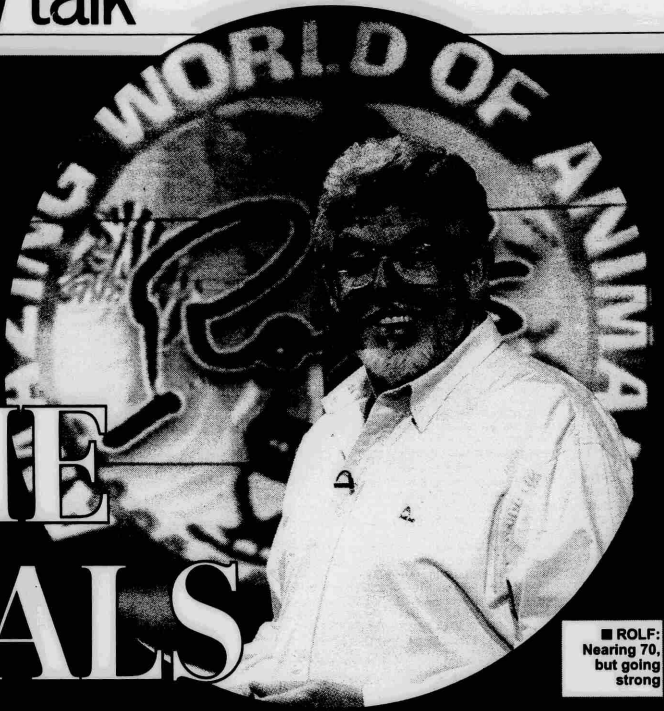


# Weekend telly talk

# STILL KING OF THE ANIMALS



■ ROLF: Nearing 70, but going strong

**R**OLF Harris is a man of many talents: musician, painter, cartoonist, singer – and, in more recent times, friend to everything furry which happens to have a wet nose.

At the age of 69, the Australian entertainer now finds himself in the enviable position of being adored by everyone, young and old. Even students queue up to hear about Jake the Peg with his extra leg and the ladies of the harem of The Court of King Caractacus.

His TV show, *Animal Hospital*, has sparked scores of imitators, with Harris himself returning tomorrow night in yet another showcase for our four-legged friends – *Rolf's Amazing World Of Animals*.

The series – co-hosted by Rosemarie Ford – is back on BBC1 at 6.15pm. Rolf visits *One Foot In The Grave* star Annette Crosbie and hears about her campaign – highlighted on this page earlier, this year – to improve the lot of greyhounds. Next week, Rolf gets "Chinchilla Night Fever" when he spends the day with Manchester-raised Bee Gee Robin Gibb.

Recently returned to his Oxfordshire converted monastery home after an Australian tour, Robin has only recently taken to keeping chinchillas. He has a collection of six of the squirrel-like rodents. "With proper love and attention they do make good pets," explains the pop star.

Mr Harris, a bit of a chart star himself, still can't quite believe the latest twists to his long TV career. "The success of *Animal Hospital* has been absolutely amazing. It actually grew out of a show called *Hospital*

## PHIL GOULD pays tribute to the enduring popularity of Rolf Harris

Watch which proved to be quite fascinating and somebody thought: 'I wonder if we could do it with an animal theme?' They approached me and I said I'd give it a go. It turned out that they asked me because the production team had watched me on television all their lives and liked my attitude towards people. So they took a gamble on me and from the word go it was just wonderful. From the outset, I insisted we didn't do any of the yukky stuff which would have had people switching off.

"I wanted to show some reality but also compassion to the animals and their owners. I suppose having had animals all my life I knew how to approach them and be at ease with them. I find if you stroke them you are putting a lot of love in through your hands and giving healing."

He may be almost 70, but Harris has retained some of that childhood innocence most of us have lost. His soft Australian tones are soothing and it's not hard to see how he earned his reputation of being one of the nicest blokes in showbusiness. Yes it's true. He really does seem to care.

Animals have played a large part in his life both on and off screen. Currently he and his sculptor wife Alwen share their home in Bray, Berkshire, with five cats and a standard black poodle called Summer. In fact, one of Summer's ancestors, Pugsy, was a bridesmaid when the couple married 41 years ago.

Harris spent his childhood in West

Australia as his parents had migrated from Wales when he was only a boy. They encouraged him to paint as his grandfather had been a portrait painter, and also to play the piano.

He became a teacher, and probably would have stayed one had he not been mysteriously paralysed when he was 21. While he was confined to bed with suspected polio he decided what he wanted to do was become an artist.

**W**HEN he recovered, he packed his bag and came to London to study art. Money quickly ran out so Harris decided to market his talents. He had read that the secret of television success was to treat the camera as a person. "I thought – I can do that. So I practised my technique by talking to door knobs at home." He returned to Perth as a children's TV host, but when in 1960 *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport* took the world by storm, peaking at number nine in the British charts, he decided to pack his bags once more.

During the next 10 years he enjoyed a string of hits which climaxed with *Two Little Boys* hitting the top spot. More recently the song gained a certain notoriety when former prime minister Margaret Thatcher named it as her favourite pop song of all time.

Although his music has never been viewed as the slightest bit cool, Harris has long been viewed as

something of a cult figure among the younger generation. Some colleges even have their own Rolf Harris Appreciation societies.

"There are websites selling all my old records and beards and glasses," he admits. "I did Glastonbury last year, which was the most amazing show of my life. There were 5,000 people inside the acoustic tent with another 2,000 standing outside in the pouring rain. There was such a good vibe it was like they had known me all their lives."

"I think after I'd recorded *Stairway To Heaven* it gave all the students permission to like Rolf Harris. About a year before, I'd have probably been booted off the campus!"

