



ALTERNATIVE COMEDY

1979 and the Reinvention of British Stand-Up

OLIVER DOUBLE

ALTERNATIVE COMEDY

CULTURAL HISTORIES OF THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

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ALTERNATIVE COMEDY

1979 AND THE REINVENTION OF BRITISH STAND-UP

Oliver Double

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For Jeremy Hardy and Linda Smith

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
UK 1979	9
Part One History of Early Alternative Comedy	
1 Prehistory: Influences and Origins	15
2 The Beginnings of Alternative Comedy	37
3 The Spread of the Circuit	62
Part Two Alternative Comedy Performance	
4 'Bits of Me Haven't Been Finished Yet': Reinventing Stand-Up from Scratch	85
5 'Anti-Matter Comedy': Stylistic Innovation	95
6 'Advanced Social Thinkers': Persona and Perspective	118
7 'Comedy of Direct Confrontation': Relating to Audiences	140
8 'I Tell Jokes Which Precipitate the Downfall of Capitalist Society': Politics	163
Part Three Legacy of Alternative Comedy	
9 Alternative Comedy Now	191
Notes	204
References	207
Index	218

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INTRODUCTION

I should start by declaring an interest. I've been interested in alternative comedy since I was at school. A friend told me about a programme he'd seen which turned out to have been *Boom Boom Out Go the Lights*, the first TV showcase for this new type of comedy. Later, I became a fan of *The Young Ones* when its first series was broadcast in late 1982. I enjoyed watching Ben Elton's stand-up routines on a BBC2 youth programme called *Oxford Road Show*, and pored over a *Sunday Times* interview with Rik Mayall, which gave me the first hint that Mayall and *The Young Ones* were part of something bigger. The new breed of performers even had a name, the article referring to them as 'alternative comedians' (Pile 1983: 32).

At university, my interest grew with the second series of *The Young Ones* and the first of Channel 4's *Saturday Live*. An anarcho-feminist friend told me about a Tony Allen stand-up gig she'd seen at the Guild of students, and shortly after graduating I had my first live encounter with alternative comedy when I saw Ben Elton at the University of Exeter's Great Hall on 24 November 1986, a date on his first solo tour. As a student I also started moving from fan to performer, taking my first steps onstage as a comedian in a termly event called Chaotic Cabaret, before moving on to non-student venues like Barts Tavern and the newly-opened Exeter Arts Centre. This continued in Sheffield as a postgraduate, where I started a collective of performers called Red Grape Cabaret.

After I finished my PhD, like many others on the alternative cabaret circuit, I started out as a professional comedian on the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, a government initiative which gave a small weekly income to new businesses. Shortly after I finished on this, I helped to set up the Last Laugh, a weekly comedy club based in a pub in the Hunters Bar area of Sheffield, which I compèred and co-ran for five years. By this point I was getting regular work as both a solo comic and a member of Red Grape Cabaret.

In 1993, we were successful enough for *The Guardian* to review us at Hemel Hempstead: 'Whoever it was that wrote off Alternative Comedy, they forgot to tell Red Grape Cabaret ... Their anarchic performance style disrupts the normal patterns of joke telling – not pretty, but always

Alternative Comedy

invigorating. If only more comics were as concerned with challenging conventional formats, rather than duplicating winning formulae.' I was described as 'the most unusual for the trio', and the review concluded by quoting one of my 'subtler observations': 'We're never going to fuck the system . . . unless we all work together' (Cook 1993).

We were being praised for upholding the values of alternative comedy, and what the reviewer picks out are the qualities that have often been claimed for it: disrupting normal joke patterns, challenging conventional formats, and jokily threatening to fuck the system. In short, it was supposed to subvert the status quo both artistically and politically.

Having declared an interest, I'll admit that my aim here is to celebrate alternative comedy and argue that it did both of those things. In my view, it represented a radical reinvention of the form of stand-up in the UK, and the roots of the current British comedy scene can be traced back to the 1980s when it first rose up to challenge what had come before. Other views are, of course, available.

