



# DON'T PLAYER

Jools Holland refuses to grow up. From his on-stage antics with Squeeze, to the infamous gaffe on *The Tube*, he can't help acting the fool. *Philip Watson* brings on the clown



# SHOOT THE PIANO

Jools Holland can't stop messing around. Standing there in the photographic studio, looking awkward in his Savile Row pinstripe and black pointed boots, Jools is getting restless and he wants to play games. Short and stooped, he roams around carrying his bungling gawkiness with him, looking like a cross between a spivvy Harold Steptoe and a flailing-armed Tommy Cooper.

"Let's play 'In the manner of...'" he chirrups, suddenly, to no one in particular. "You call out the words, and I'll mimic them." His voice is an uncomfortable squeak – a nasal, whining sound forced out sideways between a very wide, and seemingly permanent smirk. "Manfully" causes Jools to strike an unconvincing he-man pose, like Charles Atlas without the contours. "Sexily" sparks a sideways stance, his pelvis shooting forward thrustingly. And on "quizzically" he contorts his face so that parts of it seem to be moving in opposite directions – one eye is raised, the other drooped, and he resembles a kind of confused Magnus Pike.

Back at his recording studio in Greenwich, just a short ride across town in his chauffeured Jag, Jools is more relaxed and very much at

the word, Jools Holland is a cunt. He can be his own worst enemy. He may not be a fool, but he loves playing one. Jools Holland is a joker, a clown, and he just can't help it.

After years of puerile pranks – getting his knob out on stage in early Squeeze shows, in trouble with the police after a mock bank raid during the filming of *Groovy Fellers*, and his infamous gaffe on a live *Tube* trailer on which he announced: "Be there or be a completely ungroovy fucker" – such behaviour is what we expect of him. We expect him to perform, to mess up. Roland Rivron, fellow presenter and part-time drummer in one of Holland's bands, suggests that Jools' favourite expression should be: "I can't apologise enough". And we also expect a bedrock of prattishness to the things Jools Holland does. Because Jools is a very willing, dutiful clown – always has been.

A "cheeky, precocious child", Holland is the son of parents who had to move around London a great deal to avoid rent collectors, but who were arty enough at least to encourage his musical abilities. "They and their friends were probably considered quite bohemian, a bit jazzy in those days," explains Holland. "They were working class, but without the work ethic."

When the family finally settled in Greenwich when he was five, Jools learnt to play piano on the upright in his gran's front parlour. His uncle David, who played bass in a local R&B group, taught him the rudiments of boogie-woogie piano (a skill learnt originally from Jools' mother), and he was hooked. By the time he reached fifteen, not only had Jools been expelled, never to return, from Shooters Hill School in south London, but he'd met local boy Glenn Tilbrook, a guitarist and songwriter. Lyricist Chris Difford, drummer Gilson Lavis and bassist Harry Kakoulli joined shortly after, and Squeeze were born.

Bypassing punk in favour of solid songwriting, Squeeze were above-average Beatles soundalikes whose small-town English pop was to prove highly successful, especially in America. At the end of the Seventies, Squeeze were touring the US almost every time they had one of their many hits. And Jools Holland, describing himself as being, at that time, "grubby, smelly and very keen on British motorbikes", of course, was misbehaving.

"Well, we were young and mad, and this was the first time I'd really been away. There was the occasional trashing of hotel rooms, pushing people into swimming pools, and rubber dollies and bottles simulating penises and the like, but it was pretty childish stuff. We were not really laddish, more yobbish."

Leaving Squeeze in 1981 to pursue a somewhat unsuccessful and financially damaging solo career, Jools was rescued a year later by the producers of *The Tube* who signed him up for the new programme after they had seen him present a documentary on The Police in the Caribbean island of Montserrat.

As much as Holland had been a respected member of Squeeze, it was TV, and *The Tube* in particular, that really made him. ► 206

home among his gold discs, advertising ephemera, railway magazines and double-parked Dinky toys. Despite all his on and off-stage showmanship, he is actually very quiet, courteous, calm and contained.

It is this curious and paradoxical mixture of public and private personas that lies at the heart of Jools Holland and his offbeat appeal. He is a man of many guises – deadpan TV presenter, skilled R&B pianist, minor rock star, tabloid bad boy, lad about south-east London, father of three, boyfriend to Lady Christabel Durham – and opinions about him vary wildly. To some he's a hero, to others he's plain naff. His zaniness can be as irritating as it is endearing. He's fun, but can appear flippant. He's eccentric, but not maverick. He's more *enfant* than *terrible*. But what does Julian Holland think people make of him?

"Cunt: that's probably the first thing that comes to mind. No, no, I mean that in the traditional sense of the word. When old London people say 'cunt', they're not saying 'you idiot, you horrible person'. They mean you're a fool to yourself. They're saying 'you've fucked yourself' really."

