

MEET THE CREATORS... DAN PATTERSON AND MARK LEVESON

When *Whose Line is it Anyway?* made its debut on Radio 4 in 1988, creators Dan Patterson and Mark Leveson had no idea the show would be still in performance some 30 years later, nor did they ever expect it to appear on the stage at the Royal Albert Hall. Originally, they weren't even sure if the show would make it to television after a series of early setbacks.

In the end, the show was snapped up by Channel 4 and ran for over ten years before heading across to America in 1999 for a further eight years, airing on one of the biggest US television networks and drawing millions of viewers at its peak. In 2015, the show won more critical acclaim as it converted to the stage, performing at the Adelphi Theatre, the London Palladium and at the Edinburgh Festival, cementing its status as one of the most loved comedy shows of all time.

"We were about 26 or 27 when we started work on the show but we'd known each other for years before that. We went to this Jewish youth group as kids and we used to play a lot of these drama games – some of them even made it into the show, Leveson explains." "Given the Jewish origins of this, it should be a Hanukkah anniversary but we felt it was more commercial as a Christmas special," Patterson laughs.

"When we started, we were doing this little radio show and soon after a television pilot," Leveson describes, reflecting on the early beginnings



Wayne Brady, Aisha Tyler, Jeff B. Davis, Colin Mochrie, Mark Leveson, Dan Patterson, Linda Taylor and Laura Hall at The CW Network studio.

of *Whose Line*. "It's a cliché but nobody would have dreamed that it was ever going to last this long or go through so many incarnations and iterations. To go from BBC Radio 4 to Channel 4 to America, be massive on the ABC and CW networks there and then to head to the theatre after that. We had no idea of the journey."

"It will be the single biggest live audience we've ever done *Whose Line* in front of and I think it will have its own magic," Patterson says of the Royal Albert Hall anniversary shows. "It's hugely exciting and a bit terrifying too but I love the

Albert Hall and the tradition of it. I would imagine the people who originally founded it would be turning in their graves at the thought of having us there!"

Whose Line of course made its name by balking at the traditional. Leveson and Patterson put a group of talented improvisers through their paces in front of a live studio audience: none of the improvisers had any idea about what to expect and the show was entirely unrehearsed. "I think the reason why it was picked up was because it was so new and so different,"



Cast and crew at The CW Network studio.

Leveson says of the Channel 4 commission. "Nothing had been seen like that on television before. In the intervening years, we polished it and made it better – it had better music, the pace was faster and we did about a hundred different games to keep it exciting."

"It's also never gotten easier to do over time," Patterson adds. "I think the reason for that is because it's genuinely improvised which means that it's always terrifying because you start every night with a blank slate. We've got the games but we haven't got a script and you don't know what is going to happen...we hadn't come from a theatre background either."

"The most important thing", Patterson continues, "is quality. It has to be good. No one would have forgiven it for being bad but improvised – it had to be good and improvised and therefore it had to be as good as anything else because there's five million channels for people to be hopping between now. It had to be able to stand up against anything."

During its initial six-episode run on BBC Radio 4, Stephen Fry and John Sessions were the show's

resident improvisers. The original idea was for both Fry and Sessions to join the show on Channel 4, but it didn't go quite to plan, as Patterson explains.

"It was a nightmare! Stephen Fry was the first person I approached and he agreed [to take part in the radio show], and then he suggested John Sessions. We did the radio show and it was pretty much an instant hit,

so much so that we were then on our way to Channel 4." At the time, Patterson was working for the BBC. On hearing the show had been commissioned by Channel 4, he left his job only to learn Fry could no longer take part in the project. Fearing the television project would be at risk, panic ensued when Sessions then also pulled out until Fry convinced him otherwise.

"Suddenly I thought, 'We're not going to have a commission here and I've just given up my job.' But Stephen did a very good thing and talked John into doing it. And then of course we got Josie Lawrence, Paul Merton, Mike McShane and the others and it worked." Clive Anderson, who Patterson asked to present the show having been impressed by his work hosting another, followed the show from radio to Channel 4 as the quick-witted, sharp host brought in to control the chaos.

