



# SUPERSTAR

The incredible story of Rolf Harris

BY LINTON MITCHELL

## FACTS BEHIND THE FACE

**BORN:** Perth, Western Australia, March 30, 1930. **Occupations:** Comedian, musician, singer, songwriter, broadcaster, artist, cartoonist. **Named after:** Rolf Boldereau, author of the great Australian novel *Robbery Under Arms*. **Parents:** Emigrated to Australia from Roath, Cardiff. **Educated:** Perth Modern School. **First job:** Teacher in a local school. **First major public appearance:** Winning the Junior Backstroke Championship of Australia in 1945. **First jobs in the entertainment field:** Local radio and theatre dates after winning an Australian-wide amateur radio talent contest. **First came to England:** 1952 when he took his life savings (£297) out of the bank and set sail for England. **First job in England:** Down Under Club, Earls Court (to pay for art lessons). **Subsequent appearances:** Radio series, cabaret all over the World (including USA, Canada and Japan). **Summer seasons:** Four BBC-TV series, Anglia TV Survival series, *Koogie Bear*, *Learning to Swim* series, other children's programmes, numerous guest spots. **Hobbies:** Painting, rock hunting, pottery, sculpture, nature study, collecting pieces of timber for future use. **Marital status:** 1958 married sculptress Alwen Hughes. **One daughter:** Bindi (an Aboriginal name) born March 10, 1964. **Residence:** Studio-house (actually two houses joined together), with old coach house at the bottom of the garden, in Sydenham, Kent. **Ambitions:** To create and entertain. **Favourite composer:** Burt Bacharach. **Favourite vocal group:** The Beatles. **Favourite actor:** Alec Guinness. **Favourite actress:** Bette Davis. **Favourite food:** Indian curries. **Favourite drink:** Doesn't really have one. **Normally drinks:** pineapple or some other fruit juice if he goes into a pub, but likes lager with his curries. **Favourite musician:** Manitas de Plata. **Favourite colours:** Red, turquoise, purple. **Favourite memories:** Appearing before The Queen at the Royal Command Performance, and receiving the MBE from her in 1968. **Particular dislikes:** Anything phoney, the destruction of wild life in the name of progress, the pursuit of security at the expense of creativity and people who talk down to children.

IT WAS about mid-way through the three-and-a-half hour recording session at the BBC studios in London's New Bond Street, and the cigarettes had started to come out.

The control room was stifling, though it was a lot cooler in the recording studio next door where Rolf Harris and the musicians were pounding out *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport* for the Jimmy Young Radio 1 Show.

Rolf Harris. A bearded, bespectacled, mop-haired, intense and rather severe-looking study of perpetual motion.

The severity is misleading. For every now and then his face would light up and he would burst into a roar of laughter. Every time somebody he knew arrived the intense, worried look vanished, to be replaced by a smile.

The producer called a break, and the troop downstairs to the canteen began. Somebody offered Harris a cigarette. "No thank you," he said. "I had a cigarette once, when I was nine years old, and it nearly killed me. I was sick and dizzy and I hated it."

"Anyway, kids only smoke because they think it means that they are growing up — and I didn't WANT to grow up when I was nine years old. I was having such a lovely time that I wanted to stay a boy for ever."



That's Harris. It doesn't take much to get him talking, as long as you are prepared to carry out conversations with him almost at the gallop. For he never seems to stay still... never to relax.

Yet you get the impression that this is a man for whom nothing is too much trouble. And the more you talk to him, the more that impression grows. Because it is a fact. People are people to Rolf Harris. Whoever they are. He treats everybody with consideration.

"Star?" he said. "Heavens, how I hate people who play the big star... people who hide behind their dark glasses and feel that they really ought not to have anything to do with anybody else. They think that because they have been lucky in the entertainment world they are somebody apart; they should take care who they mix with. Nonsense. Pure nonsense. The big star act makes me sick. Be yourself, for goodness' sake. If you are not yourself, then you are a phoney — and in the long run you lose an awful lot."

By this time we had reached the canteen. Harris drank milk.

The man is a bounding extrovert, but anybody more different from the popular

## Three hours, five good tracks — and the worried look vanishes. A good session



Rolf recording: three-and-a-half hours, five good tracks. PICTURES: Chris Capstick

picture of the beer-downing Australian it would be difficult to find. "I don't drink much," he said, "not because I have anything against it, but because I never really have the time to stand about in pubs or drink at home. I like to do things all the time. Even at home? Certainly at home. My idea of relaxation is exercise with your hands — pottery, sculpture; making things — as opposed to exercising your mind. I'm learning sculpture at the moment... my wife Alwen you know, she's a sculptress."

Actually, this was Harris the Singer and Songwriter and Musician. There is also Harris the Comedian, Harris the Artist, Harris the Broadcaster and Harris the

Handyman. Not forgetting Harris the Swimmer.

