

# Billy Connolly

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**A**merican audiences know Billy Connolly for a lot of reasons: his appearance in the raunchy documentary "The Aristocrats," his dramatic roles opposite Judi Dench ("Mrs. Brown") and Tom Cruise ("The Last Samurai") and his sitcoms (including "Head of the Class"). We know him for every reason except the one that's made him an international star: his standup act.

Connolly, whose recent tours of Australia and New Zealand sold out faster than Springsteen in New Jersey, is doing 20 shows at 37 Arts from May 9 through June 3, which offers plenty of opportunity to find out why he's the best-selling comedian in the world.

**Q•What's it like to switch from playing huge venues in Australia to an intimate 485-seat venue here in New York?**

**A.**It's a different beastie altogether. The bigger they get, the happier you become until eventually it's the small crowds that frighten you. It's a bit like performing for your aunts and uncles. It's got a nakedness. I'd much rather walk out to a football crowd.

**Q•I read your biography, and it's like you read "Angela's Ashes" and said, "Oh, I can give him a run for his money." You spoke about your mother abandoning you, your father molesting you, being dirt-poor and beaten by your aunt.**

**A.**Oh, he had it easy. [Laughs] It seems very harsh from the outside, but when it's happening to you it's OK.

**Q•Did the book change your relationship with your audience?**

**A.**I've spent my life up there onstage. I'd told them all my secrets. There was no embarrassment in it for me. The sexual abuse

stuff was kind of difficult — not to talk about but to go through again.

**Q•You waited till they were dead.**

**A.**I think that's the best way. But to go back again and tell it to the best of your rememberings is weird and unnecessary. You shouldn't be doing that too often. All I wanted in my book was to be a survivor. You can get beyond that s---t whether it's poverty or sexual abuse or divorce or all of these. You survive.

**Q•And flourish.**

**A.**And flourish! You can actually win! I live in a fancy house and all that, all those things people take as success. I've got a castle here. The kitchen is much bigger than the apartment I grew up in. I imagine people take that as success, and in some ways I suppose it is.

**Q•There are a lot of stories about how you became a comic. My favorite is that when you were a folk musician, you forgot the words to a song and just started talking, and the light went off in your head.**

**A.**It was a song called "St. Brendan's Isle." I broke down a little bit and I couldn't remember the words, so I described the song to them and they were pissing themselves laughing.

**Q•You use a lot of four-letter words.**

**A.**I do because I like it. I swear really well. I could lecture people on it. I like to say there's no such thing as bad language, there's only bad use of good language.

**Q•Isn't telling jokes a strange way to make a living?**

**A.**It is. But it has this psychological edge to it that is lovely, I find. And it's good to fight it because some days you don't feel like doing it. It's a great exercise to get up there and do it. It proved

to me many, many years ago that your mood is a choice.

**Q•How hard is it to go onstage and entertain people when you're not in the mood?**

**A.**Usually it goes away by the time you've changed from the little ashram of your dressing room to the stage. And if you can, get yourself in a position where you can put on "Long Tall Sally" by Little Richard. It's impossible to listen to "Long Tall Sally" and be in a bad mood.

**Q•You were a paratrooper in the military. Parachuting out of a plane just seems wrong.**

**A.**Oh, you must try it! Did you ever try bungee-jumping? In New Zealand if you do it naked you get it free. I just did it; it's wonderful.

**Q•But you'll take off your clothes at the drop of a hat.**

**A.**The drop of a hat. Ewan McGregor is the same. Ewan does it because he's beautiful. I do it because I'm not. There's nothing funny about a person who is in good shape when they take their clothes off. As a matter of fact it's quite distressing. People with abs and all that.

**Q•It just makes everybody else upset and jealous.**

**A.**It's not a good thing. You're better with a flabby ass like me. It gives you hope.

Age: 63

Born: Glasgow, Scotland

Became famous: as a folk musician, teaming up with Gerry Rafferty of "Baker Street" fame

Wife: Pamela Stephenson, famous for the UK series "Not the Nine O'Clock News" and starring on "Saturday Night Live"; now she's a clinical psychologist

Home: owns a castle in Scotland

Prized possession: a ukulele made from a tree in George Harrison's backyard

Books: finds Jane Austen a bit limp-wristed but loves "Jane Eyre"

Chart-topping release: his 1975 parody of Tammy Wynette's "D.I.V.O.R.C.E." went to No. 1.

Biography: "Billy," written by his wife, has sold more than 1.2 million copies

## CHARMING BILLY

Connolly, playing N.Y.C. into early June, is at your service.