

ONE MANS WISDOM



Norman Wisdom and Johnny Mans

I first met my best pal Sir Norman Wisdom back in the early part of the '60's, having bumped into him in Oxford Street, and it was Norman who introduced me to that legendary variety agent Billy Marsh, who was also Norman's agent at the time and forged his international career.

I was a fledging stand-up comedian at the time and believe this is why Norman and I got on so well. We had the same outlook on life, the same sense of humour, and he was always there to give me good advice about the business. We became really close friends, with me not realising that one day I would eventually end up personally looking after his career, producing his theatre tours and arranging all his television, radio and personal appearances for around thirty years.

Sadly Norman passed away on October 4th 2010. He had reached the ripe old age of 95 and although he had been in a care home on the Isle of Man, suffering the early onset of dementia, he still (fortunately) seemed to remember who I was and still kept the residents of the home cheerful by singing and playing

piano, but after a couple of strokes, passed away peacefully in his sleep.

His funeral service on October 22nd was an amazing affair with over 8,000 people lining the streets of Douglas and many celebrity guests travelling to the island, including Bradley Walsh, Jeremy Spake, Todd Carty and Lord Michael Grade.

I had the honour of attending the service with my wife Becky, my son Elliot and my daughter Lucy, and I also gave a eulogy about my life with the great man. Norman's son Nick gave a marvellous speech and his wife Kim also attended, along with their two sons Lawrence and Gregory, and also Norman's daughter Jaqui. It was more a celebration of his life than a sad occasion, and he will be remembered by his millions of fans worldwide.

I have some wonderful memories of our times together including trips to Albania, his Lifetime Achievement

trophy at the very first British Comedy Awards, the endless tours around all the major UK theatres, the laughs in restaurants (his favourite being *McDonalds* or *Burger King*) and the endless telephone calls he made to my home to speak to either my wife or my kids...and then to me...and we'd chat for over an hour each day!

Norman was not only the greatest living comedic genius, an excellent dramatic actor, a fine singer and a prolific songwriter, but he was also one of the kindest and nicest of men you could ever wish to meet. Even though he's gone, he will always be a part of my life. I was honoured to be his agent and manager for so many years, but I was also privileged to have him as a friend.

Rest in peace Norm. We all loved you.

Johnny Mans

(Photos: Doug McKenzie)



Johnny and Becky Mans with Norman Wisdom at Buckingham Palace

NORMAN WISDOM

At the opening ceremony of the second Festival of Music Hall and Variety in Weston-Super-Mare, Roy Hudd strode into the hall declaiming: "Look who I've just found wandering the streets." In tow was Norman Wisdom. The festival was going to be great fun, but this was the serious bit, the opening ceremony over which Roy presided. Three local dignitaries, bedecked with their regalia and oblivious of the way theatre people behave, had ponderous welcoming speeches to make. Norman was deposited in the front row. Surprised that for once he was not the centre of attention and probably bored by the oration of the Chairman of North Somerset Council (or some such), he spotted a piano, walked over, lifted the lid and started to play. Roy never had a more difficult task to perform – placating the dignitary and getting Norman off the piano. With quick-wittedness and great charm, he achieved both and the festival started.

The sombre demeanour of the Somerset panjandrum would have held no fears for Sir Norman. When serving as a soldier with the Royal Corps of Signals during the Second World War, he was Churchill's telephone operator in the command bunker and was once put on a charge for addressing the Prime Minister as 'Winnie'; when the Queen knighted him, he performed one of his famous backward tumbles in front of her; and, throughout countless movies, did he not always get the better of that stuffed shirt, Mr Grimsdale?

Late in life, long after Norman had gone out of fashion in Britain, many people were amused, but slightly puzzled, that his films remained popular in Albania of all places. Sir Tim Rice even wrote him a song, *Big In Albania*, which climbed high in the Albanian charts. There was a reason. The Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha, viewed Norman as a subversive master satirist, whose character, the gump, by overcoming management oppression, revealed the horrors of the capitalist menace.

When Norman died at the age of 95, some papers called him the last star of music hall. He wasn't really, but you knew what they meant. That mixture of slapstick and



pathos would have been entirely appropriate to the halls fifty years earlier. It is true that his career started at Collins's in Islington, but his place in popular comedy lay elsewhere, a link between the gormless George Formby and the delinquent Benny Hill.

