

Stairway up the charts

AFTER 23 years away from the hit parade, Rolf Harris has entered the charts at number nine with his version of Stairway to Heaven. Radio 1FM DJ SIMON BATES talks to the Aussie, who lives in Bray

THE airwaves are once again resounding to the strains of Led Zeppelin's hit song Stairway to Heaven.

No surprises there. It has to be one of the most memorable rock tracks of all time.

But sung by Rolf Harris? The man who brought his didgeridoo from Australia all those years ago.

Isn't he tampering with the rock dreams of hundreds of hippies? And how did the unlikely hit ever come about?

Rolf told me: "I was on this mad, quirky television programme in Australia and they asked me to perform Stairway. But I had to be the only person in the world who had never heard it. They said it was the policy of the show and so I agreed if they got me the sheet music so I could work out my own version.

"They told me to make it really 'Rolf Harris', so I gave it lots of didgeridoo and a bit of The Me Kangaroo Down Sport, and then I threw in a chorus.

Rolf's rock credentials are actually more impressive than most people think.

He said: "I was the compere on the first TV show the Rolling Stones ever did. It was a pilot in south-east London and they never put it out on air. The producer decided their music would never catch on."

So how did Stairway to Heaven bypass his ears the first time around?

He explained: "I began on television in 1953. In the 60s, Saturday was Rolf Harris night on the BBC. That's probably why I never got to go to rock festivals or listen to Led Zeppelin!"

Thanks to his new-found pop fame, Rolf is to make an appearance on Channel 4's late-night show The Word.

I asked him if he had any idea what he was letting himself in for.

"Yes, but the only thing that really worries me is all that back projection in panicky colours with swirling things happening behind you.

Will he take his wobble board on the show and talk about it to Terry Christian?

He replied: "I invented it! I was painting a fella's portrait — he was a magician called Robert. He was a father



▶ **DIDGERIDOO WELL** — Rolf Harris with his Stairway to Heaven wobble board

Picture: STEVE PETERS

figure to me and when I'd finished, I propped the picture up against an oil heater so the paint would dry.

"Just as I was testing it with

my finger I had visions of it catching light. It was too hot to hold with my fingers so I propped it up between the palms of my hands and shook

it.

"Then this weird sound came out, so I did it again. I discovered it even had its own rhythm, like a pendulum and

always bounces at the same speed so you just extend every second beat on the off beat.

"I had written a song a couple of months earlier, so I

‘I was on this mad, quirky TV programme in Australia and they asked me to perform Stairway. But I had to be the only person in the world who had never heard it!’

just fitted the wobble board in. That was The Me Kangaroo Down Sport. It was like magic.

"The didgeridoo is different because it has a long history — in fact, I believe it was invented 40,000 years ago."

Rolf is famous for his brush strokes on television and has fascinated viewers with his skill and the speed at which he paints cartoons.

But few realise that he is a brilliant portrait painter.

He said: "In fact, the main reason I came to England was to go to art school. I just ran out of money so I got myself an audition at the BBC to do some drawings for kids just to keep myself going.

"That became the main string to my bow, as it were, so I dropped out of art school, met a painter I admired and he taught me the rudiments of impressionist painting — which is what I always wanted to do anyway.

"I went home later when I was offered a job running my own children's show in my home town of Perth. That's when I recorded that mad kangaroo song which I had written for the Australian Club over here in England. It went to number one in Australia in four weeks and changed my whole life round.

"Suddenly I was going in a different direction. In a funny sort of way, the recent poll that showed most people knew about my painting on television meant I had got to a lot more people than if I had pictures hanging in a gallery.

"Galleries can be rather elitist and most people are scared to even go into them. They're afraid that once they're inside they won't know what they are looking at or won't know whether they are supposed to like it or not.

"It's great to be taken seriously occasionally but I hope I have encouraged a lot of people to have a go themselves. Maybe it's the first time some people have ever seen painting start from zero and be finished — to be able to see the progress of a picture."

Nightclub idea proved a disaster

ROLF HARRIS could have been famous as an artist as well as an entertainer. Yet his career has not always gone well.

He told me there was a period during the 70s when he nearly lost everything.

Rolf said: "I was talked into building and running a nightclub in Malta.

"But people in the entertainment game shouldn't assume that this means they will know how to run a club. I didn't. I went out there and let myself be persuaded.

"I was told there were all these

British servicemen in Malta, bored out of their minds and some entertainment for them would be great.

"I was told and believed I would make a fortune out of the club so I went ahead and we opened up.

"One week later, the Maltese elections took place. The other party

got in and the first thing they did was send all the British forces away.

"As the weeks went by, new regulations would come in and eventually they closed us down.

"When we asked why and pointed out that we had all the right permits they simply said they had a new one for us to apply for and that would be

another £400.

"We would either have to pay up for the new permit or stay closed. Two weeks later the same thing would happen all over again.

"You'd turn up at the club, there would be another "closed" order, another demand for a new permit and another £270.

"Eventually, they told us there was

‘I was told there were all these British servicemen in Malta, bored out of their minds and some entertainment for them would be great...I lost a fortune!’

a 51 per cent Maltese ownership imperative.

"We couldn't sell the shares so we had to give away 50pc of them to somebody — we chose the accountant's son, who said it would only be a nominal thing, nothing real.

"But when we sold the club the accountant said 'Ah, but my son owns 51pc of the shares. We had already settled for aittance so altogether I lost a fortune.

"I'm all right now. But I'm such a workaholic, that I just keep on. In fact, I'd probably continue even if they didn't pay me. But don't tell anybody!"