"I would say he not only controlled the chaos but added to it incredibly well," Leveson laughs. He wanted to be supportive but his thing of being a bit scathing meant that improv didn't have that thing it has in this country where people see it as a bit smug. Because Clive was having a slight

go at them, I think people felt sympathy with the improvisers as it looked as though they were having a harder time."

"I'd worked with him previously on a show called *The Cabaret Upstairs*, which was a radio show where they introduced stand-up comedians," Patterson adds. "In between the comedians, Clive would banter with the audience and often that was actually funnier than the actual comedians. For *Whose Line*, we wanted to include suggestions from the audience so it was much better to make those bits genuinely funny than just have it be functional, so Clive was a huge boon when we started. From there, he got his own talk show incredibly fast because everyone suddenly realised how quick he was with people."

Alongside Anderson, Fry and Sessions on the radio show, other guests who made early appearances included Dawn French, Lenny Henry, Rory Bremner, Hugh Laurie and Jimmy Mulville. On TV in America, the show earned the highest audience ratings of its history – 15 million – following an appearance by the late Robin Williams. "He played this game called *Scenes from a Hat*," Patterson recalls. "Drew Carey [host of the US version of the show] read out a scenario which was: 'What is Robin Williams thinking right now?' Robin Williams just walked to the mic and went: 'What am I doing? I have a career!' He loved it and we loved having him on."

Other memorable guest appearances included one by Peter Cook. "He was on the very first series which is how we managed to get Stephen thinking about doing any of the TV shows," Patterson explains. "In the afternoon before the show, Peter Cook was incredible during the warm ups. Rory McGrath – a member of the Hat Trick team at the time – decided to go off for



Dan Patterson, Mark Leveson, Josie Lawrence and Clive Anderson with Father Christmas at the Royal Albert Hall Christmas Festival Launch.

a drink with Peter Cook afterwards. 'Settle the nerves' was the phrase he used. When Peter came back to do the show later on, he was absolutely smashed...he was not the man he was four hours earlier!" Patterson laughs.

For Patterson and Leveson, it's the talented improvisers who are the reason for the show's longevity and ultimate success. Having gone around the world auditioning (some stars who auditioned early on in their careers for *Whose Line*, but were turned down, include Tina Fey, Steve Carell and Mike Myers), the cast of improvisers assembled are described by both as "very special indeed." Patterson continues: "We've been incredibly lucky with the wonderful talent that we've had working with us over the period. They can still do it and all have managed to keep their abilities going over 30 years. Josie Lawrence, Colin Mochrie, Mike McShane, Ryan Stiles and Greg Proops, have been joined by Wayne Brady (ever present on the US shows), Chip Esten, Brad Sherwood and Jeff B. Davis,

as well as our super-talented musicians Richard Vranich, Laura Hall and Linda Taylor ... and they're all wonderful."

When the show moved to America, it grew in popularity even more and despite being pitted against television juggernauts *Survivor* and *Friends*, the show still attracted large audiences and a loyal following. "Improvisation is sort of an American art form," Leveson says. "They're really good at that kind of thing, making stuff up on the spot and being really funny."

"We were one of the first shows to break into America," Patterson says. "After us, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *The X Factor* followed, but we were the first in the comedy genre. We weren't as big as those but we were a trailblazer and the first. We did 136 shows in 10 years for Channel 4 but we did about 240 in five years in America, so it became huge. We had the excellent producer Danny Breen who was a significant part of the US show, who sadly

passed away last year. He came up with many ideas and he is in our thoughts as we do this special show."

30 years on and 483 episodes later, *Whose Line* is still going strong as one of the longest-running, most successful comedy shows of all time. "I think the people who like *Whose Line*, both in this country and the US, love it," Patterson concludes. "I think they are real passionate fans. I think it appeals to new generations too because when we did the shows at the Adelphi, the audience age group for the first few shows were older. As the run went along, the audience got younger and younger and they were impressed. The fact is, 30 years later, we're still producing shows and that's a great feeling," Patterson reflects. "Well, a great feeling in between feeling really old and still terrified of the unknown!"

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