

Billy Connolly: ‘I liked the guy I invented. I can’t remember the old one’

In a rare interview, the comedian, 80, talks about love, forgiveness and his ‘magical’ new life

Michael Odell

‘Art has made my life magical at a time when I thought it would be unbearable,’ Billy Connolly says. “My disease creeps up on me — every day it gets stranger and more different. I don’t know how I would have coped without drawing. It’s taken me out of the scene and put me somewhere else, where I can survey it from a different angle.”

Connolly, 80, has Parkinson’s disease and may never perform live again, but he has managed to find another outlet for his restless creative spirit. In the past ten years Glasgow’s most famous welder turned folk singer turned comedian has launched another successful career as an artist, last week unveiling two stainless-steel sculptures based on his previous sold-out giclée prints and echoing his very first gig, working in the shipyards on the River Clyde.

The Big Yin will be 81 in two



Billy Connolly with Pamela Stephenson: “I have a lovely time now. It’s just a different kind of ...”
NICK DOLL

weeks, but he was just a “wee boy” when he first began to think about what he wanted to do with that life. His ambition? “To be a tramp.” Having been abandoned by his teenage mother, bullied by the sadistic aunts who took him in and then physically and sexually abused for years by his father, he coveted a picture of a homeless man he had seen in a children’s book. “He just seemed happy, having a jammy sandwich and a good chat with a good friend,” Connolly recalls. “It seemed like bliss compared to the Glasgow tenement where I was living. The freedom ...”

It’s obvious from Connolly’s

third (and, according to his publishers, likely final) memoir, *Rambling Man*, which has been in The Sunday Times Bestsellers’ top five since its release a month ago, that this carefree itinerant spirit has informed his whole life. No rules, bills or mortgage payments, much less the drudgery of becoming a “barnacle” (someone who sticks to the same job for more than a year).

Connolly is recalling this freedom while increasingly incapacitated by his health. Having been diagnosed with Parkinson’s ten years ago, he has recently lost balance,





memory and eyesight. A face-to-face interview would be difficult, but he is keen to talk about his life now, so we agree to do it in a way that works for him. I send him questions and, despite being thwarted by flu and a lingering cough, he replies in a series of voice messages, assisted by his wife of 33 years, the psychologist Pamela Stephenson.

In the recordings, he is unmistakably the Connolly we've known and loved for decades. Though occasionally needing a prompt from his wife as he reaches for a word, once he is focused on a subject his talent for freewheeling monologues with all their trademark honesty and humour is intact. No subject — his childhood abuse, his struggles with alcohol and latterly Parkinson's, even death — is off-limits.

The love between the couple

shines through. Connolly tells me he is answering these questions in his bedroom "surrounded by my wife". "You make it sound like I am very large with a doughnut hole in the middle," Stephenson interjects, the pair of them chuckling away.

Although Stephenson is his main caregiver, their three daughters — Daisy, 39, Amy, 37, and Scarlett, 35 (he also has two fiftysomething children, Jamie and Cara, from his first marriage, to Iris Pressagh) — are neighbours and help too. "She [Stephenson] is lovely, she never complains about anything," Connolly says. "We never argue. I had so many years of her winning I went off the idea." I can hear them chuckling again.

Key West in Florida is where Connolly has lived since shortly after his diagnosis because the warm, dry climate is good for his health. "The cold affects me,

it makes the streets slippery and I end up on my arse," he says, "which is rather boring."

Rather poignantly, when his Parkinson's was diagnosed he tried to hide his symptoms from his children. "They're so obvious now," he says. "The way I walk, the way I talk, the way I do everything — the way I shake — it's impossible to hide. But they're so used to it now. They're all great spirits. It's one thing I'm immensely proud of, the spirits of my children."

He sent faxes from wherever he was in the world to his and Stephenson's three daughters. "I loved doing that, it was one of the highlights of my life. I was on a world tour and the fax was such a wonderful machine. I would buy books and cut out the pictures and big letters and write them strange letters almost every day. My [eldest] daughter Cara explained to me one day that she had every postcard I'd ever sent her."

