

# June Whitfield's death brought those memories flooding back.

It seemed strange at the time, how media coverage of June Whitfield's life brought it all back to me. Many others have gone to that playhouse in the sky in recent years, but somehow and though I hadn't realised it until hearing of her demise, June Whitefield more than the most, seemed to knit all those past years together.

A bit of a metaphor for the lady herself, I guess, who was always there playing second-fiddle to some other comedian, yet when all her roles were brought together, she was probably more important to the history of comedy, than any of them could singularly claim to be.

I live abroad now and the thing I miss most is being able to talk with others around me, about those memories that sometimes come flooding back from my early years, in England. If you haven't lived through those times, then you have no inkling of what it was all about.

My uncle, now in his 80s, must have the same sense of humour as me, or maybe it was a generational thing and everyone had that same sense, never again to be repeated in this twenty-first century. It was the late 1950s and incredible though it seems now, our farmhouse in Cornwall had only just been connected to the mainline electricity grid (gas and water came even later).

I would walk home from the village school, a mile or so down the road, and in the fading winter's light, unless homework took precedence, it was usually my job to help with the

late afternoon milking. More-often-than-not, the topic around the cows, was to do with BBC radio and which programme would be on after 'tea', that evening.

Our house had a large kitchen, with a 'Rayburn' wood-fired, cooking stove, which burnt constantly through the colder months. There was an old, dark brown, bakelite radio on the kitchen bench, and at the allotted time, my uncle would tune the dial and we'd each sit on either side, ears almost literally glued to the set. I can never forget the introduction to our favourite 'Hancock's Half Hour', with the short lead in tune, building up to the ... 'H – H – H – Hancock's Half Hour', from the master himself! Hancock was brilliant, but of course he was by no means alone. There was a wonderful supporting cast, with June Whitfield amongst them. Sid James, Hattie Jaques, Bill Kerr, John Le Mesurier: their voices are all still there, in my memory.

And there were many other half-hour radio shows, which all seemed to hit the same 'funny bones' of my uncle and I: 'Beyond our Ken', 'Take it from Here', 'The Goons', peopled largely by the same playhouse stars. Whether or not they would have the same effect on an addicted public, today, as they did in the 50s and 60s, is doubtful; the world has moved on a tad since then. But I still think many would raise a bit of a smile on hearing that line from Tony Hancock's 'Blood Donor' sketch: "It may be just a smear to you mate, but it's life and death to some poor wretch!"

The stars of that era knew how to deliver those lines and that the pauses were sometimes more important than the lines themselves. June Whitfield was a master of the art and that's perhaps why she was so able to continue for more than 50 years, through the 'Carry Ons' and on to Ab Fab. But her fame, like all the others, was dependent too on the lines they were given in the first place and scriptwriters such as Muir & Norden, or Galton & Simpson also deserve a whole lot of credit for enabling that post-war years, comedy boom.

Not long after the dawn of electricity it was the turn of television to arrive in our house: a small cream box, with a bubble shaped screen. The image was black and white of course and changed from a rather fuzzy picture to a snowstorm at times. Some friends in the village were the first to get a TV, a few months earlier – a larger affair than the one we acquired – and I still remember sitting on the carpet to watch Tommy Steele deliver ‘Singing the Blues’, on that first Saturday night.

But somehow, television never quite captured the early magic of those comedy half-hours on BBC radio. The Hancock programme transferred to television and though it was still able to hold an audience, it never seemed quite as funny as on radio. Analysts, I guess, would say this is due to the power of our imagination: if we can't actually see it, then what we hear can conjure up all sorts of inspired images in our fertile minds.

June Whitfield was in some ways rather unique because she managed to negotiate this transition from radio to TV and film, better than many in her day. Others did it too, such as John Le Mesurier in Dad's Army and Hattie Jaques to pair up with Eric Sykes, but June Whitefield did it perhaps better, and certainly for longer, than most.

Thanks for the memories Dame June. Even now having departed this Earth, your comedy will live on in the minds of many ... including myself.

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