It is easy now to dismiss Norman Wisdom as an entertainer who based his career on frequently falling over. But let us remember some of his achievements. His first major movie, *Trouble in Store*, set records in 51 London cinemas, a BBC Television pantomime in which he starred was seen by more than eighteen million people and Charlie Chaplin dubbed him his favourite clown.

Richard A. Baker

NORMAN'S PLAQUE

A Heritage Foundation plaque will be unveiled at 91 Fernhead Road, London W9 on Sunday 6 March 2011 at 12 noon, the birthplace of the late Sir Norman Wisdom, OBE.

NORMAN'S DVD

The Max Miller Appreciation Society has produced a DVD which features what they believe to be Sir Norman's last ever public performance. He helped celebrate the unveiling of the Society's Statue of Max Miller in Brighton in 2005 and gave an impromptu performance at the celebratory lunch, which

included a previously unrecorded song of his own composition.

Also featured on the DVD are Roy Hudd, Dora Bryan and the late George Melly.

Copies of the DVD entitled *MMAS Statue Unveiling* may be obtained from the Society, price £14.99 (incl.

P&P), by application to:

Mrs Jo Blake,
19 Orchard Close,
Shoreham-by-Sea,
West Sussex, BN43 5UT
Tel. 01273 461082

(Editor's Note: More memories of Sir Norman on pages 17, 18 and 19)

WHEN NEIL MET NORMAN



Neil Sean and Norman Wisdom

Sir Norman Wisdom – try saying his name and not cracking a smile! See, he had that effect for, when Norman was around, the world seemed a better place. I, like so many, had fallen for his charms while catching him playing a hapless milkman who, under the guise of Pitkin, created a riot in his Rank Film *The Early Bird*. Norman just did the right amount of schmaltz and, as a young kid watching on our black and white TV, I loved the fact he was also trying to save the job of his horse Dolly too. I never once in my wildest dreams thought that I would get to meet Sir Norman, let alone him becoming a personal family friend.

I was given the opportunity by a London listings magazine to go and interview one of my favorite stars and, better than that, I would get it published too, no matter who it was. I was, of course, struggling to find a star that would wow the editor. Who was in town? A quick glance down the listings guide announced that the great Norman was in fact ‘in town’ preparing to launch his new movie *Adam & Evil* at Pinewood Studios. Norman, it was said, was going to be co-starring with ‘70’s sex bomb Bo Derek. Now remember I had never done this type of interview before, so, with great nerve, I called the production office and bleated out that I would require an interview. What cheek, eh? Well, I was lucky to be connected with Norman’s P.A. who was in fact kindness itself. He assured me that Norman would in fact be available and that he would meet me at the very plush Langham Hotel opposite the BBC in London.

