too long."

TH He actually had a heart attack?

SL Yeah, I had to clear the room.

I'M NOT RESPONSIBLE ENOUGH TO BE IN CONTROL OF A TWITTER ACCOUNT. AND NEITHER IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

TH Reading your columns, I see that you were a Crass fan.

SL I started listening to them twenty years ago. Which is of course a long time ago, but I'd be lying if I said I was a teenage Crass fan.

TH You weren't one of those 13 year olds who bought all the albums …

SL No, but weirdly Napalm Death [hardcore punk band] were at my school, in the year above me. I didn't know them, but they were on one of the compilations Crass put out, *Bullshit Detector*. So I knew what anarcho-punk sounded like. But I oddly got into Crass more when I moved to Stoke Newington in the nineties. Versions of them were on at the Vortex club, and they'd kind of become free jazz. I once got a bit star struck. I was in a coffee shop, with my kids. Eve Libertine and Penny Rimbaud were there. And I thought: "I'm going to stop and have a conversation because I'd like my children to have met Crass." So I went: "I've just bought all the CD reissues to your records," to Penny. And he thought I was taking the piss, I think, and said: "Yes, I spent a lot of time remastering those." I said: "They're really good." But meanwhile, Eve Libertine had started talking to Luke, who was reading a Ladybird book of William The Conqueror. And afterwards – this is really naff – I said: "You have to remember this, you have to remember you've met Crass." I remember when I was nine I went to a motor show and I saw Lewis Collins from The Professionals at the NEC trying out a car and it absolutely blew

my mind. But my kids, by virtue of what I do, meet a lot of people. One of my best friends is Kevin Eldon, who does all the voices in Dangermouse. They think it's normal that the man they know from round the corner is Penfold. So it's funny, they met Crass, and Alan Moore... some major figures from the counterculture.

TH You spoil them.

SL They don't really understand that it's not normal. But then maybe – there's that thing they say about people who go to Eton, it's not that it's better than anywhere else, it's just that they know people from there who achieve things, so it gives them confidence.

TH What college were you in at Oxford?

SL St Edmund Hall, doing English. Were you there then?

TH I was at the other one. But I was in a hardcore punk band, called Chopper at the time. We used to play at Wadham College in Oxford.

SL Chopper. That rings a bell.

TH On English courses at that time, there was a lot of French literary theory around – Roland Barthes and so on. I wonder whether some of the self-referential stuff in your comedy was influenced by them?

SL No! It just came out naturally. If anything I've probably got it from weird things like John Byrne's *She-Hulk* comics, where she would address the reader, or walk between frames. Or *Krazy Kat*. I didn't really get it from literary theory, though I'd love to pretend I did. I had a friend who was a drama lecturer at Kingston, and he used to really take the piss out of me. He used to call me "all practice and no theory". Thing was, he'd never performed in his life.

TH And punk and music?

SL I was tangentially aware of free improvisation because of Sonic Youth and The Ex and all that. But then I found that the Vortex club was 100 yards from my flat and I saw all those sorts of people. I really loved [the late avant-garde guitarist] Derek Bailey. I ended up speaking at his funeral, weirdly. What I stole from them was that if something goes wrong, they don't dismiss it, they chase it down. They make the problem into a virtue. They're good at changes of mood and pace. There's no tunes, in the same way there's no jokes. And those free jazz guys who say they don't want to play tunes – they could if they wanted to.

My show isn't improvised from end to end. But rhythm and textures, tonalities, lengths of things and shifts in mood – I do think about those things. Because I've been so busy in the last year I haven't been to any of that kind of music, but on the 23rd of December I went to see [jazz saxophonist]

Evan Parker in Hackney. It was just like being reminded of the point of everything again, it was so inspiring. And also the take it or leave it attitude of people like The Fall I liked. I like Mark E Smith's affectation onstage that he's indifferent to the audience … but he's actually very needy. There's a vaudevillian aspect to Mark E Smith. I think I'm a relic of the counterculture. But just in the last 18 months I've thought: "Oh yeah, young comedians are products of a different time." Our generation could go, "I'm not gonna do that gig, I'm not gonna do that do that sellout thing." But our morality and our ethics were more flexible because the economics were more flexible: we weren't £30,000 in debt.

TH I remember fanzines with long earnest editorials and letters complaining about bands who sell out.

