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## Is Billy Magra the hardest-working man in Irish rock and roll? And comedy? And TV?

The Dublin comedian speaks to Barry Egan about childhood stammering, sharing a flat with Bob Geldof, tea with Bono, late night pool with Joe Strummer – and getting back into stand-up



Comedian, promoter and producer Billy McGrath



Barry Egan

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Comedian Billy McGrath first noticed he had a stammer when he was at primary school in Drumcondra on Dublin’s northside. As a result he became introverted and lived in his head.

“Some people would say ‘shy’, but it paid off not to speak until spoken to,” he says.

In fourth class he switched schools to Coláiste Mhuire in Parnell Square.

“The worst part was paying my bus fare going to school. I used to sit upstairs at the front of the bus and silently rehearse my destination ‘Mountjoy Square’ over and over. But when the conductor stood over me it came out as ‘Mmmm... with head jerks in between.

“I remember once a passenger behind me – who obviously had seen it all before – sighed, butted in, and said: ‘He’s going to Mountjoy Square.’ Double morto! Oh for pre-paid tap-on travel cards then.”

A teacher, Brother Wade, at Coláiste Mhuire had a suggestion to help the young Billy with his stammer – talk to the trees.

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“I grew up opposite Santry Woods, beside the athletics stadium, and I had the most interesting – often wooden – conversations in various *Goon Show* voices and accents. But it gradually worked. Now every time I have to stand up and talk to an audience I imagine them as trees.”



Billy McGrath at home in Portobello with Ted, the family dog. Picture by Steve Humphreys

I'm sitting with Billy and his dog Ted in the kitchen of his home in Portobello in Dublin, where he is preparing for two upcoming comedy shows this week, one in Galway, one in Limerick.

“For the Galway show,” he adds, “the audience are Wollemi pine trees. And in Limerick they are the crooked forest of Gryfino.”

Were you bullied at school because of your stammer?

“Not really,” he says. “Mainly because I was able to take care of myself. I was a good footballer, hurler, runner, handballer, and even played chess and golf for the school. Plus in my fifth year I played soccer for Greenfield Park FC near me in Santry, and was picked to represent Dublin under-18s.

“Myself and another player Seán Sheedy – from Pearse Rovers in Sallynoggin – were the only non-League of Ireland youth players on the team. After a match in Cork when my name was published in the paper, my all-Irish school Coláiste Mhuire wrote to my parents to say that if I continued playing the ‘foreign game’, I could do my Leaving Cert elsewhere.”

He stayed, but played no soccer until he went to UCD and played first team League of Ireland for a few years.

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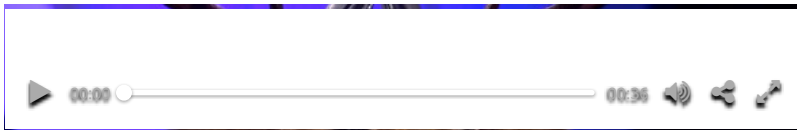
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“In school,” he says referring to Coláiste Mhuire, “we had a great football team. Dub legend the late great Brian Mullins was a class below me and Robbie Kelleher a class above. We won countless Dublin finals. Both were class players! School finals in Croke Park were an annual event. You never stammer on the sports field.”

He inherited his on-field prowess from his Cork-born father Kevin, who made history as the first ever hurler to win three All-Ireland minor medals in a row – 1937, 1938 and 1939. He also captained the 1938 team with a 16-year-old Christy Ring in the side. After he moved to Dublin in 1939, he won many tennis titles in Fairview Tennis Club and later senior golf tournaments out of Donabate GC.



Billy McGrath photographed in 2001. Picture by Kyran O'Brien

The youngest boy in a family of seven, Billy — who goes by the stage name of Billy Magra — grew up in Santry. He’s the only one of his siblings to remain in Ireland. As adults they would leave: Donal and Kevin to London and Arizona respectively; Veronica and Joanna (Cambridge), Gerri (The Hague) and Trish (Albuquerque, New Mexico).

In 1976, he graduated with a BA in English and history from UCD – where, as students’ union social secretary, he put on gigs for many of the era’s hottest young acts, among them The Boomtown Rats.

He became friends with singer [Bob Geldof](#) – a friendship that endures to this day – and ended up organising the Falling Asunder rock revue tour around Ireland in July 1976 (when the Rats, Cheap Thrills and Nighbus toured the country).

He and Geldof shared a house at the Blackrock end of Seapoint Avenue from that summer until late 1977.

“Bob was living with his girlfriend Daphne at the time,” he recalls, “and Penny, who worked in animal rescue, had the other bedroom.”

Any rock ‘n roll tales in the flat with the leader of the Rats?

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“No, it was a very spartan lifestyle. We were both on the dole, dreaming and scheming.”

How much was the rent?

“Can’t remember. But old pounds and the dole covered it. I started to get my act together after Bob left for London, and in 1977 I rented a two-bed basement flat on Mount Merrion Avenue in Blackrock.”

One bedroom in the flat was an office, and it was there that U2’s [Bono](#) and Adam Clayton once asked Billy to be their booking agent.



Billy and Bob in London in 2019

“I stayed over with The Boomtown Rats when they first moved to London and they shared a huge house outside the M25 which also had a huge living room they used as a rehearsal room.

“It was like a student house with name stickers on kitchen doors marking who owned what on the shelves. [Guitarist] Gary Roberts’ girlfriend at the time noted I used a tea bag from their stash and complained. Next day I was leaving, and I bought a catering size box with 1,000 tea bags and left it for her.