'Alternative and unfunny'

Recent scholarship has often been far more critical, questioning the achievements of alternative comedy. In 2016, Gavin Schaffer wrote an article in which he challenges 'the idea of 1979 as a new dawn for British comedy' (397), arguing that 'the impacts of radical alternative material were limited and ambiguous' (374) and that alternative comedy could even be seen as 'a manifestation of Thatcherite hegemony' (376). In 2013, Lloyd Peters – who had been in an early incarnation of Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson's 20th Century Coyote – contended that 'most performers' in the early scene 'were quite conservative (small "c") in content and form' (6).

Going further back, in his influential 2007 book *A National Joke*, Andy Medhurst confessed that in choosing his examples, 'I spared myself the masochistic chore of grappling with comedy that makes no substantial inroads into my own laughter . . . Thus you will look in vain for extended considerations of . . . the "alternative comedy" of the 1980s' (7). A decade earlier, Howard Jacobson was similarly sniffy: 'It wasn't many years ago that comedians calling themselves "alternative" would turn up on chat-show sofas fulminating against mother-in-law jokes. There must be no sexism, grated Ben Elton, the first of the anti-comedic red-brick ranters' (1997: 173–4).

Such attitudes have been around almost as long as alternative comedy itself. In November 1981, Andy de la Tour launched Comedy Cabaret, filling the vacuum left by the recently departed Comic Strip in the Raymond Revuebar's Boulevard Theatre. De la Tour was the compère, and resident acts Ben Elton and Combo Passé were joined by guests like Keith Allen and Skirted Issue for twice nightly shows on Fridays and Saturdays. Peter Hepple's review was titled 'Alternative and unfunny' and scathingly suggested that "“alternative” on this occasion merely means not as polished, not as funny and not as good as an evening in an ordinary social club' (1981). By December, Comedy Cabaret had closed after playing to only 45 per cent capacity. According to *The Stage*, it was 'defeated by a combination of bad weather and rising overheads' (Petty 1981b).

Even though the venture failed due to a specific set of circumstances, that didn't stop the same newspaper publishing an editorial entitled 'Only an alternative to the real thing,' which begins, 'The apparent collapse of "alternative" comedy in the West End is another example of the dangers of sticking an elitist label on something and converting what should be a spontaneous art form – for want of a better word – into a passing fashion . . . Our experience of alternative cabaret has been that it is neither as good nor as professional as the mainstream variety' (*Stage* 1981a).

De la Tour's vigorous response was published in the letters page a fortnight later. The full text of the letter is angrier, arguing that, 'One might expect a straight newspaper or magazine to elevate a single closure to the status of a portentous [*sic*] catastrophe if it makes better copy. For a trade journal to do so is simply irresponsible.' He gives five examples of alternative cabaret venues with 'regular packed houses' and claims there are a 'dozen or so' more. He argues that the 'professionals' with whom comedians like him have been unfavourably compared are 'simply joke-tellers who attempt neither to stretch the different forms of comedy nor to expand into subject matter beyond the myopia and prejudice of nagging wives, ugly mother in law and thick Irishmen.' He complains that, 'the very term "alternative" is most avidly perpetuated by journalists themselves more often than not as a useful stick with which to beat anyone who tries to break with convention' (BSUCA [British Stand-Up Comedy Archive]).

What this incident reveals is that opinions on alternative comedy have always been sharply divided. To supporters, it was a necessary reaction to the prejudice and lack of imagination of the comedy that immediately preceded it, explicitly aiming to expand the creative possibilities of form and content.

Alternative Comedy

To detractors, it was conservative, unprofessional, unfunny, elitist, and its radical ambitions remained unfulfilled.

The Stage's editorial was not an isolated example, but a symptom of a cultural divide between a showbusiness establishment feeling under threat and the alternatives who hoped to challenge it. Certainly, comedians with more traditional career paths were often scathing. Bobby Davro declared, 'I'll never laugh at Alexei Sayle in a million years. Most new comedy stars seem to be emerging in the Mayall and Co mould. Comedy today has gone a bit strange.' In the same article, Bob Monkhouse argued, 'There is a considerable puritan backlash in 1985 comedy . . . Today a kind of humourlessness has crept into bureaucracy which says you can't do racial or sexist gags' (Barrow 1985). The comic actor Bill Pertwee was more scathing: 'I think much of it is filth. The new breed are frightened and lack confidence, and believe if they shock the audience they will get laughs . . . I think the audience should walk out and those artists never employed again' (Green 1988).