He's not entirely serious of course, and the 33-year-old Jools does a nice line in candid, self-deprecation, but it's a revealing retort all the same. Because in the traditional sense of



## Don't Shoot the Piano Player

◀ 141 It created Jools Holland, the cult. Because for those of us that lived or grew up with five years of the programme, it will always, despite its slapdash unprofessionalism and shambolic interviews, retain a warm place in our media hearts for its very live, very real mayhem and cheerfulness.

“What people liked about *The Tube* was that it wasn't contrived,” says Jools. “It was a proper show – bands usually had to come up from London, and it was live and there was a proper PA. You could forgive its mistakes because it was not as if someone was trying to have one over on you.”

Jools is also very certain about his key role in its success. Would it have been any good without him? “No, it would have been crap. Because of my surliness, and the credibility of my music background, research showed young boys used to watch it and look to me as an older brother guide-figure.”

As conceited as this may seem, Jools is not alone in his assessment. “In terms of the basics of the job – having a degree of confidence, and being able to speak – Jools is crap, but any turnip can do that,” says Jonathan Ross. “The thing that counts is what you bring to a show in terms of personality, and in that respect Jools is one of the best. He is very natural, immensely entertaining, and a joy to watch.”

John Cummins, who rose through the ranks of *The Tube* team to become Channel 4's commissioning editor of young people's programmes with overall responsibility for the show, similarly praises Holland:

“He's the greatest youth television presenter ever because he's one of the few people who you feel is speaking directly to *you*; it's as if he's sharing a private joke with you. He may not be Parky or Terry Wogan, but then again he's not got a placard above his head saying 'please love me'.”

As a man for whom television feels “very natural and comfortable”, Jools was not only

made for television, he was made for television at exactly the right time. Because if *The Tube* was the precursor of the whole *Network 7*, *Rapido*, *Def II* explosion, Jools Holland was yooof TV's harbinger.

Holland was the perfect embodiment of post-punk irreverence and early Eighties indifference, his spiky insouciance echoing the zappy, grab-all street style of such newly-borns as *The Face*, *i-D*, Vivienne Westwood, rap, warehouse parties and The Wag.

It was Jools' curious, madcap reputation that was to open up a series of TV opportunities for him. *Walking To New Orleans* was his very respectable guide to the music and musicians of the Deep South, and *Groovy Fellers*, a meandering, embarrassingly self-indulgent guide to contemporary Britain made with “visiting Martian” Roland Rivron. Following a spell in New York on America's most prestigious and (perversely) slick music programme *Sunday Night*, Jools also captained two series of the resurrected but lamentably hit-and-miss *Juke Box Jury*.

Yet it's this experience, Jools believes, despite the criticisms made of his television skills, that he has built on and used in such recent projects as *Hysteria 3!*, the AIDS charities comedy show, and the newly launched Channel 4 series *The Happening* – six one-hour shows featuring music and comedy. Although Holland describes the programmes, made last year for BSB, as being like “a modern variety show”, and his role in them akin to “Michael Barrymore on acid”, he is actually surprisingly restrained and keeps his introductions to a minimum.

While doing all this TV work, Holland has also rejoined and re-left Squeeze, toured with his big band, The Deptford Dance Orchestra, and released two solo albums, *World Of His Own* and *The Full Complement*, reviews of which rightly praise his abilities as a rock 'n' roll pianist, but also question his dubious talents as a singer and songwriter.

For all these reservations, it's difficult not

to like Jools Holland. It's hard not to like a man who consistently makes you laugh, and who laughs at himself.

Similarly, it's difficult not to like a man obviously swayed by certain passions. Get him talking about black American music or his forthcoming sequel to the New Orleans film, *Mr Roadrunner*, a documentary on the music of Memphis, and he becomes engagingly animated by his love and obvious knowledge of the subject.

And at his recording studio you'll discover other enthusiasms that add weight to the idea that Jools Holland has, like all clowns, never really grown up. He likes to play, and there's evidence of all kinds of hobbies and amusements over and above the avid collecting of bric-a-brac and Dinky toys. He likes motor-bikes (he still has the chrome and black Velocette he got when he was sixteen), flashy Fifties American sports cars (he's owned Buicks and a Corvette), oil paintings, sketching, architectural drawing, and most of all adding to the studio itself – a lock-up garage converted into a faux vintage railway station complete with such period details as waiting room signs, posters, and cigarette machines.

“With his hobbies, his style, and the era he's picked, he lives very much in a pretend world,” says Rivron. So isn't Jools Holland the Peter Pan of pop? Isn't he still a boy?

“Yes there could be a certain amount of truth in that,” he answers, making to put his thumb in his mouth. “I'm sure there's a part of me that has never really grown up, but I don't want it to. When I first heard boogie-woogie piano, that's all I wanted to do; when I hear certain records, I get a real buzz; if I look in a toy shop window and see a little car and think: ‘Wow, that's great’, I buy it. I love the thrill of discovering things; I don't want to lose that childish excitement.”

*Hysteria 3!* will be broadcast on Channel 4 on October 12. A Jools Holland single, “Together Again”, featuring Sam Brown, is released by IRS on October 7, proceeds go to The Hysteria Trust ■