SL I went to Boston seventeen years ago to a festival organised by Terrascope, which was a psychedelic fanzine. I was single, and had some disposable income. There was all sorts of weird stuff on, but the crowning glory for the weekend was that Sonic Youth had agreed to do it. As they often did – they were so great like that. And they drove from New York to Boston in their own van and loaded their own gear, into a room not much bigger than this, and headlined the thing. And the bloke from the group Abunai, which was sort a psychedelic drone band, stood in the middle of the room shouting at them all night: "You suck [music mogul] David Geffen's dick." And I thought: "But they're here!' You've seen them load all their own stuff in! And what did they do with that Geffen money? They made really peculiar strange records." You've got to cut people a bit of slack.

TH Chumbawumba were criticised for being on EMI, but actually they got more creative freedom than before, and they got paid. Boff Whalley of Chumbawumba has said that the people who were slagging them off for being on EMI were running indie record labels in their spare time but had day jobs at Barclays Bank … and that was somehow seen as morally superior.

SL When I started on the comedy circuit, the biggest thing to aspire to was a twenty or thirty date tour of 150 seater art centres. Now you have a 1% type of thing, where a tiny minority are earning loads – and I would include myself in that bracket – while everyone else is scrabbling around for the fuck-all that's left in this thing. So the society of it, where we all felt in it together, has gone. That's what they've done to us.

TH So you're saying that the alternative comedy scene reflects the wider development of capitalism and the system?

SL It's become more competitive. Weirdly the young comedians do social media and they all "like" each other. They almost have to pretend to like each other.

TH And you don't do any social media at all?

SL No.

TH When did you start not doing social media?

SL I never started doing it. I looked at where it was going and thought, "This is nuts."

TH Have you ever had some say to you, "But you *have* to"?

SL Yes, and I think there's jobs I didn't get because I don't do it. But the thing is, I've already got half a dozen bipolar stalkers. And I've got kids. My persona as a performer is that I'm not your friend. I am really, though! I do loads of gigs and I keep them as cheap as I can. So I am sort of your friend. I am more your friend than someone who goes onstage and pretends to be your friend. But that persona doesn't work as a Twitter personality. *He* [pointing to the stage] wouldn't be on Twitter. So *I'm* not going on Twitter. I also don't want the grief in my life. It's like a chink in your armour. People get to you. Loads of people really hate me – really pathologically hate me.

TH I love the inane below the line "comments" from readers which you put in your book – hilarious.

SL I've got a bit on the website actually. It's 600,000 words that I found on the Internet of people hating me, and it really makes me laugh. But I don't want to give them a way in. I've seen a lot of good people torn apart by thinking they can do whack-a-mole on Twitter of all the people that hate them. Donald Trump being one of them of course. So I won't do it. A couple of times I've sent emails drunk at two in the morning and it's caused problems. I'm not responsible enough to be in control of a Twitter account. And neither is the President of the United States.

TH The medium is the message and the whole digital thing somehow encourages certain types of behaviour. Even with email, if you dash one off too quickly, it's easy for the other person to take offence. Have you developed a thicker skin? Because you dish it out as well.

SL I don't mind having the piss taken out of me, and I don't mind being hated. But I don't like being lied about. And I think because I don't mind being slagged off and parodied, what people have started to do is lie about me, because they know it annoys me. The other interesting thing is, in the last couple of years, I've become, for a generation of people, a sort of an annoying establishment figure. Some of the twenty-somethings don't even like political correctness, which is weird. Because you know what a hard won battle that was. For the 80s generation, to be *not racist* was really important.

TH What about the things that young people like, like *Vice* magazine?

SL I got asked to do something for *Vice* magazine so I looked at it. It seemed like

"Loads of people hate me - really pathologically hate me"

all funny pictures and attention-grabbing headlines. I suspected that, were I to take a nuanced position on something in *Vice*, it would reduced to a click-bait shock-horror sentence, so I didn't do it.

TH These shows you are doing – are they good earners?

SL Yes, they are. But the other weird thing is, I'm not with big rock and roll management. I have one guy, we go in the van together.

TH It was fascinating to read in your book, where you say that the bigger gigs can pay less than smaller gigs.

SL Yeah that was with Avalon, that was with rock and roll management.

TH Because they just basically suck it all up?

SL Yes, but now we've got a lean machine. You can pass the savings on to the consumer, and then the consumer likes you.

TH A lot of that stuff, like Avalon, is vanity for the performer.

SL In the mid-nineties, my then-fiancée's sister was going out with a Britpop person in a Britpop group who had been signed and given an advance and came in one day to tell us about all this money he'd spent. So I asked him if he knew what an advance was, and he didn't really. But the management doesn't want them to know.

