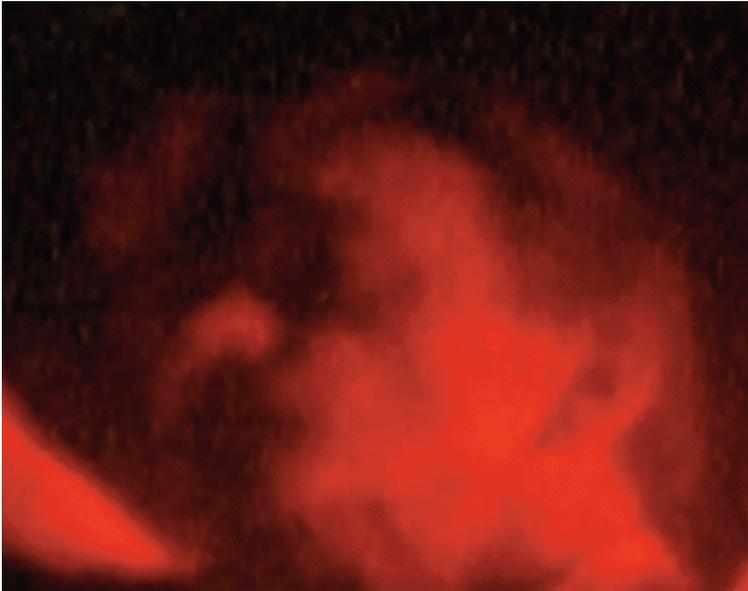


**WHERE ARE THE THINKERS?**

**STEWART LEE**

**IN CONVERSATION WITH NEIL JACKSON**  
for POST-NEARLY PRESS

what is this awful  
and infuriating stuff?



Dedicated to the memory of Mark E Smith 1957 - 2018

**Stewart Lee**  
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## WHERE ARE THE THINKERS?

[Offices of Stewart Lee's agent, Haymarket, London; discussing the Alan Moore edition of Post-Nearly Press.]

**Neil Jackson:** Alan arranged the use of The Lodge studio in Northampton; I see you've been there to do a Guardian video together. When I went, there was an old prog-rock band upstairs – one of them might live there. I remember seeing the band going up, through the studio window, waving at Alan Moore, and Alan serenely waving back. The Enid, they're called.

**Stewart Lee:** Yeah, The Enid. The Enid had a weird 'baggy' incarnation in the late 1980s, early 90s, with an old fella in charge – although probably younger than we are now. He'd got some kids in to 'funk up' The Enid.

**NJ:** I did see the older guy, sitting upstairs in a pyjama type outfit. Again, he waved.

**SL:** It's really nice to think that they beat the system. The Enid used to be on the *Friday Rock Show* with Tommy Vance, along with the likes of Status Quo.

**NJ:** Who were very good up to a point, I'll admit.

**SL:** Do you know what? In the mid 1990s, when comedy was the *new rock 'n' roll*, and I was in the double act for about three years with Herring, we were put on the road by our *comedy is the new rock 'n' roll* management, in tour vans, with expensive hotels; we'd always come back in debt - which I suspect

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was the idea – and we had these rock ‘n’ roll tour managers. One was a guy called Malcolm, who’d toured with Status Quo, for ages, and he played Status Quo bootlegs all the time. All his anecdotes were about stupid things that Status Quo had done. They just didn’t appeal to my sense of humour. But you’re right, some of the early stuff is good. They did a great version of *Roadhouse Blues* by The Doors.

**NJ:** Rock-wise I used to be quite into Marillion. I still stand by their *Fugazi* album.

**SL:** Yeah, a lot of people do. They did a 20-minute B-side adaptation of *Beowulf*, didn’t they?

**NJ:** *Grendel*, quite an early one. I can’t defend a lot of it.

**SL:** It seems weird – at the time – that anyone would revive that kind of music, but now, 1984, 1974, there seems little difference. It’s the blinking of an eye between *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* and the first Marillion album.

**NJ:** The only new band I’ve liked recently is Sleaford Mods.

**SL:** I like Sleaford Mods. They’re basically our age, of course. They’ll reference the same things as us.

**NJ:** With them, and it’s the same with Alan Moore’s *Jerusalem* novel, you sense the work was going to happen come what may. Alan, whatever, was going to do that book. Sleaford Mods are a bit like that. Jason Williamson’s been around the

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music scene, he's getting on a bit, and obviously couldn't be bothered trying to cater for what other people might want anymore.

**SL:** I sometimes think about that in relation to... the point where I massively scaled down my expectations of life. A realisation that I just had to make the work work. And that's when it started to work. It reminds me of *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Morgan Freeman's character has given up on parole, feels totally broken, resigned to serving out his time. And that's when they release him.

**NJ:** You touched on an interesting moment in your book, which you might be alluding to now, the Ricky Gervais moment in *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*.

**SL:** If someone keeps praising you, and they're successful, it probably means they feel a little bit guilty about being in your debt. I read an interview with Louis C.K. – whose work I don't really know – but he said he used to have a routine about what sort of people park in handicapped spaces; what kind of people chuck litter down; how they're 'assholes'. This was around 1989/90 when he was being compared to Denis Leary. Leary came along afterwards and ran with Louis C.K.'s thing of: *oh, I do this; I'm an asshole*. The standout, far and away best bit of material that Denis Leary ever did – he came over to Britain in about 1991/92 and got stuck here because his wife was ill. We didn't know Bill Hicks and all these people – we saw it as an amazing new type of American standup.

