

Beyond a joke?

Legendary comic Max Miller is said to have made a certain saucy quip that his biographer claims got him banned from the BBC. As a statue of the stand-up is about to be unveiled in Brighton, **Richard Anthony Baker** asks whether he really delivered the naughty line

On May 1, hundreds of Max Miller fans will gather in Brighton to witness the unveiling of a statue of their hero. It is a huge achievement for the Max Miller Appreciation Society, which has worked hard to raise the cash. Brighton is just the place to site the statue as Max, reckoned by most to have been the finest stand-up (or front cloth) comic of all time, was born there and died there. He loved the town, often foregoing his position as top of the bill in London so that he could catch the last train home.

Undoubtedly, many of Miller's followers will debate his career, perhaps again raising the question of whether he told or even broadcast that notorious joke. As we are all adults here I will repeat it, purely, you understand, for posterity. It concerns a man confronting a beautiful naked girl on a narrow mountain pass. The punchline is, "he didn't know whether to block her passage or toss himself off".

Ernie Wise recalled it in his ghosted autobiography but managed to mess up the last line. Max Wall said the joke was sometimes attributed to him and, after repeatedly denying the claim, found it easier to admit it. Miller's last pianist, Clive Allen, said that the comic had told him it was untrue, that somebody had made it up and, after a time, it had become an urban myth.

Plenty of Miller's followers agree it was not his style – he did not tell dirty jokes. He told saucy stories and stopped just short of the punchline, allowing his audience to complete the gag for themselves and, when they laughed, admonished them for having dirty minds and getting him into trouble.

So who provides evidence to the contrary? Solely, Miller's only biographer, the late John East, who devotes three rather confused sentences to it in his book *Max Miller – The Cheekie Chappie*. Oddly enough, when East was interviewed at length on Radio 2 on the centenary of Miller's

birth, he said that not only was it true but he was there when it happened, in a theatre during a live BBC transmission. He said that there was pandemonium, the programme was taken off air and Miller was banned from BBC broadcasts for five years. East went on to say that, some time later, he raised the incident with the Corporation's first director-general, Sir John Reith.

Yes, Reith told East, he had heard about it and had sent Miller a telegram which read: "Will send wreath (Reith) to your funeral." Good stories, so good in fact, why did East not include them in his book?

And here we come to the nub of the biography. East, who I knew, was an intelligent and highly complex man. He always had a new outrageous story – that he was a confidant of Barbara Cartland (that was true) and that he once had a lead role in the London production of *Irma La Douce* (surely not but that was true too). He said less about his involvement in soft-core porn movies. He wrote one, directed another and even appeared with the likes of Mary Millington, who committed suicide at the age of 33 only a few hours after chatting with East on the phone.

His literary career rests on the highly readable *Neath the Mask*, an account of the East family, who played an important role in the early days of the British film industry. And yet John was not an East. His real surname was Baker (no relation).

He maintained he was "adopted" by Miller at the age of nine but there are hardly any first-person accounts in the biography. In fact, there were many good stories in the centenary interview which, inexplicably, do not appear in the book. Alongside a penetrating examination of Miller's stage technique, there are pages and pages of memories from people who, it appears, had answered a published letter from East asking for reminiscences.

In researching his splendid new book,



Banned by the Beeb? – Max Miller

Shepperton Babylon, about British cinema, Matthew Sweet spent hours with East, who told him – among other things – that his father was the glamorous early film star Henry Edwards, whom his mother met at Elstree while her husband was abroad. East clearly hated the father he spent the first nine years of his life with, a man who enjoyed corporal punishment. But the longer Sweet spent with East, the more sceptical he became about the relentless flood of anecdotes.

So if East is to be doubted over even his parentage then his work becomes unreliable too. How true are the lengthy quotes from Max Miller in the autobiography? And did he really tell that infamous gag? Probably not but it seems that publishers do not want to hear about things that did not happen. ■

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