

My 58-year life sentence!

MARTIN McCONACHIE SPEAKS TO COMEDIAN AND BIRMINGHAM CITY FAN JASPER CARROTT

When you see some well known supporters of football clubs, you can't help wondering just how committed they are and whether it's some sort of publicity stunt. But millions of comedy fans all over the country will tell you that Jasper Carrott is a true Blue, serving, as he calls, it a "58-year life sentence".

The folk singer/entrepreneur/agent/author/actor/comedian has made his name over more than four decades through using his considerable talent. Being funny is what he is most famous for and fans have grown up laughing with one of the funniest British stars of his generation.

The young Carrott was spoilt in his early years at St Andrews. Growing up in Shaftmoor Lane, Acocks Green (stop sniggering at the back!), his backing of the Blues came at one of the high points of their history as he explained. "In my first 18 months supporting them, Blues beat Liverpool 9-1 in a league game; they won what is now the Championship; finished sixth in the top flight and reached the 1956 FA Cup Final, losing 3-1 to Manchester City. It's just a shame they've won sod all since!"

He's quick to admit that there have been good times since though. "We did very well in the Steve Bruce years but the trouble was, it knocked 20 minutes off

my act. Comedy is my living and thankfully, no-one else talked about Birmingham City. When David Sullivan and David Gold took over as co-owners, they were God's gift to comedy and to be fair, they laughed at my jokes. Everyone says City are a sleeping giant but really they've been comatose for centuries."

In a city with more than one team, the youngster had a choice to make as to who he followed at an early age. "In those days there was no bitter rivalry like there is nowadays. I went to Aston Villa one week and Birmingham the next but Birmingham being closer on the train won in the end. It was a great choice to make, after all Villa will never win the Leyland DAF Cup or the Auto Windscreens Shield Trophy, will they?"

Good point well made.

As Jasper reached his mid-20s, he opened a folk club in Solihull with good pal Les Ward. Starting as a singer who did a bit of comedy, he soon became known as a comedian who could turn out a tune and it was here that he encountered true West Country culture for the first time. "Yes, we had The Yetties play at the Boggery (the folk club) and also The Wurzels played there too, though that was with the late Adge Cutler leading them of course."

After the single '*Funky Moped*' was released in 1975 and reached number 5 in the charts, his TV career took off. London Weekend Television supremo Michael Grade invited him to make a pilot for a new show '*An Audience With..*', based on six half-hour shows.



The show was a roaring success and it was to launch the Brummie funnyman into the stratosphere.

A move across the divide to the BBC followed, as did a string of comedy shows such as '*Carrott Confidential*', '*Carrott's Lib*' and '*Canned Carrott*'. The last of these featured a police drama spoof called '*The Detectives*' which then developed into a long-running series of its own starring Jasper alongside Robert Powell.

Throughout his career though, Blues were always close to his heart. A director of the club many moons ago, he has felt the pressure over recent years from fans who'd



ALL SMILES: Jasper Carrott with the Carling Cup that Birmingham won in 2011 after beating Arsenal 2-1

PICTURE: Roy Smiljanic

like to see him make a return to the club in some capacity. He won't rule it out, just adding "I'm like everyone else, just waiting to see what happens with Carson Yeung (the Blues owner who faces a money laundering trial). Lee Clark has a very difficult job, almost impossible, to get blood out of a stone. I saw them beat Hull 2-1 in pre-season but like Yeovil, a lot will depend on the first six to ten games. Enthusiasm and confidence can carry you a long way in football."

His knowledge of the Glovers is

impressive. "I'm aware of the area from doing the folk clubs in and around Bristol and Salisbury. Yeovil, the sloping pitch and the cup giant-killing was part of my football life growing up and of course you had the fantastic day at Wembley in May winning promotion. From that team, we've got Dan Burn at Blues now; he looked good against

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Hull, distributing the ball well as we played them off the park."

The future looks no less busy for the folk and football funnyman. Married for more than 40 years to Hazel; father of four (including 'The Office' star Lucy Davis) and grandfather to six, his plans for 2014 might even bring him to the Yeovil area. "I'm great friends with Bev Bevan (the drummer from EL0) and we took a musical show out last year called 'Made In Brum'. It was aimed at a nostalgic older audience; it was hugely successful and we might try something similar on a national stage this time visiting the towns around the country." ■