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The standout bit was a song he did, with members of the Del Fuegos, called *I'm an Asshole* or something. Years later, Louis C.K. talked about this, how he never called Leary out on it, and how Denis Leary kept offering him money to invest in film projects and various other things. Ricky Gervais would always be talking me up in interviews, and I'd basically quit standup because I couldn't afford to get into any more debt. He was famous on the back of *The Office*, which allowed him to do 500-seater rooms immediately, full of people who wanted to see him. Easier, obviously, than spending twenty years playing small roomfuls of random people.

**NJ:** Where the audience have already decided it's going to work brilliantly and they're going to have a great night.

**SL:** Al Murray said a very generous thing about this a few years ago. I didn't understand it at the time. I thought he was depressed or something. This is five years ago, before Brexit, and at a time when people's response to character comedy was more straightforward than it is now – talking about the Pub Landlord, he said that the laughter was already in the room before he came out. His job was to manage it, guard its progress. I thought that was a very generous thing to say. I'm not sure the laughter is there for me in the same sense. What happens with me, now, is someone says: I'm going to see Stewart Lee, he's brilliant, he's my favourite comedian of all time, once you've seen him you'll hate all the others! That's the kind of thing people say. And the other bloke, at work or whatever, is saying: well, I've never heard of him mate, so he can't be that good! And he feels affronted. Then the first guy makes

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him get a ticket and come. So at least a third of the audience are involved in some argument with the person that's brought them. I'm serious. I know this for a fact. They come up afterwards and go: I'd always thought you were shit and hated you. So a number of people who come to see me hate me, or are sick of someone going on about me. They'll say: I always go to bed when your programme comes on. I hate it. But *he's* made me come and see you. There always seems to be a lot of hostile tension. But even if it was the case that the laughter is already there, I try to crush it, or make it difficult, so that there's something at stake. Every performance, about anything, should in some way be about a struggle that has to be won. Some kind of jeopardy.

**NJ:** I was interested in your decision to play free jazz as people filed in. As some kind of test, or...

**SL:** Conventional wisdom is that you play something that gets everyone in the room in a good mood. I thought: play something that gets them discombobulated. So they think: well, if he's playing this, then what's the show going to be like? It's put them on a wrong footing. Though conversely, for this tour, *Content Provider*, I've not done that. The world has been so odd in the last two years that I feel my audience, of woolly liberals, which is what most of them are, have suffered enough. And this tour is the first I've done where I've thought: let's try and make everyone have a good time. Because of the point I'm at in life – I'll be fifty when I've finished this; my telly's been cancelled – I wanted to do as many gigs of this show as possible, so I could play to all the people that

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want to come and see me, because I'm never going to be this popular again. Hopefully, over the next 15 to 20 years of managed decline, if I lose 10% of them every year, there'll still be enough to eke out when I'm 65 or 70. I had to write a show that I could do 250 times. And those shows where I'm crying, or pretending to commit suicide, or thinking ghosts are haunting me, or running around the auditorium shouting at people, or climbing over unsecured pieces of plasterwork, Frank Matcham theatre masonry from 1890, those things are all too physically and mentally dangerous to do 250 times. So this show is lighter. More fun; self-consciously. There's a lot more room for play, at my expense, rather than the expense of making people feel uncomfortable in the room. Lots of people have said it's the best show. It's isn't, at all. But it is the most enjoyable, and for a lot of people they think that if they enjoyed something more than something else, that means it was better. [Laughter] And who knows – they might be right.

**NJ:** This would be a more mainstream album then?

**SL:** It's *Sparkle in the Rain* by Simple Minds as opposed to the early, Krautrock influenced stuff.

**NJ:** You said – perhaps quoting somebody – all you need is 2000 people who like you.

**SL:** It was John Hegley. I stopped doing standup in the summer of 2000 and started again in the middle of 2004. Four years that I didn't write any material. I did the odd charity show, but I was saying to John: I can't see how to make this

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work. Actually I thought I might not have to worry too much, because I got involved in that opera, and the expectations were, after the first couple of years, it was going to be your pension. Instead it ended up virtually bankrupting me. But Hegley said: stop worrying about it. If you're not being put out on the road where these big agents operate, if you've got 1000 people that like you, they all give you 25 or 20 pounds a year or something..

**NJ:** The sums work out.

**SL:** Yeah. And also, I got on the internet and found out about Myspace. You could put your face up on Myspace and people follow you, and you can mail them about where your gigs are. So if you've got 5000 of them, and one in five come, in a year, it all suddenly seems do-able. Soon after, I left the rock 'n' roll management and went with Debi Allen, who had around 5 or 6 clients, and she's just gone in with Curtis Brown here. I've noticed there's all sorts of posters up of their clients, and they're people I've done routines taking the piss out of. It's really weird being in here because I haven't been in... and I'm walking through thinking: oh, shit; Freddy Syborn. I've accused him of plagiarising me.

**NJ:** I see you've got a 'plagiarists corner' on the website. You're the same as Mark E Smith, keeping a log of all the people who've copied you.

**SL:** Notebooks out plagiarists.