There were even critical voices among those connected with alternative comedy. Eccentric musical comic Bob Flag, who appeared on the first night of the Comedy Store, recalled that after his initial involvement, 'I gave "Alternative Comedy" . . . as wide a berth, as I had "deejays" and hypnotists' (2015: 66). Keith Allen – a pivotal figure in the scene for a short period – proclaimed, 'I was a founder member of Alternative Cabaret. Hated the name, thought it was rubbish. Their content, virtually all the time, is not "alternative" to me. The performance is exactly the same, the structure of the jokes is exactly the same' (Kohn 1981: 45).

Onstage, Pauline Melville joked, 'This is the Alternative Cabaret, which is the alternative to having a really good time somewhere else. [laughter]' (Alternative Cabaret 1981). On one level it's a simple self-deprecating joke, but it also wryly comments on the sniping aimed at the new comedians and sends up the term 'alternative' itself.

'Alternative comedy, though?'

When I interviewed Comedy Store co-founder Peter Rosengard in 2017, he told me, 'I never invented the word "alternative comedy". I never even heard the word "alternative comedy". I mean I think the media did that.' This highlights the distaste for the term that exists on both sides of the cultural divide, and expresses the widespread belief that it was spawned by journalists. The truth of its origins are complicated, not least because this strand of

comedy is terminologically tangled. For example, Nick Revell recalls, ‘We always used to call ourselves “alternative comedians” and talk about “alternative comedy” in conversation, but . . . it was often “alternative cabaret” for listings and so on’ (2017).

The terms ‘alternative comedy’ and ‘alternative cabaret’ sprung into existence around the same time, and have often been used interchangeably. In this book, I’ll treat them as synonymous, because being able to choose between the two will help me to avoid the grind of repetition. I’ll also use the shortened form ‘altcom’ for reasons of both variety and brevity.

Alternative Cabaret was the first-coined term, being chosen as the name for a group of performers who had met at the Comedy Store and decided to start putting on their own shows. It probably first appeared in print on an iconic flyer (see front cover), which shows a stark black-and-white image of a crowd of people wearing gasmasks. At the bottom, in tiny letters, is a signature which reads ‘A.S. 1979’, revealing that it was designed by Alexei Sayle. It’s not dated any more precisely than that, but the name appeared in listings as early as November 1979, when the group’s fortnightly show at the Elgin pub appeared in *Time Out*’s ‘Theatre: Fringe Shows & Events’ section (1979a). Intriguingly, an even earlier show had been listed in September when the group appeared at the Pindar of Wakefield under the variant name ‘Alternative Kabaret’ (*Time Out* 1979b). Soon afterwards, the phrase started to appear in lower case to refer to the genre rather than the specific group, a review of Threepenny Theatre in March 1980 noting, ‘Alexei Sayle and Bill Monks have put together a unique form of “alternative cabaret” for fringe venues’ (*Stage* 1980a).

The first usage of ‘alternative comedian’ followed a few months later in August 1980, when a columnist mentioned Alexei Sayle and Tony Allen’s appearance at the Edinburgh Fringe, referring to ‘two alternative comedians [who] harangued the audience on drugs and allied matters’ (Pile 1980). The following month, September 1980, saw ‘alternative comedy’ appear in print in a broadly positive review of the Comic Strip that complained about the re-use of familiar material: ‘Alternative comedy is fine, but how about some alternative material?’ (Petty 1981a).

The actual origin of the word ‘alternative’ being used in this way is less than straightforward. It’s often been attributed to Tony Allen (Absalom 1981; Cook 2001: 16). Allen himself has written, ‘Just for the record, and so that nobody has to ask me again, I can’t ever remember coining the phrase “Alternative Comedian” or “Alternative Comedy”’ (2002: 116). On the other hand, Martin Soan and Malcolm Hardee from comedy troupe the Greatest

Alternative Comedy

Show on Legs have staked their claim on the term. In Soan's account, 'There's a very good-natured dispute between us and Tony Allen about the phrase Alternative Comedy . . . He says that he coined it, and Malcolm and I insist that we coined it with the help of a landlord in Salcombe' (Cook 2001: 52). In his memoir, *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake*, Hardee wrote:

I think the comedian Tony Allen is usually credited with coining the phrase, 'Alternative Cabaret'. But in 1978, years before the Comedy Store, the local yacht club at Salcombe in Devon was putting on mainstream acts and the landlord at the nearby Ferry Inn put a notice in the local paper advertising, 'Alternative Cabaret at the Ferry Inn' meaning an 'alternative' to the yacht club's cabaret. *That* was the first time the phrase was used, as far as I know.

