

Ed Byrne interview

- Big Issue

Kate Wellham

From babysitter to gardener to office temp, Ed fits the mould of many successful comedians who, like Ross Noble and Eddie Izzard for example, seem so wonderfully suited to what they do that there was never really any alternative career choice for them. But, seemingly a natural, Ed never really saw stand-up as his thing. "When I started doing stand-up I thought it might be a good back door into acting," he says, "but stand-up has now become the end in itself rather than a means to an end".

This is despite the trauma of his first gig, where Ed charged himself with running the entire night, on top of performing. "I was nervous that nobody was going to show up, that the comedians I'd booked might not be any good, that someone was going to start a fight in the audience, I had a lot to think about that night."

Thankfully undeterred, Ed has gone on to reach the dizzying level of fame where "people know me, but they don't always know where from". For those familiar with him only as one of a team of comics on heavily cut half-hour quiz shows, 90 minutes of pure unedited Ed seems to fly by in pretty much the same amount of time, thanks to his hilarious and genial ranting.

"I do like a good panel game," says Ed of his rounds on *Mock The Week*, *8 Out of 10 Cats* and *Have I Got News For You*, among others. "But they're really just the best way for stand-up comics to be on TV nowadays. It's the live shows that are the major thing for me in my career and anything else I do is either just for a laugh or just to get people to come to the live shows."

A note for the otherwise uninitiated, this is the most vitriolic you are likely to have seen him, which may come as a bit of a shock, but the show is all the better for it. Of his live routine, Ed would be the first to admit that he likes a good vent, away from the constraints of topical quizzes. Despite his recent commitment to happy married life - which is also proving handy for material - there still seems to be plenty for him to get angry about. "Possibly I've got a bit angrier, possibly I've got better at channeling my anger into something funny, identifying the things I don't like and finding funny ways to get it out. I think I've gotten better at finding ways to slag off things, whether it's homophobic Christians, as it was in the last show, or WAG culture in this show."

For Ed, not having a point to make would be a waste of a gift to make people listen and think about whatever it is that happens to be getting his not very evasive goat. "I think after a while you want to have something just a bit more gratifying than just making everybody laugh. Making

everybody laugh is still the bottom line and I'm still not the type who will just stand and rant without a punchline, there has to be something funny at the end. I think it's very important not to put the cart before the horse though, and think it's more important to make a point than to be funny, because then you become a spoken word performer."

The freedom to say what's on his mind is as crucial to Ed as it is to any stand-up, which is why live comedy is his battlefield of choice. Especially now, he points out, that broadcast comedy has had to suddenly rethink its boundaries. "It's always the case that going to see a stand-up live you're going to get a different kind of flavour from what you see on TV, but since the Ross-Brand affair everybody's just clamped down. There's a real worry that everything's going to get muzzled, and for the time being TV and radio have really got to watch what they say, so I think the only place to really see unfettered stand-up comedy is live".

So beware, should you recognise him offstage. Because beneath the chirpy demeanour, diminutive stature, flicky hair and tendency to make a lot of people laugh for a living, Ed Byrne is actually a fierce adversary, and not a man to be messed with. No really.

Cross him just once and, even though you might appear get away with it at the time, he'll make damn sure you regret it later, when he's had chance to think of all the witty things he should have said - and assuming you're in the audience at one of his latest shows.

