

# The Entertainers



**A** GRIZZLED Rolf Harris returned to the comparative civilisation of the Northern Territory town of Darwin at the week-end (I say "comparative civilisation" since Darwin nestles near a dwelling called Humpty Doo) after a hazardous fortnight in Australia's aboriginal outbacks.

His bags were doubtless weighed down with a few more didgeridoos and wobbleboards which he'll be blooping at us when his next—and fourth—TV series starts in the New Year.

If only those poor innocent aborigines knew it, they could reap some hefty royalties from Mr. Harris. He'd probably pay up, too. He's that sort of person: warm and sensitive and religious and home-loving. "I suppose my popularity must come from the fact that I'm sincere in all that I do and it comes across to the viewer," he says with honesty as opposed to affectation.

And there can be no question about his popularity. What began as an emergency show one night in 1967 when Rolf stepped in at four days' notice to fill a 40-minute spot Vikki Carr was unable to keep because of a throat operation has since become a regular, high-rating TV series for the BBC.

Rolf had not bridged the gap between entertaining children and adults at the time. When his big break came he was combining his "Hey Presto It's Rolf!" teatime TV show with a cabaret booking at London's Talk Of The Town.

"Some people from the BBC went along to see my show at the Talk Of The Town," recounts Rolf, "and the next thing I knew I was asked to go and see Bill Cotton Jnr., head of variety at the BBC. It was on a Wednesday and he told me about Vikki Carr's illness and explained that they had booked a 41-piece orchestra and you couldn't unbook musicians so would I like to take over in the show that Sunday?"

"They told me to do my 'Talk' act and the next thing I knew I was booked for a series, got my contract renewed and things are still going strong."



Despite the fact that this man can crack jokes, sing songs, play astonishing instruments, draw cartoons, paint pictures, take phenomenal photographs and polish and cut rare stones, he still says he finds his success "rather amazing."

"I talk to the camera, you see," he says. "I imagine I'm talking to one or two people and that way I can identify with the viewer at home. I try, too, to put over my genuine enjoyment and enthusiasm in what I'm doing and it all seems to work."

He bubbles like boiling

## How Rolf made a career of being Aussie

water, he calls himself half Australian, half nut, and yet he's not really like it at all when you see him onstage, or mostly in his case, off camera.

"I'm a fairly quiet person in reality," says Rolf. "I don't leap about and carry on show business traditions. I don't drink much and go out to get seen in the right places. I'm a home-loving person who likes not to put on the big star act. I'd much rather be myself than have a phoney big star complex. That's something I hate."

But big star he is, although it hardly looked like being the case when he first came to London to make a living out of exhibiting his paintings. That was in 1952 and this son of Welsh emigrants says: "For two years life in London was very tough. My savings dwindled right down to coppers and I became pretty desperate when I wasn't able to get jobs like doing murals for TV stage sets."

"I used to stay with some friends at Roehampton who had a couple of children, a boy of four and a girl of eight, whom I used to entertain whenever I went there. We were watching children's TV one afternoon and after a few minutes the kids went out to play in the garden and I remember thinking to myself: 'Gee, that's rough — I'm sure I could be more entertaining than the programme on at the moment.'"

"So I wrote to the BBC and asked for an audition and got it. Except that it was pretty

disastrous, but they rang me a few days later and said 'Come back—we don't want the story you used in your audition, but we can get some different material for you.' So back I went and into a show, telling stories about a puppet called Fuzz and doing these lightning drawings."

And so, too, came characters like Willoughby and Oliver the Octopus. He hankered for home, however, and went back to his native Perth to appear in more children's TV shows. "I had the feeling at the time—which was 1960—that the only way ever to become a fairly big entertainer, however, would be to put on a British act."

"I tried hard to cultivate an English accent, but as I was doing four shows a week in Perth I simply didn't have the time to work on my accent. Then, out of the blue, came that record 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' which sold a million copies around the world. It did more than make my name known, though — it was a very Australian song and it suddenly dawned on me how stupid I was to try to be something I was not. And, ever after, I gave up trying to talk like an Englishman."

When "Sun Arise," another Australian-flavoured song, became a big hit Harris was home and dry. Although he was still several years from moving up to adult audiences. And when this did come about, he had the honour of being awarded the MBE to combine with his own country's "Salesman Of The Year" award in 1968.

It was the ultimate accolade to his popularity.

How does Rolf relax on TV? "It's a gift that some people have and some people haven't and there's nothing you can do about it if you don't click. I do fortunately and I find it more satisfying than being on a stage."

"Mind you, all my shows are done 'live' and so if you make a mistake you just have to keep going. That makes the medium electric with excitement. I love it."

He says that although he can turn his hand to so many things, enthusiasm comes first in his list of qualities. "Then my painting ability and music must tie for second place. And, of course, there's my Australian slant on things."

"I don't know why British people laugh at Australian humour. I suppose it's probably because there's a sense of something different there. My humour's not solely Australian, although so much about me is."

His five-year-old daughter has the decidedly down-under name of Bindi although his wife, Alwen, is Welsh. "It was hate at first sight when we were both at art school in London," says Rolf, "but we met again two years later at a Royal Academy exhibition when I shattered the people there by bawling 'Alwen' at the top of my voice when I saw her down the other end of the hall. And for some strange reason, we hit it off on this occasion."

Rolf, who's 39, lives with his family at Sydenham, south of the Thames, when he's not taking them to aboriginal settlements to "steal" more musical instruments and ideas. I hope the news of how he has made their music such an international success doesn't boomerang back to those wide open spaces or one day Rolf might not come back from one of his safaris!



Rolf Harris... returned from the outback

by BOB FARMER

Next week: KEN DODD