

Rolf changes channels at the crossroads of his TV career

Drawing on his talents

by Syd Gillingham

Sooner or later, says Rolf Harris, he's going to be found out — someone somewhere will twig that all these years he's been paid for just having a good time.

"I had this feeling at the very start of my career," he chuckles, "and I still get it now. It's only a matter of time before I'm exposed!"

But behind the jokey exterior, there is the serious realisation that he has reached possibly the most important crossroads in his career.

For after more than 35 years with BBC TV, he has defected to ITV with a new 22-week series, 'Rolf's Cartoon Club', beginning on Thursday.

He says: "I've enjoyed my years with the BBC tremendously but I was getting bogged down. I don't want this to sound nasty but when I put up ideas, they said they were already using me extensively in 'Cartoon Time' and that was that. It was like a slap in the face.

"But HTV, which is producing the new series for ITV, has seen the potential in me and other exciting projects are already lined up.

"There's a new generation of viewers who think all I can do is draw cartoons. It's a bit of a shock when little kids come up and tell me, 'My mummy says you used to sing'."

Projects

Some of those other projects include a new adult evening series with star names and a unique format, a Christmas special and screening of the four-part 'Rolf's Walkabout 20 Years Down the Track' — his return to Australia's Northern Territory.

"In the past, my career has sort of wandered along," says Rolf, "mainly because of the character I am. I enjoy doing so many different things — working with symphony orchestras, compering nature shows, doing huge paintings and so on.

"I just enjoy doing creative things. There



Rolf Harris as he is best-known ... drawing cartoons for youngsters.

has never been any driving, burning ambition. What I've always had, though, is a horror of the star syndrome. One of the most important things for me is to remain a real person.

"I can't imagine having to be hustled through clutching crowds from the stage door to a waiting limo. I like to stop and have a yarn with whoever's there. I've even met people in showbusiness who'd rather run a mile than sign an autograph."

Emigrated

Rolf, 59 at the end of this month, was born at Bassendean in Perth, Western Australia — his parents had emigrated there from Cardiff. Rolf came to Britain in 1952, enrolled at art school and did cabaret work at night.

Showbiz won over art, he made his TV debut here as a cartoonist-storyteller, and not many years later had huge success with the hit records 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' and

'Sun Arise' ('Two Little Boys' came 10 years later).

Order

Rolf and his sculptress wife, Alwen — their 25-year-old daughter Bindy, is an accomplished portrait painter and is studying for a degree in fine arts — live in a beautiful Thames-side house in Berkshire.

In January — on Australia Day — he was made a Member of the Order of Australia. He already has the MBE and OBE.

But he recalls his role in the 1979 concert to mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of Western Australia as the most memorable event of his career.

Books

"It was in my home town of Perth," says Rolf, "the place was packed with eight and a half thousand people and my mum and dad were there to watch their youngster at work!"

He's busy now illustrating a series of children's books, he has followed up his own books (they've covered music, paintings and cartoons, among other subjects) with his first novel for children, 'Win Or Die (The Making Of A King)' and in May he's off to Australia for another concert tour.

"So what's left to do? "I'd love to do some straight acting," reveals Rolf. "In a film, perhaps, because months on end in a theatre would bore me stiff. Some years ago I played an 80-year-old man in a part-animation film called 'The Little Convict' and I really enjoyed that.

"I'd also like to have a little more spare time. My relaxation is doing something I don't have to do — some wood-carving, maybe, or polishing a stone.

"I'm terrible for putting things off. I suddenly find letters I meant to answer three weeks ago. I suppose I ought to have a secretary to badger me but I hate that formal side to life."