

Hell that drove Rolf to brink of suicide

Hospital's drugs left him close to suicide

FOR once the didgeridoo and wobble-board are put aside.

So is the grin which launched a 42-year career on the telly. Rolf Harris is suddenly serious.

He is talking about committing suicide, a thought which trailed him like a black dog. One which walked beside him on the brink of the best days of his life.

"It began early last summer," he says. "I was feeling groggy at the time. I'd been very low, depressed, down. I'd had an inner-ear infection while I was in Australia.

"It threw my balance. I was falling over. I had to cancel my tour.

"In hospital they gave me steroids to get rid of the virus. The drugs put me on such a high you wouldn't believe it. I was manic. Getting one hour's sleep a night and the rest of the time writing 48-page letters to people. Running everywhere.

"Then, when I got home, I went into a depression. Me — depressed? Worse. For six weeks I was absolutely suicidal. I hated everything. It just sat on my shoulders. A frightening weight. I couldn't see any point in going on. I wanted to commit suicide. Horrible. Terrible. Awful.

"I saw doctors, who gave me more pills. Eventually I said I didn't want them. No more pills inside me. I hoped I could ride it out. And slowly, thank God, I got better."

Even now, with the huge success of *Animal Hospital* on TV, with the cheer-dripping round concerts, with Rolf's rebirth as trendy "legend" and one-man cult, the memory of nearly losing it all drains his face.

Zombie

"During that terrible time I had an interview with the BBC, who were putting *Animal Hospital* together.

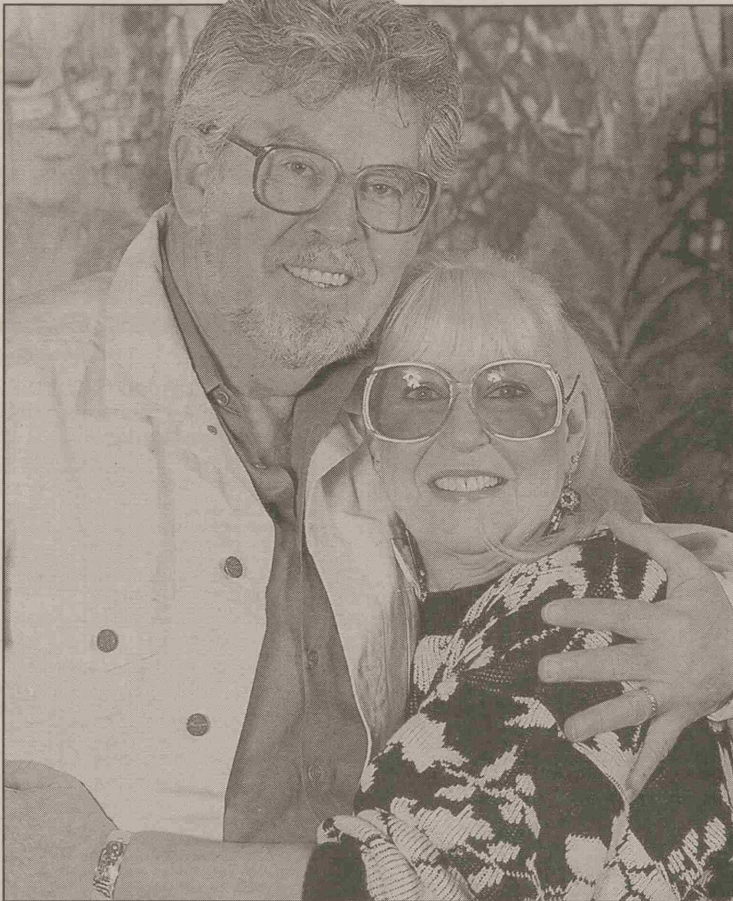
"I was like a zombie. My agent came out of the meeting and said: 'What are you trying to do? Destroy your chances? It was as though you hadn't been there.'"

Rolf's pale blue eyes look at the ceiling. He rubs the side of his famously whiskered jaw. He picks up his mug of tea with "Keep Smiling" emblazoned on its side.

He seems to shiver. Then he's back on track, mouthing his favourite word: "Magic!"

He laughs. "*Animal Hospital* has been a magic success. It just seems to have grabbed the nation's heart."

The show features the



OUT OF THE SHADOWS: One-man cult Rolf Harris and his wife Alwen Pictures: JOE BANGAY

By ANTON ANTONOWICZ

RSPCA's Sir Harold Harmsworth Memorial Hospital in North London, with Rolf as a kind of agony uncle.

"The people who appear are folk who have known me, through television, all their lives. I can put them at ease so they ignore the cameras and behave naturally. I'm not going to embarrass them or on them."

That has always been his golden rule. "I've never knowingly conned anybody on television or done anything to make them look or feel small.

"I'm not there to make myself the big star. Step back, let others shine. Kids, especially."

He is too polite to mention names, but you

get his drift. "Oh, those conman programmes where they fill your car with cement or dig up your lawn. That sort of show is a licence to commit murder. It would be justifiable homicide to wipe the guy out.

Lies

"I've always loathed those type of confidence tricksters, those presenters who tell people deliberate lies to get someone steamed-up, while they laugh at their expense.

"I hate people being made to look stupid." And that is the key to Rolf's singing-songwriting-music-playing-painting-writing-joking appeal. "Yeah," he laughs. "Maybe

I am the longest-running joke on television. It's a funny old deal, eh?"

In the room, overlooking the Thames in the millionaire-rich village of Bray in Berkshire, a large portrait of Alwen, Rolf's wife, painted by their 30-year-old daughter Bindi, has pride of place.

Alwen, the Welsh sculptress Rolf met at art college in London, has to rush off. He walks with her to the car, telling her to watch the roads and the lousy weather.

He breaks off to greet Summer, the standard French poodle which lopes into the room, followed by Beetle, a Devon Rex cat — a strange brand with curly hair on a Siamese body.

Then he remembers his teenage years and how he used to practise speaking to the door-knob at home

as though it was his audience. "I was a great make-believe kid," he says.

He remembers *Rock Around The Clock*. Later *Led Zeppelin's Stairway To Heaven* was aching to emerge. In 1993 it went to No 7 in the charts and "Rock 'n' Rolf" was born.

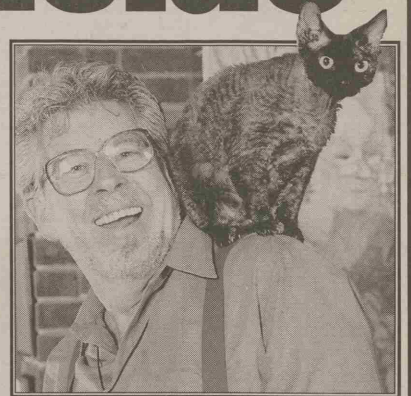
Bad

Next week he launches *Rolf Rules OK!* — an album dedicated to the bad boys of music. So is a big, bad Rolf about to emerge? Is he gonna carouse and booze, and fool around with women and pop the pills ... and still celebrate his 65th birthday on March 30?

"Strewth! I played Glastonbury last year — 80,000 people chanting: 'We Love You Rolfie. We Do' and not a pair of knickers flung on stage. As for pills ..."

His beaming face darkens again.

"After last year and the pills, I don't think I'll ever want to go near that sort of thing again."



LOVE ME DO: Rolf with Beetle, one of his pets

I loathe TV tricksters who make people look stupid