TH You do sound incredibly busy. You've also got two children.

STEWART LEE

How I Escaped My Certain Fate

The Life and Deaths of a Stand-Up Comedian

SL Yes, and my wife is a comic as well.

I'VE GOT KIDS NOW, SO I CAN'T JUST DIE. I WOULDN'T REALLY HAVE MINDED BEFORE. I COULD HAVE JUST DIED. LIKE TOMMY COOPER

TH You're writing at home in the daytime as well.

SL It's too much. That's why I'm stopping. Back in June, I had a high blood pressure scare, a week after Brexit. And I know what happened – I'm unfit, for one thing – but I also stayed awake for about a week watching the news because I was very concerned about it. I was very concerned about how the cultural shift was going to affect what I do. I had just got a new show together and I thought, where's this now? That's what caused the stress. My dream plan was to carry on doing this – at this level – for as long as people came, because nobody has really done that. It's really weird – most stand-ups either give up to become film stars, because that's what it was all about anyway, or they do massive gigs, with an hour of stuff and it's not really a proper show. I just got commissioned to write something for Channel Four, which is really good, because I'm thinking that I might not be able to do *this* every night for the rest of my life. I really wanted to, but I just don't think I can. It's because of the kids.

TH How old are they?

SL They're six and nine now. So I can't just die. I wouldn't really have minded before. I could have just died. Like Tommy Cooper.

TH Is this the right time to be working so hard, when your children are so young?

SL I'll get to the end of next year, and then I'm not going to do any touring for two years. Things like homework, you have to be around for it. We don't know what to do. We're in this funny position where actually we're in the clear now financially, which we never thought would happen. We're not from families where we ever expected that. So now what do you do? Maybe we should leave London? The kids have got asthma. Maybe we should go somewhere where they don't get kept in at playtime at school. I'm driven by this, because I love standup, but I don't think standup loves me anymore. I'm seen as a sort of cul-de-sac.

TH Do you manage to get any time off?

SL I manage to go to about thirty gigs a year... I read a tragically small amount of books last year because I was so busy. We always block out school holidays to do things.

TH Are you a worrying person?

SL Yes. I'm really worried now, like a lot of middle-class liberals. I'm worried about Europe, I'm worried about the fact that I thought I was going to grow old in a liberal democracy and I also thought I had beaten the system because I had a house. And now, I've got a house, well done to me, but in a country where there's no relationship to what I thought the country was going to be like thirty years ago.

I'M THE LAST OF THE "GETTING IN THE VAN" GENERATION

TH It seems to have gone backwards. I can see why it's liberating to leave, because we had twelve years in North Devon and experienced a real sense of freedom.

SL But you came back. Why? What did you miss?

TH Well, because our children are teenagers and we were living in the middle of nowhere. So we thought we'd come back to London. I'm very happy back in Shepherd's Bush.

SL I feel a bit burned out. The things that keep me in London are being able to go and see music at the Vortex.

TH Yeah, you do miss that. There's less culture.

SL But the things like, you walk through Soho and you used to find old record shops and old bookshops. I miss that. Hanging out and talking to people behind counters. And it's the same around the country. I was going to try and write something about it this year. I've been going to every town in the country once a year for about 28 years now, and every year, one of the places that was your little stop isn't there anymore. Like the record shop's closed, the bookshop's closed, the person you became friends with in the town has moved or has had a stroke or died. Have you read *Your Band Sucks* by Jon Fine? From Bitch Magnet?

TH Oh yes, you mentioned it in the show.

SL Yeah, I did. It's about the late 80s, early 90s, American hardcore touring scene and analog media. How exciting it was to have a record, and make connections with people, and how that's all gone.

TH Those bands were also quite entrepreneurial. They'd have their own record labels.

SL Well, it's a funny thing about the early days of the alternative comedy scene – and I think I'm quoting myself from a book here – it was left-wing, but its

economics were Thatcherite. We were all independent businessmen, essentially.

TH That's right but I don't see anything wrong with that. I think there's something nice about the small shopkeeper and the individual person.

SL So do I. People take the piss out of me sometimes. They say that I approach this with the attitude of being a small business. And I do. And I remember that used to really make me laugh about The Fall. I don't know Mark E Smith, but I've interviewed him about five times at five year intervals about different things. I went to meet him once in a pub in Manchester in the mid-nineties. As I got there, Steve Hanley and Karl Burns got there.