Hardee 1996: 89

No direct evidence has been put forward to support this claim, but in any case, even if the phrase was used in Salcombe in 1978, it wouldn't have carried the meaning that it would go on to have. The phrase 'alternative comedy' often provokes the question 'alternative to what?' There are many valid ways to answer that question, but 'the yacht club's cabaret' would not be one of them.

The journalist Andy Beckett provides a useful explanation of the word 'alternative' in his book *Promised You a Miracle*: 'In Britain in the early 1980s "alternative" was a loaded word. It was widely taken to mean left-wing, counter-cultural, rebellious, separate from the mainstream' (2016: 331). This was precisely the meaning that Tony Allen took when he chose the word. Speaking on a podcast in 2017, he recalls: 'I came from a sort of counterculture background. I was squatting at the time and I was an anarchist . . . everything was "alternative" . . . It was used as a sort of counterculture . . . prefix to every sort of cultural thing, really. So it was just obvious that we called it Alternative Cabaret. That's what I called it' (HistComPod 2017a).

Allen remembers being steeped in the alternative culture: 'The area that I lived in, in Ladbroke Grove . . . had everything you could imagine that makes up a community – there was an alternative version. So there [were] alternative medics, there were alternative shops, there were alternative anything you can name' (Allen 2016). In July 1979, at almost exactly the time he was forming Alternative Cabaret, he was involved in a protest by the West London Anti-Nuclear group against fuel waste from Bradwell and Sizewell being

transported through the capital. A report in *The Guardian* quoted his reasons for being involved: ‘If the economy is run by the multi-nationals, you’ve got to have nuclear stations, because they are big industries. I certainly don’t want that. I’m involved because I want to advocate an alternative life style’ (Hebert 1979). In his book *Attitude*, he recollects that ‘a bunch of my mates were editing the info-directory *Alternative London*, so that name was in my head when I booked our cabaret package to a promoter’ (Allen 2002: 116).

This, then, is the original significance of the word when applied to comedy or cabaret. ‘Alternative’ meant being part of the counterculture and against the status quo. Being an alternative comedian was like being an alternative medic, running an alternative shop, or living an alternative lifestyle. Regardless of Hardee’s and Soan’s claims, it was Allen who first used the phrase Alternative Cabaret in this sense, and thus he is the originator of the term – whether he wants to be or not. The countercultural origins of the term also draw attention to the new movement’s intention to oppose the values and structures of the comedy that immediately preceded it. This was explicitly stated in an article about the Comic Strip in the music paper *Melody Maker*: ‘Alternative comedy, though? Rik Mayall told me it was simply an attempt by young comedians to break away from racist, sexist and mother-in-law stereotypes. Or, as Sayle puts it: “[I]f you want to be really good, you’ve got to do something nobody’d done before”’ (Humphries 1981).

This book

Having stated my intention to argue for alternative comedy’s achievements in reinventing the form of stand-up, I should explain how I intend to do this. In terms of scope, I’ll be concentrating almost exclusively on live performance, discussing television only in terms of its impact in popularizing the new comic movement and as an occasional source of performance footage where necessary.

I’ll be mainly concerned with the period 1979–90, which saw alternative comedy grow from its haphazard beginnings to a thriving sector of the entertainment industry, a well-established network of performers, venues and agencies. The first part of the book is historical, explaining exactly how this happened. There are chapters on influences and origins, key starting points of the new movement, and the spread of the circuit. The second part of the book focuses on how alternative comedy reinvented the form of stand-up. There are chapters on how the alternative comedians learned their

Alternative Comedy

craft, stylistic innovation, stage persona, interaction between performer and audience, and the politics of the scene. Finally, the book will conclude with an examination of altcom's legacy, and how it is reflected in today's comedy scene.

