



BOOK EXTRACT

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Chapter Seventeen: A LORRA LORRA LAUGHS

Later that year, I got a phone call from David Bell who was then the Controller of Entertainment at London Weekend Television inviting me to a meeting in his office, a meeting which was to affect the next twelve years of my life. David was a brilliant producer having been responsible for furthering the careers of many comedians including Stanley Baxter, Russ Abbott and Benny Hill. I wondered what he wanted to see me about. He got straight to the point.

‘Vince,’ he said, ‘last week I had a meeting with Cilla Black and her husband Bobby. As you probably knew, a few years ago she put her show business career on hold to bring up her three children (I didn’t know but what the heck). Well, she’s now decided to resume her career and we’re going to do a TV special with her this Christmas. Isn’t that tremendous news?’

He was obviously so proud and excited at having secured her comeback for LWT that I hadn’t the heart to disagree.

‘Very good David, but what’s that got to do with me?’

‘She wants you to write the special for her.’

I shook my head. ‘David,’ I said, ‘I write sitcoms. I don’t write sketch shows or specials. It’s very kind of her to ask for me, but I wouldn’t be right.’

It was now David’s turn to shake his head. ‘They’re both very insistent,’ he said, ‘look - why don’t I fix up a lunch for us all, next week and we can discuss it then?’

Never one to turn down the offer of lunch, I agreed. The following week we all met at a restaurant on the South Bank. I hadn’t seen Cilla or Bobby since the memorial service for Ronnie Taylor which they both reminded me of. Bobby jumped right in.

‘Now listen Vince, I’ve just done a deal with LWT for Cilla to do a one hour Christmas special and we want you to write it.’

I was just about to repeat the arguments which I’d put to David Bell when Cilla interrupted.

‘You can write for me like Ronnie Taylor used to do. You’re from the North like Bobby and me. You’ve got a Northern sense of humour - alright, you’re from Manchester not Liverpool but that doesn’t matter. Ronnie spoke very highly of you.’

Bobby chipped in. ‘Don’t make up your mind right away. Think about it. And while you’re thinking about

it, have a glass of champagne.'

He handed me a glass of champagne. We all drank.

Cilla said, 'You'll do it won't you Vince?'

David said 'Of course he'll do it. I'm going to offer him a script fee he can't refuse.'

The upshot was, by the end of the lunch I had agreed to write the special and that was the start of my association with Cilla that lasted over a decade. And all thanks to dear old Ronnie Taylor. The special was very successful and I found it relatively easy to write. The studio set was designed to represent Cilla and Bobby's lounge, and the premise was that every so often the doorbell would ring and a guest celebrity would arrive. My job was to write a 4/5 minute routine between Cilla and each guest. The guests included Frankie Howerd, Diana Dors, Irene Handl, American singer George Benson, a children's choir who sang a selection of Christmas carols, with Cilla joining in and the inevitable chorus of dancers. I remember I even wrote a small part in for Bobby, playing himself. All in all it was an enjoyable experience.

A couple of weeks later, I got a call from Bobby.

'Hello Vince. Listen, I've just signed a contract with London Weekend for Cilla to do a series of people shows. It's called 'SURPRISE SURPRISE' and I've told them you'll be writing it.' Did you get that? 'I've told them you'll be writing it'. How's that for artist power?

Well, I did write it - in fact I ended up writing 130 episodes. The series, as its title implies, was built around Cilla surprising unsuspecting members of the public by granting them wishes such as meeting their favourite celebrity, or re-uniting them with a long lost friend or relative. We had a team of researchers who collected all the information about the people who were to be surprised and the friends and relatives who were to be re-united and it was my job to put it into a suitable script form. It was a lovely show to work on. Some of the surprises, particularly the re-unions with relatives who they hadn't met for years or were separated from as children were quite moving and tearful. Many of them came from different corners of the world.

During the course of the series, I met lots of famous celebrities who appeared on the show including Cliff Richard, Dusty Springfield, Tom Jones, Barry Manilow, Wayne Sleep, Frank Bruno, Kenny Dalglish, John Barnes, Graeme Souness, Bryan Robson and Take That - how's that for name dropping?

Cilla and Bobby were a joy to work with. Bobby and I used to spend hours discussing football, in spite of me being a Manchester United fan and Bobby a Liverpool supporter. And Cilla really did say 'a lorra, lorra laughs, fur hur and Mairseyside.' They were true Liverpoolians and proud of it.

I'd been doing 'SURPRISE SURPRISE' for about a year when Bobby rang me one evening. He'd just concluded another deal with LWT for Cilla to host another people show, a British version of an Australian show called 'BLIND DATE' and both he and Cilla wanted me to be involved. As most of you will recall, the show revolved around pairing members of the public up on a date. One week a girl or woman, would choose from three lads or men, hidden from her view behind a screen, after asking each of them a series of questions. The following week would involve a lad or man choosing a girl or woman. The lucky couple would then be sent off on a date - a romantic weekend somewhere - with a film crew and on their return would be invited to tell Cilla and the viewers what happened. Did they get on or did they end up hating each other? Great care was taken by LWT not to suggest that anything untoward happened. The couple had separate rooms and were filmed everywhere they went. Unlike an episode in the Australian version in which the host asked the girl, 'Well, did he snore?' How subtle can you get?

It seemed like a fun programme, and I agreed to be involved. I was given the title of 'PROGRAMME ASSOCIATE' and we did 224 episodes, many of them in tandem with 'SURPRISE SURPRISE'. It was a massive hit with the viewers and launched Cilla into a second successful career after her years as a singing star with many hit records to her credit. Which reminds me of a funny anecdote about her, which I was told was true but could well be apocryphal. Cilla was appearing in pantomime at the Liverpool Empire in Jack and the Beanstalk in which she was playing Jack. It had got the part where Jack had chopped down the beanstalk and the Giant had fallen and was lying on the floor. Cilla placed one foot on his chest, drew her sword, faced the audience and asked, 'How shall I kill him? Shall I run him through or cut his head off?' A voice from the Gods shouted down 'Sing to him!'