TH Who?

SL The bass player and the drummer then. They were giving him receipts for new strings and stuff. And he got a grubby envelope out and paid them with cash and took the receipts. I thought that was really funny. In a way, that's been my sort of model.

TH But Mark E. Smith is not exactly left-wing?

SL No, he's not. It's funny, I make allowances for him. Because I like the music so much, I can't afford to blacklist him in my mind. Whereas with other people, I can't listen to their stuff anymore because I don't like things they've said. I don't know young people. And with a lot of them I don't even understand the stuff they're talking about because it's to do with things on the Internet or with apps or some meme. Funnily enough, in this, in every show now there'll be a bit where I make a virtue of talking at length about something like *Game of Thrones*, a TV show that is a big deal but is something I've never seen. But you can only do that once. If I can keep going for another 20 years, and even if the audience depreciates by 75% in that time, I can help the kids out with college and shift the mortgage. The end is in sight bizarrely. I never thought that would happen.

TH Well, congratulations for keeping going. It must have been quite tough at certain points.

SL Well, the nineties were fun because you were young so it didn't matter if you were poor. The only really tough bit was in my late twenties and early thirties, when I wasn't earning anything. I was with rock and roll management and I was in debt and then I chopped the legs out from under everything. I did that Henry Rollins "get in the van" thing for about four years, where I went all around the country to little gigs. But I think I might have been the last of the getting in the van generation. And I got that phrase from American hardcore: they would talk about "getting in the van". And my "get in the van" years were late. They were 2005 to 2008.

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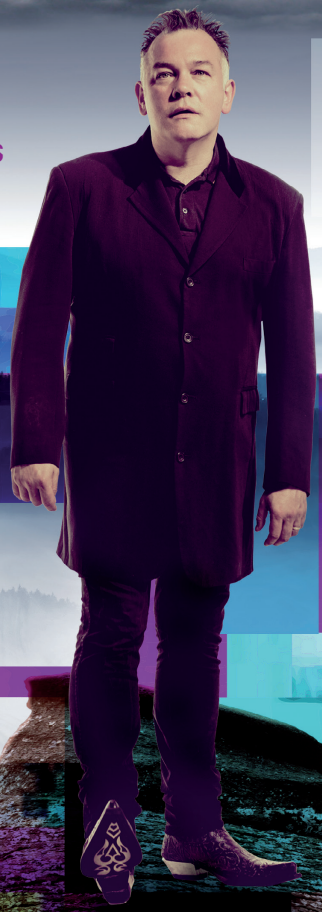
TIMES

"Stewart Lee is not funny and has nothing to say."

TELEGRAPH



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TH But that laid the foundations for what you're doing now?

SL Absolutely. But young people don't get in the van. Instead they create a hashtag or do a social networking thing, or they ask me at a gig if I've seen their act and if I say yes, they ask me what I think of it because they want to quote me on it. Because your name drives traffic through. Or they change something you said so it sounds controversial and they can drive traffic through that. Everything is traffic driving. Reading Jon Fine's book, he talks very romantically about the late 80s – getting up in the middle of the night to go to copy shops to create flyers and how with certain printers you could run the flyer through once in green and then a second time in black and get a two-colour flyer. Instead of that, people are now thinking: what meme can we create that will catch on?

TH But you don't just get a following by Tweeting.

SL Well, you *can* get a following. Poor little Dapper Laughs, he's been very good at making three second sexist videos. Then he was thrown to the lions to do a live show, and he didn't have any experience of thinking about how that tone of voice would play over that time. I don't like what he does but it was inevitably going to be a car crash. I did ten years of being a circuit comic. But it's been fifteen years since I was a comic who had to turn up in front of audiences that just wanted a night out and make it work. Actually, a lot of young comics have written really interesting blogs about this, both here and in America. Nish Kumar, one of the young comics who I like, the Friday of the Brexit vote, was on stage at the Comedy Store and said something about Brexit, and someone shouted to him, a brown-faced man, "Well, go home then". And that's not happened for thirty years. All of a sudden the tap was turned on. But a young comic in Brighton wrote a great blog about how it's all very well for comics like me, doing theatre shows, to do confrontational stuff about where the country's at. But if you're a working circuit comic on a Thursday night, in a club where people have come for a night out, you're unlikely to be rebooked for the gig that pays your bills if you divide the room. You're not doing that on your own time, like I am doing here – you're doing it on the time of that promoter.

TH So you have to be pragmatic about it.

SL Weird times.