If there are silver linings Connolly is going to find them. He sounds happy. He has always been a keen angler and now can fish straight from his back door. "We sometimes get crocodiles in the garden and there are herons, rays and turtles too," he says. "I had a lovely time before this, I have a lovely time now — it's just I have a different kind of lovely time."

It is a far cry from his brutal



upbringing and his first job as a welder on the Glasgow shipyards. A fan of the American country music pioneer Hank Williams, Connolly bought a banjo, imagining a life on the road playing music. It was a fellow welder called Willie McInnes who insisted he pursue his musical dreams.

“I think I would have been a happy welder if I’d come to the conclusion that I wouldn’t have made it as a banjo-playing rambler,” he says. “I would have settled down and tried to make a good job of it, but I never saw myself getting married, living on an estate then dying. I had to become something else. I had to reinvent myself.”

Despite some success in the mid-1960s with a folk-rock band called the Humblebums (Gerry Rafferty, of *Baker Street* fame, was also a member), Connolly eventually ditched music and became a comedian. By the mid-1970s he was a star in Scotland and came to national attention with his debut on the chat show *Parkinson* in 1975 (he eventually became Michael Parkinson’s most frequent guest, with 15 appearances).

“Just before *Parkinson* I’d done an English tour and had half-filled concert halls, and after that I never ceased to completely fill them,” he recalls. “After about five or six of them I



Billy Connolly on his 64-date Big Wee Tour of Britain, 1979

ALAMY

thought, ‘I’ve done it, I’m big.’”

He became friends with the King (who, as the Prince of Wales, was a frequent guest at Connolly’s former baronial Highlands home Candacraig, 15 miles from Balmoral), not to mention the Rolling Stones and the Who. Connolly had a self-destructive addictive streak to match any rock’n’roller. Visiting Elton John he once collapsed in a recording studio under the influence of alcohol and cocaine. John thought he was dead.

“I always assumed my life would be short,” Connolly says now, recalling the boozing, carousing and one-night stands. “I think it’s a kind of self-indulgence — a lot of people of that age fancy themselves as a James Dean — and I had this image of myself having a short life, people saying, ‘Wasn’t he

great?’ It seemed like a good idea to me. When you drink a lot, a lot of things make sense that don’t make sense when you don’t drink.”

He met Stephenson when he appeared as a guest on the satirical comedy show *Not the Nine O’Clock News* in 1979. At the time both were married. However, by the time she went backstage at Connolly’s show in Brighton a year later both were single and a relationship began. Goodness knows how. Connolly had drunk 30 brandies (and next morning he asked for the wine list at breakfast). Stephenson later discovered her nickname was the “Tour Pull”.

“What I saw of him — particularly in that dressing room — was that he was about to die,” Stephenson recalled in her 2002 biography of her husband, *Billy*. “You know how



you get a sense from some people when they are very self-destructive that there is something they are trying to bury? He was hurting in a very deep way.”

With her support Connolly gave up drinking in 1985, and the couple married in Fiji four years later. By the 1990s he was a star in America and his 1997 performance opposite Judi Dench in *Mrs Brown* earned him a best actor Bafta nomination. Many more roles followed, including alongside Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai* and as a warrior dwarf in *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*. “I was a wee plastic toy in a breakfast cereal — I was even in a McDonald’s Happy Meal,” Connolly enthused in his 2021 memoir *Windswept & Interesting*.

Even more astonishing than his global success was his ability to overcome the demons of his childhood. Connolly was three years old when his mother left him and his older sister Florence for her lover in 1945, while their father was away serving in the RAF.

“I don’t know if I’d have done the same, but I understand it,” he says today. “She was living in a slum. She was 18 and there was a war on — the Germans were bombing the docks half a mile away. It was hell. You can’t think straight and be a normal



Billy and Pamela at the after party for the film *Brimstone and Treacle*, 1982

DAVE HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES

person in those circumstances. She responded to someone showing her love in the middle of terror.”