They are all the same Harris, of course, but trying to cover all the aspects of Harris at once is enough to make your head swim. One has the distinct feeling that if he put his mind to it he could probably do anything.

"You know when I was really scared?" he said. "When I went back to Australia to do cabaret in Sydney."

"I had been lucky... very, very lucky... because my BBC shows had been shown in Australia and had gone down pretty well. It wasn't as if I had forsaken Australia never to return, but Australians tend to regard entertainers from their own country who go back after getting on pretty well in England with suspicion."

"If you still have an Australian accent they say 'Huh, he's just putting it on because he's come back here.' On the other hand, if you have an English accent they say 'Huh, it didn't take him long to lose his Australian accent.'"

"It was nerve-racking all right. That first cabaret spot they came to jeer and, though I say it myself, I think they stayed because they changed their minds and liked me. That was back in 1964. I like to go to Australia whenever I can, even if it's just for a holiday."



The break was over, and we were on our way back upstairs to the studio again.

"Take *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport*," he said. "I was at the Down Under Club in London, a rendezvous for homesick Australians, for six years. Six years. I sang there non-stop from eight to 11 every Thursday night. Calypsoes were all the rage and I thought I would write a Belafonte-type song to amuse the members. I tried to bring in everything Australian I could think of — as many animal slang terms and nicknames as possible — and, gradually, got an original tune with about 18 verses."

"What happened then? Nothing. I flogged it around, but nobody wanted to know. Alwen and I had married — we met at art school — but I had more or less abandoned art at that time. Things looked a bit dodgy, to say the least."

In 1959 came an offer to return to Perth, Western Australia — his home town — and produce and star in a children's TV series. He leaped at the chance. He painted the scenery, wrote the material, appeared in and produced the five daily half-hour shows himself — and starred in his own Monday late-night half-hour show every week for a year.

Now we were back at the recording

studio, and Harris was ready to start work again. "It was exhausting that year," he said, "but I enjoyed it. Everything happens at once. *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport* won a Gold Disc in Australia and was released with a lot of success, thank goodness, in Britain, Canada and the United States."

"Three, five, seven, 12." The voice of Harris came through to the control room...

"There's an old, Australian stockman, lying... dying... Aaaaah... aaaaah! He gets himself up on to one elbow and he says to his mates who are gathered around..."

"Watch my wallabies, feed, mate..."

"They're a dangerous breed, mate..."

This was the song that rocketed Harris to fame. But he had plenty to back it up. Listening to him sing it, accompanied by the musicians and himself on the Wobble Board (his own invention) it was funny to recall the story about his initial reception at New York's celebrated Blue Angel. He had just completed 31 weeks at the Arctic Club in Vancouver. But the Blue Angel didn't take to him at first. The audition was a disaster.

Recalled Harris: "There was no audience — just the bosses, and me out there, all alone, on the floor. I finished my act and, by mutual consent, we all left by different exits."



He was going into one of his other hits, *Sun Arise*, now. This was an authentic Aboriginal chant to which Harris and Australian naturalist, Harry Butler, put words. It was after this that the Blue Angel came back and booked him for four weeks.

Yet the success of those two songs were nothing compared to that of his *Two Little Boys*.

The story behind this phenomenon has been told before, but deserves repeating. Rolf and his family were on holiday in Australia, touring the Northern Territory (something which I will talk about later in the series) when he met Ted Egan, Administrator For Aboriginal Affairs in Darwin. Mr Egan gave him a song, which he thought would suit him down to the ground. It did. It was *Two Little Boys*.

Yet it almost never came about. For Ted had written the song down on a piece of paper, and when Rolf decided to sing it on a TV show he found that he had lost it. Worried telephone calls were made from England to Australia. Mr Egan ended up singing the song to Rolf over the telephone.

The record was released in Britain in 1969 and stayed in the Number 1 spot for the longest period since Engelbert Humperdinck's *Last Waltz* in 1967. When he represented Australia at Expo '70 in Tokyo, Harris sang the song in Japanese.



It was believed, at first, that this song was about two childhood friends who went to the Crimea War. But later it was established that the setting was in fact the American Civil War, and was about two brothers who found blood ties stronger than battlefield hostility.

It was now half-past five, and the musicians were going home. Rolf was due to stay for another half-an-hour playing the Didgeridoo, an Australian Aboriginal instrument.

Before he started, there was another short break while he came into the control room to listen to the tracks of his earlier records. When they came on he just naturally moved, in time to the music. After a few seconds, everybody else was doing the same.

Came six o'clock, and the session was over. But Harris couldn't go home yet. He had several other appointments to keep, including a call at the Adelphi to have a look at the Young Generation. And before he left the studio he had to do a radio interview. Even before he came to the studio he had been having a singing lesson.

He shook hands all round.

"A good session Rolf, said the producer. Harris nodded agreement. The worried look had vanished again.

"Three-and-a-half hours, five good tracks — a good session," he said.

**TOMORROW:**  
Harris  
at home