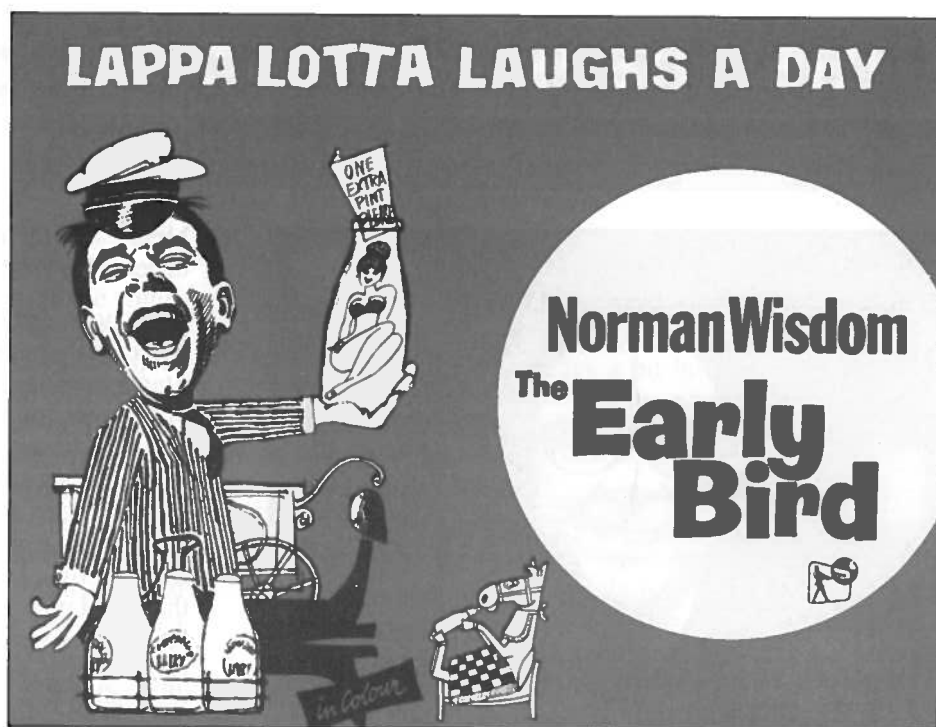
I worried so much prior to the interview as this was, you know, the big one! He was a huge star - the biggest box office draw in the UK with a top ten record - he was Norman Wisdom and I could hardly contain my excitement when the day arrived. I got to the hotel early to make sure that I had a good seat for him and then waited in the reception area. I heard a rustle at the door and knew straight away that the funnyman had arrived. You know those doors that spin around in posh hotels? Well, Norman had got himself tangled up in it and had simply brought the hotel to a standstill. Pulling himself free, he promptly marched up to me and tripped in the only way he could and said, “I am Norman. You’re Neil, right?” Bliss! We were off and I have to say that I could not get a word in, but when he was reeling off one great story after another, who cared! “Did I tell you about the time Marilyn Monroe kissed me?” he asked. “How about me & Sean Connery? I was a bigger box office draw than him you know.” Norman had me enthralled and then, a stroke of kindness, he said we should order lunch. I gulped! After all, the editor had just pulled the expenses and if Sir Norman was to have ordered big then it was up to me, with very little money on my person, to pay for it. Norman looked at the menu longingly then slammed it shut and announced, “It’s a bit posh in here innit!” He then told me he knew of a café nearby that did ‘smashing egg and chips’. Off we tottered and, true to form, he had the whole café in stitches within minutes of arrival. I later found out that Norman was aware that this was my big break and knew also that I had very little cash. He treated me to lunch and we toasted our new found friendship with lemonade (neither of us were drinkers). I was over the moon at just meeting him and he then suggested that we return to the hotel to have the picture taken that you see here as “It will look better, as it’s a swanky place, mate.”

Still on cloud nine, I received a call later that night “Hi, it’s Norman. Just checking that you got all you needed today?” Having assured him I had and that he was a legend for being so kind, he then told me more stories and how he would be attending a showbiz event later in the year and if I were there I would see him again. I liked his style. With laughter still ringing in my ears, I replaced the phone and thought “Wow! How did that just happen?” I did, indeed, attend the showbiz event, at which, of course, Norman was the star guest. I was able, also, to reintroduce to him Alan Scott (my father) and Ann Montini, who like me were just such great fans. Norman gave us his personal phone number for his home on the Isle of Man and told me to call ‘anytime’. Over the years we often received calls from Norman, and vice versa, and then one day he told us how he was coming to our home town of Mirfield where a new scheme was being set up in UK libraries to install all of Norman’s biggest films to borrow. I was once again so excited and, in turn, wondered if he would have the time to chat. I need not have worried. He arrived at the library and, yep you guessed it, had the lot of us in stitches by swinging off a lamppost (remember he was well into his eighties at this point). Norman found the time to come back to our house for tea and sandwiches. “I love potted

meat”, he assured us.

Over the years I bumped into Norman on so many occasions as I rose up the media ladder as a showbiz reporter for Sky News. I even got to work with him as he invited me and Alan to the Grand Theatre in Blackpool while he was the star guest on a Lottery show, which was coming live from the old theatre. Of course, Norman invited us backstage after the show, bounding up the stairs leaving me totally out of breath! However, even after he had brought the house down and, no doubt, had millions crying with laughter at home, he asked me, “Was it ok ... did I go well?” Afterwards, at the Imperial Hotel over lemonade, we gossiped and had a jolly old time but what he said stayed with me: “Did it go ok?” I pondered this and then it hit me; this is how he remained at the top of his game. He never took his success for granted and that hunger to make sure people laughed was still there even after all his success around the world.

Norman had his biggest hit with a track called *Don't Laugh At Me*



(*'Cause I'm A Fool*), a song he penned himself. I sang the song many times while touring around the UK with *Variety Express* and I had his personal permission to do so. How many people can say that? The thing is we did laugh at him and how! I can only imagine what havoc he is now creating upstairs, can't you? But one thing Norman would

always say to me every time we said goodbye was “Keep laughing!” I think, thanks to his wonderful legacy, we will and for that we should all be so thankful that Sir Norman Wisdom, the little man with the big talent, graced our time on earth.

Neil Sean