What about his aunt Mona, who tormented him (among many abuses she told the young Connolly he was “a lazy good-for-nothing” and would rub his soiled underpants in his face), and his father, who later abused him? “I have forgiven them completely,” he tells me. “The only way to carry on is to forgive people and try to love them. They were unhappy people who didn’t know how to love. You can forgive them and love them and continue to let your life flow.”

Connolly’s life flowed until the day in 2013 he was walking through the lobby of a Los Angeles hotel when a fellow guest, a doctor, stopped him. “I’ll never forget what he said: ‘You

have the gait of a Parkinson’s man.’” (Those with Parkinson’s often walk with small, shuffling steps.)

Connolly received the official diagnosis, as well as one for prostate cancer and gallstones all in the same week. “It was a helluva week,” he recalls. “It got funny. My daughter Scarlett was with me in the ambulance on the way to the gallbladder surgery through Manhattan. The sirens were going — nee-naw nee-naw — and she said to me, ‘Is this your first Caribbean cruise?’ That’s a line I always said to her to make her laugh when her surroundings were awkward or boring.” It worked. “I cried a couple of times as well, which I’m not particularly proud of. I didn’t want to die. I was going to miss me.”

Even now he misses driving (“but back when there were no phones, and I was in my car and I was unfindable”), smoking (“I sneak a cigar when I can, but it isn’t very often”) and, occasionally, the thrill of live performance.

“Gigs I don’t miss,” he clarifies. “I miss coming off stage and Steve Brown — my manager, who’s dead now — standing there. I would look at him and he would look at me and we’d both burst out laughing, because we knew it was a beauty. I miss that.

“To do something well is a

lovely feeling. I get it from other sources now, but there's something about live entertainment — you can't kid people, you've either got it or you don't, and to have it in such glorious amounts was wonderful."

Connolly's humour could range from the salty and macho ("If women are so bloody perfect at multitasking how come they can't have a headache and sex at the same time?") to the whimsical ("Never trust a man who, when left alone in a room with a tea cosy, doesn't try it on"), but he was never PC. "I don't like the politically correct world and I'm fed up with comedians who are social workers telling us what we can and can't talk about," he says. "It's an irritating and dangerous thing to take people's freedom away. One of the founding stones of democracy is to be free to speak your mind."

The success of his new book is clearly gratifying. "That's a wonderful thing, to be on the bookshelf, with great writers," he says. "I just bought a Bible and I've been reading it. It's OK, but it'll never catch on."

Death doesn't scare him. In fact he is dismissive of graveyard headstones that describe the interred as "Asleep" or "Resting". In *Rambling Man* he says his own will read simply: "You're standing on my balls".

"That joke has been a friend to me for years," he says, chuckling. "Being brought up a Catholic you're surrounded by death. All those threats: if you don't behave there'll be a terrible death. It's an unfair way to treat children and so I always tried to fight back with humour. And I still do. I still don't take death as seriously as I used to. In fact I'm beginning to swing towards reincarnation."

He once said the meaning of eternal life was being well thought of when you're gone. How would he like to be thought of? "I hope they think of me as being a good laugh and being a force for good," he says. "That's all." His regrets are few. "I always wanted to go to Tibet and I didn't get round to it, and I'm sorry for that," he says. "But I wanted to go to Cuba and I did that a couple of weeks ago." He even managed a few draws on a cigar.

He used to say that when he dies he would like his ashes scattered in Loch Lomond, where he once fished, but he is now wondering about the river in Glasgow where his rambling life began. "The Clyde means so much to me, I might opt for that."

Against considerable odds Connolly got to fulfil that boyhood dream. He wasn't a tramp but he has rambled across the world. "And it was

good fun. I liked the guy I invented," he says. "I can't remember the old one."

***Rambling Man* by Billy Connolly (John Murray £25).** To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://www.timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members ■