As we have seen, alternative comedy sharply divides opinion, and its history is surrounded by a fog of mythology. In order to try to see past this, I have tried to draw on as rich and detailed a research base as possible. This includes books, articles, journalism, and recordings of performances that have been broadcast or commercially released. I have drawn on my own collection of memorabilia, particularly a stack of 1980s music magazines, the rock press having been quick to catch on to altcom's existence. I have also drawn on a range of interviews, some conducted for earlier research projects, some taken from a podcast I make, and some carried out as events for a public audience. I have also conducted new interviews with nearly forty people involved in alternative comedy, from pivotal performers and well-known comedians to smaller acts now largely forgotten, and from agents to promoters who ran venues.

Crucially, much of the research is drawn from the British Stand-Up Comedy Archive, which (as its website explains) 'was established at the University of Kent in 2013 to celebrate, preserve, and provide access to the archives and records of British stand-up comedy and comedians'. BSUCA includes a varied and eclectic range of material, including publicity material, photographs, script notes, business records and – most usefully – unpublished audio and video performance footage. Alexei Sayle, Tony Allen, Andy de la Tour and Jim Barclay are among its donors. Some of the material even relates to my own experiences on the fringes of the alternative comedy circuit at the end of the 1980s.

This emphasizes the careful path I'm trying to tread in this book. On the one hand, I'm writing about something of which I had direct personal experience, even if only at the margins – hence starting by declaring an interest. On the other hand, I have used documentary evidence to bring in an element of objectivity. My aim is, as much as possible, to support my arguments with personal testimony from people involved in the alternative cabaret scene of the 1980s, and – crucially – the facts as recorded in historical documents from the time.

UK 1979

In 1979, the UK was on the cusp of massive change – in both politics and comedy. On 3 May, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party was elected to Westminster, heralding the final death knell for the postwar consensus that had started with Clement Attlee’s radical Labour government of 1945–51. Throughout the 1970s, Prime Ministers from both parties – Edward Heath for the Conservatives, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan for Labour – had been dealing with increasing economic problems and industrial unrest, culminating in the Winter of Discontent (1978–9).

Thatcher’s government broke with the orthodoxy that preceded it, based on Keynesian economics, a strong welfare state, a mixed economy with major nationalized industries, toleration of strong trade unions, and relatively high taxation. Instead, it steamrolled forward with a monetarist agenda based on privatization, curbing the power of the unions, cutting taxes, rolling back the welfare state, and above all a chest-beating belief in the power of free market capitalism to solve all problems.

The initial effects were devastating for many. Having inherited an inflation rate of about 10 per cent and unemployment standing at around 1.5 million, inflation shot up to 22 per cent by 1980 (before falling very significantly over the subsequent years) and unemployment rose to 3 million by 1983. With poverty hitting inner city areas and feelings stoked among minority communities by racist policing tactics, April–June 1981 saw rioting in Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth, Chapeltown and Moss Side, among other places. Nationalized industries were drastically slashed, devastating communities and leading to the miners’ strike of 1984–5 – a highly divisive dispute, with violent clashes between pickets and police, ending in humiliating defeat for the National Union of Mineworkers.

One of the Thatcher government’s answers to mass unemployment was the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. The concept was to allow people who were moonlighting while claiming benefits to come into the system, declaring their earnings and paying income tax and VAT. In order to qualify, candidates had to be between 18 and 65, have been jobless and claiming benefits for at least thirteen weeks, commit to working at least 36 hours a

Alternative Comedy

week on the business, and have access to £1,000 to invest – which could take the form of an overdraft agreement. In return, they would receive £40 per week for a year, to help them get established. The scheme was piloted for 18 months, and although nearly half of the businesses established had failed in that period, it was rolled out nationally in August 1983 (Beckett 2016: 210–14). When it was introduced, nobody could have anticipated that it would become a significant factor in the growth of alternative comedy.

Thatcherism also introduced a more aggressive foreign policy, with a significant ramping up of the Cold War as Britain bought Trident nuclear submarines and allowed American cruise missiles to be stationed at UK air bases. In 1982 Britain's war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands created stark divisions. On the one hand, the right-wing press created a tidal wave of jingoism, transforming Thatcher's political fortunes. *The Sun's* front page on 4 May 1982 greeted the sinking of the Argentinian warship *General Belgrano* – at the cost of 323 lives – with a one-word headline: 'GOTCHA'. The country's economic woes, with over 3 million people unemployed, had made the Prime Minister an extremely unpopular figure, but the feverish patriotism unleashed by the Falklands War recast her as a national hero. As a *Daily Mail* opinion piece gleefully conjectured, 'The effect of Mrs Thatcher personally could prove profound. The episode looks like vindicating her and discrediting her rivals and critics . . . her electoral position could well, within a short time, look almost unassailable. She may emerge not just as the Iron Maiden, but as Iron-clad and unsinkable' (Alexander 1982). This proved correct, as she went on to significantly increase her majority in the 1983 general election.

