



Rolf Harris and his trusty didgeridoo at home in Bray. Photograph: Hainsley Brown
The Observer Pop and rock

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He introduced a generation to the joys of painting and once gigged with the Beatles. So how can Paul Mardles help him?

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Rolf Harris is singing Buffalo Soldier by Bob Marley when,

excitedly, he punches the air and smacks his right fist into a beaded metal lampshade, bringing his note-perfect version to a halt. "Ow!" he says quietly then, unperturbed, continues, eyes closed, lost in the rhythm of the track.

"And then he gets to the bit that goes, 'Bom bom bom/Bom bom bom bom bom bom,' and I just think, 'He stole that from [African-American folk song] Shortnin' Bread.' Do you know that?" he asks and, again, begins to sing, tapping out the tempo of the song against the table on which he has placed four perfect squares of paper containing the names of the artists he admires. "So anyway," he says eventually, beaming, "Bob Marley, yeah, I've always loved his stuff."

It has been four decades since the painter-cum-light entertainer uttered his teasing "can you tell what it is yet?" catchphrase on long-running variety programme The Rolf Harris Show. But, despite turning 79 last month, Harris is blessed, still, with the exuberance that made him such an inspirational figure. Sitting in a riverside hotel in Maidenhead, he sings practically as often as he speaks, intent on crooning every tune that has meant something to him, all the while drumming on the table with his hands.

"I drive everyone mad," he says, "I know, but I've got a metronome running inside my body." He clicks his fingers steadily by way of example. "You see people missing a beat and think, 'How could they have missed that?' It's stuck in my head, that rhythm."

Harris acquired his unforgiving ear from the music teacher at his convent school in Perth, Sister Mary Magdalene, "a fiery little thing who would whack me with a ruler if I did anything wrong". Nonetheless, her cruel methods worked: at 14 he could play the accordion and piano, persuading him to form a group with whom he covered "fun songs" while listening, enraptured, to Eartha Kitt at home.

"I loved her voice," he says. "I thought she was wonderful." He sings a snippet of Kitt's The Day the Circus Left Town, stopping, abruptly, on the verge of tears. "It says so strongly that everything you associate with childhood is coming to an end. Boom! Very emotional. I've always tried to retain that childlike wonder."

In the 1960s Harris had Kitt on his TV show, by which time he had notched up a couple of top 10 hits. The best, 1960's Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport - on which he used his wobble board for the first time, having "invented" it three years earlier when he tried to shake dry a portrait of a friend - was inspired, lyrically, by a calypso song whose chorus ran "Don't tie me donkey down there/Let him bray, let him bray". "But the tune just came from nowhere, handed down from on high," he says. "This huge, magical hand came down and said: 'Here it is.'" Harris sings both songs then, having made his point, recounts how conceptually the track developed once he'd decided to change "donkey" to "kangaroo". "'Tie me kangaroo down... there. No: tie me kangaroo down... mate. No: tie me kangaroo down... sport. Yep, that'll do.' And it took me about that long."

In December 1963, on the radio show *From Us to You*, Harris performed the song with the Beatles, altering the lyrics to acknowledge the Fab Four ("Don't ill-treat me pet dingo, Ringo/ He can't understand your lingo").

He also collaborated with Kate Bush on 1982's *The Dreaming* and 2005's *Aerial*, his didgeridoo skills proving invaluable. "Yeah, I taught her brother how to play the didg and talked myself out of a job because he became so damn good at it."

He mentions another song that he made with Bush, *She Moves Through the Fair*, which he's hoping to release, and then, stimulated by a quick glance at his notes, sings a medley of his favourite tracks, from *Without You* to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The latter, like Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven*, with which he had a top 10 hit in 1993, he interpreted in his endearingly zany style. "I had a line that I wanted to change: 'Mama, just killed a man/Held a pencil to his head, tripped and filled him full of lead.' But the Freddie Mercury Foundation wouldn't let me."

Musically, he says, he has one ambition left: to employ a vocal trick called "eefing and ifing" - which involves breathing in and out frantically - on a Chemical Brothers-produced tune. Their spirit informed his 2000 single *Fine Day*, which was adopted by football side Kilmarnock when they reached the Scottish League Cup final in 2007.

"Do you know it?" he asks. Record Doctor shakes his head. "It went in at No 24 but nobody at any radio station would play it." Outraged, he sings a verse, rocking in his chair, a youth trapped in an old man's frame. "Bloody stunning it was."

Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport, a picture book with a DVD, is published by Scholastic. A three-set CD, *The Platinum Collection*, is also out now

The Symptoms - His favourites

Nilsson: Without You (RCA Victor)

"An amazing track. I listen to it and think, 'I wish I could sing as casually as that and still be in charge of the song.' I love the bit when he jumps an octave and goes [sings] 'without yooouuuu'."

Sting: Fields of Gold (A&M)

"This is just an exquisite melody. I love the way that his voice comes to a resolution on the word 'gold'. It's a fantastic piece of songwriting that takes you through the entire story of a love affair with warmth. I wish I'd written it."

Kris Kristofferson: Help Me Make it Through the Night (Monument)

"Kris Kristofferson never tried to imitate anyone else. Many years ago he sang this on my TV show with Rita Coolidge and it was like watching a love affair. "

The Beatles: Yesterday (Parlophone)

"George Martin recorded a lot of my stuff before the Beatles, so I observed their meteoric rise. I particularly love this song, not least because when McCartney wrote it he had the working title of Scrambled Eggs. I love the cellos, too, and the casual way it's sung."

The Diagnosis

The Patient derived a great deal of satisfaction from his improbable coupling with Kate Bush, leading the Doctor to conclude that Bat For Lashes, too, might appeal to his kooky inner child. Quite possibly, Moon and Moon, from her new album, Two Suns, is the finest track Bush will ever make.

Youth and, specifically, the Patient's refusal to embrace the demands of adulthood were also a factor in the Doctor's second choice - MGMT's fluorescent, adult-baiting Kids. Equally frisky is This Rhythm by Filthy Dukes, three dance producers who, in common with the Chemical Brothers, combine synth-pop with a rave sensibility.

The Doctor thought that the Patient would approve of fellow Aussies the Avalanches and their magnificent Since I Left You, while Peter Tosh, a former Wailer, was, at best, as commanding as Bob Marley: witness 1977's menacing Stepping Razor.

Finally, as the Patient cherishes classic songwriting, and has covered Stairway to Heaven, he was sent Hors d'Oeuvres from Roy Harper's Stormcock, on which Zeppelin's Jimmy Page played guitar.

The Cure

The Patient was disappointed by the dearth of narrative-driven songs. "I want to follow the words and hear a decent yarn." Still, he enjoyed Peter Tosh, "even though it's something I wouldn't have chosen myself. But I really liked the rhythm and his voice. Was he in Marley's band? Oh, right. Bloody good."

Roy Harper warranted a qualified thumbs up for his ability to compose a song. "But much like Leonard Cohen, who's also a great songwriter, he sounds the sort of guy whose songs are done better by somebody else. I couldn't understand what he was saying half the time."

He found Bat For Lashes, right, more unintelligible still ("Maybe young people can understand the words"), although her "cracking voice reminded

me of Björk and Sinéad O'Connor", while MGMT were, unsurprisingly perhaps, "too loud".

As for dance music's Avalanches and Filthy Dukes, neither affected him quite like the Chemical Brothers. But then, to be fair, very little does. "The Avalanches was a great dance track, I thought, but I always feel a little bit let down when there are just two lines repeated constantly. Over and over. Forever. And I'm afraid their song had nothing else apart from those two lines."

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/apr/19/rolf-harris>