



The Guide

Your 7-page entertainment and TV extra - Edited by Robin Duke



Retire? You'll have to tie Rolf down!

DON'T mention the word retirement to Rolf Harris - even though the evergreen entertainer celebrates his 70th birthday tomorrow.

"To me, the word retire equates with giving up," says Rolf, who marks the milestone in Animal Hospital - Rolf's Birthday Special tonight (BBC1, 8pm).

"I just enjoy working," he says. "I suppose if you keep working it puts off the dreadful moment when you have to decide what you're going to do if you didn't work. I can't imagine retiring."

In just six years, Animal Hospital has become an institution on British television, with viewers tuning in week after week to see how Joey the parrot is, or whether Sparky the cat's leg has mended.

"It's probably the greatest cliff-hanger situation where nobody's writing a script," says Rolf, whose face belies his 70 years.

It was originally roughly based on the BBC's Hospital Watch, where a team of cameras went into a human hospital and followed op-

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erations and discussions. The first series of Animal Hospital was an intensive week of programmes, and by Thursday we were getting nine and a half million viewers, which nobody could quite believe.

This series sees the programme leaving the big smoke and travelling up the M6 to Manchester, to the RSPCA in Salford and the Stapeley Grange Wildlife Hospital in nearby Nantwich, so viewers can expect an even wider range of cases.

An animal lover with a standard poodle and five cats, including a hair-

less sphinx, Rolf had never envisaged himself in a presenter's role.

"It's been quite a remarkable chance for me to step back from the show-off business of show business. With Animal Hospital I play second fiddle. The animals, vets and owners are the most important in the show and I'm just here to liaise between them and to support animals and the owners, and translate what the vets are saying, if it's too technical," he says, understating his part in the show.

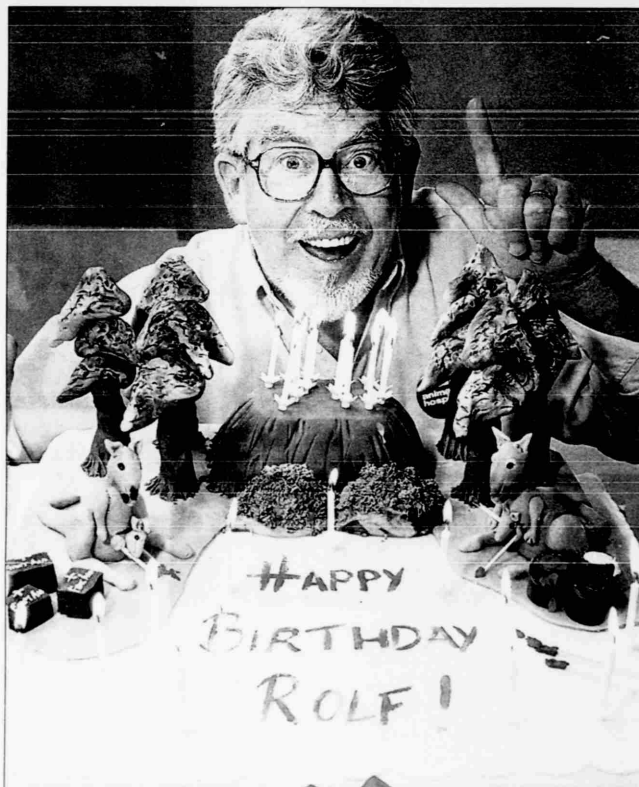
"I try to be the voice of Joe Public and ask the questions that they would ask. If the vets say something I don't understand, then I assume that nobody else watching at home knows. And sometimes the owners are too overwhelmed to ask anyway."

He has, on occasion, broken down on camera when owners have been given bad news, and he admits he finds it hard sometimes, especially when animals have been maltreated.

"The cruelly cases can be quite horrifying. At least you hope that if you show them, people will realise that there is an alternative to going away and locking an animal up and pretending that it doesn't exist."

Animal Hospital won the award for the Most Popular Factual Entertainment Show at the National Television Awards in 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1999.

When it started in 1994, Rolf was in the midst of a career low. Rolf's Cartoon Club,



MANY HAPPY RETURNS: Rolf's reached the grand old age of 70!

which had been running for six years on ITV, had just been axed. "I was really depressed," admits Rolf.

But he soon realised that every cloud has a silver lining when he was offered the role of presenter on a new show for BBC1. "Had I still been doing that I wouldn't have had time to do Animal Hospital, so one door closes and hopefully another one opens and you're ready to jump in and take the chance."

A year earlier, Rolf had stormed the music charts with his own unique version of the Led Zeppelin anthem, Stairway To Heaven, complete with wobble-board and didgeridoo. He was first asked to sing the song on a TV programme in Australia.

"I think everybody was so shocked when I did it, I'd never heard of the song and when I told them, they said 'What? What were you doing when that

was a big hit?' I said I was recording Six White Boomers, Jake The Peg and I've Lost My Mummy," laughs Rolf, who has since heard the original version. "Had I heard it before I'd done it, I would never have done it in a million years. It's such a fantastic recording."

Now Robbie Williams' biggest hit, Angels, is the latest to be given the Rolf treatment.

"I'm putting out records on the internet now, on my website, rather than through a record company. I always feel that if you're older than 14 you're getting too old to record! You've got to be in a boy or girl band!" explained Rolf.

It's the singing that Rolf still finds the most fulfilling part of his repertoire. "It's the thing that gets the most immediate buzz. You immediately get feedback from the audience and it gives you a terrific lift if it's going well."

With Animal Hospital, a birthday gig in London's Shepherd's Bush, Glastonbury and an art exhibition to look forward to, there doesn't seem to be much chance of Rolf taking things easy...