On the other hand, many on the left opposed the war as a sordid imperialist adventure, and abhorred the triumphalist propaganda spewed out by the popular press. Throughout the time Thatcher was in power the left offered significant resistance, and the early 1980s saw a surge in membership for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament reflecting genuine fears that nuclear war might become a reality, and the establishment of the women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common in 1981. Another sign of resistance was the election of a Labour Greater London Council led by Ken Livingstone in May 1981, its radical policies offering a beacon of hope for the left and a thorn in the side for Thatcher, until her government abolished it in 1986.

Meanwhile, pop music had been transformed by the emergence of punk in 1976, but comedy was still largely unreconstructed. In 1979, there were no comedy clubs in the UK, very few comedians performed the kind of autobiographical material which abounds today, and female stand-ups were

almost completely unknown. John Fisher's book *Funny Way to Be a Hero*, published in 1973, dedicates just one of its twenty-six chapters to female comics – a chapter entitled 'Are Women Funny?' – and even then, almost half of it is dedicated to the male drag comedians Rex Jamieson and Danny La Rue. Although variety theatre had produced a number of brilliant and successful female comic performers in earlier decades, working men's clubs (WMC) had failed to do the same. Every one of the WMC comedians featured in the 1971 documentary *There Was This Fella . . .* is male. While not a single female comic appears in the show, by contrast there are two black comics (Charlie Williams, Sammy Thomas) and one more-or-less openly gay comedian (Jackie Carlton). This seems to have been an accurate snapshot of the WMC circuit in the 1970s, as the only female comedy star to emerge from it in that decade was Marti Caine – and even she was as much a singer as a stand-up. It was only in the 1980s that female comics like Pauline Daniels, Crissy Rock and Ellie Lane became stars of the WMC circuit. Racist and sexist gags were rife among club comics, and even innovative television comedies like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Goodies* contained attitudes towards women and ethnic minorities that would be questioned today.

In this context, the birth of alternative comedy in 1979 is as much a watershed as the election of Thatcher, a dividing line that challenged the previous orthodoxies in light entertainment as much as the Conservatives challenged them in politics – albeit taking things in opposite ideological directions. Unlike Thatcherism, altcom had no single figurehead, but a number of individuals played crucial roles. Alexei Sayle quickly marked himself out as the scene's breakout star, becoming well known on television before anybody else, with a style blazing with alternative comedy's special qualities – aggression, surrealism, metacomedry, left-wing politics, and a keen interest in the latest trends in youth culture. Tony Allen was never a household name, but became a kind of spiritual leader of the scene, promoting radical, anarchist ideas about what it should and shouldn't be. In his account, though, it was the outrageous liberties with form taken by his namesake Keith Allen that initially gave altcom its identity. Keith Allen had been an actor, and spent just a short time performing stand-up on the nascent circuit before going back to acting. In this sense, he was typical of the early alternative comedians. Other important figures like Andy de la Tour, Pauline Melville and Jim Barclay also came from and went back to acting, but nonetheless were important pioneers of this new style of comedy.

Alternative comedy's impact was not as immediate as that of the Tory government, but by 1982 it was a national phenomenon. On 2 November,

Alternative Comedy

the opening night of Channel 4 featured the first episode of *The Comic Strip presents . . .*, a long-running series of comic films for television created by performers from one of altcom's most iconic early venues. Just a week later, the first episode of punk sitcom *The Young Ones* aired on BBC2, written by and starring key alternative comedians. It quickly became known as a classic cult comedy, capturing the imagination of young viewers just as punk had done in music.

This, then, was the UK in 1979 – a country on the brink of radical change in politics and comedy, the effects of which are still seen today.

PART ONE
HISTORY OF EARLY ALTERNATIVE
COMEDY