“Talking about student houses,” he continues, “I once called over to a basement flat in Rathmines occupied by a few heads I knew well. The Drugs Squad were active at the time and we knew of one house that was raided.

“For a laugh I banged on the downstairs window with my fist and at the same time kicked the door, shouting in as many gruff accents as I could muster: ‘Open up! Drugs Squad! Come on, we know you’re in there. We don’t want to kick the door in.’”

As the seconds ticked by without an answer, young Billy got louder. He also added an Alsatian bark. Whereupon the door opened and an innocent – “but stoned” – face gave him their nicest smile.

“And then he punched me! They’d flushed their hash down the loo! One of them scaled the wall behind, fell in a dark lane and broke his ankle.

“No mobiles then,” he adds, “so he stayed there in the dark, thinking the house was being raided.”

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Billy with U2 in 1985

Young Billy – who was by now a successful independent promoter putting on rock shows all over Ireland with everyone from U2 to The Atrix to Rory Gallagher – clearly had a talent for comedy. Indeed he had been doing stand-up in UCD in the mid-1970s when comedy was unheard of.

Nineteen seventy-seven wasn't, however, a funny year. His beloved mother Vera died. He was only 25.

“At the time it was all a blur. It was the week before Christmas and I was traveling back and forth to Galway and Limerick promoting a weekly rock club.

“My older four siblings had also left home – three had emigrated. My two younger sisters were still in school. It must have been the hardest for them. It really was much later – even as a parent – that I realised that life sometimes can be really unfair.

“Vera was only 56 years of age. She had raised seven kids and given so much time to voluntary work with the Ballymun ICA – there's a tree planted in her honour in An Ghrianáin – preparing lunches every day in the community centre in Larkhill, and she volunteered every Saturday at the Santry Credit Union.

“The saddest part is I never got to know her as a person. My dad Kevin lived until he was 80, and we spent many days and hours together.

“He died suddenly at home in June 2001 – and I'm so glad we all got together as a family for his 80th birthday party a few months before. The lasting memory is now of a happy man dancing and enjoying the shared love.”

In the early 1980s he put on his one-man theatre show *An Otter You Can't Defuse* at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. The *Sunday World* newspaper liked it, and dubbed him ‘the funniest man in Ireland’.

His life took a different turn in 1984 when he joined RTÉ and began producing shows like *TV Gaga* and the Self Aid concert in Dublin in 1986, as well as making documentaries with his pals U2 in Italy, and a David Bowie special in London. His feature length film *Self-Aid: Behind the Screens* won ‘Best Irish Documentary’ at the Dublin Film Festival in 1987.

A year later, he quit RTÉ to work on Channel 4's music show *Wired*. It saw him

work with the likes of Pink Floyd, Prince, Michael Jackson and Joe Strummer. He persuaded The Clash icon to take part in a documentary by seeking him out in a pool hall in East London late one night – and beating him. Presumably you don't stutter when you're playing pool with legends.

He also produced live films for The Pogues and the feature length film *Que Sera Sera* with the Irish World Cup squad in Italia 1990. The 'Put 'Em Under Pressure' video was also one of his. Around that time, he was putting on live comedy in venues around Ireland, bringing over the likes of Eddie Izzard, Jack Dee and Lee Evans, and nurturing Irish talent like Ardal O'Hanlon, Dylan Moran and Sean Hughes.

In 1992, he put on Ireland's first international comedy festival, The Liffey Laugh. He also nipped back into RTÉ to direct *The Basement* comedy show. That year, for his championing of new Irish talent, he was given the National Entertainment Award for Comedy.

He also managed Sean Hughes for three years. Of Hughes's untimely death in 2017, he says: "Sadly, my memory of Sean is in his last few months when he wasn't in a great place, mentally or healthwise. Compare that to the cheeky-chappy comedy genius I loved so much. He was only 51."

"Sean was a trailblazer who achieved huge commercial success very fast. But alongside his prolific output, he was an angsty individual who never settled down, even with himself. He never met 'the one'."

In 1998, McGrath became executive producer of new programming and talent at TV3. Two years later, he was back at RTÉ.

The boy who talked to trees was now the national broadcaster's commissioning editor for TV entertainment. He was soon giving airtime to Dara Ó Briain, Pat Shortt, Jason Byrne, and Tommy Tiernan.

Around that time, he met comedian Brendan O'Carroll to discuss a potential new sitcom about a Dublin mammy called Agnes. To this day, Billy is still in shock that RTÉ turned down the idea.

"I still have the letter of rejection," says Billy, who post-RTÉ went on to produce many other shows.

He returned to comedy with his show *Gusto* – "an OAPunk re-visiting the live stage with a new solo show exploring the funny side of life – including growing up with a stammer, saying no to U2, and getting the snip."



Billy McGrath and Joe Strummer

The 'saying no' to U2 story is, like all his stories, hilarious. In Bono's recent memoir, *Surrender*, the singer relates how in the late 1970s U2 were considering firing their manager Paul McGuinness – and bringing in a young hot-shot.

They even had a meeting with him in Captain America's restaurant on Grafton Street to discuss the idea.

Fate intervened when young pop agent Louis Walsh, sitting by chance at a nearby table, overheard the conversation and quietly told Bono: "Stick with McGuinness."

It was good advice, as McGuinness guided his charges to become the biggest rock act in the world. But 40 years later, Billy is pondering the imponderable – how different would his life been, if he had been the manager of U2?

"We'll never know," he says. "But for sure I would never have had such an eventful and rollercoaster career.

"I love variety and switching hats when I tire of one side of the business. I like the fact that I could make my own choices about who I work with and what I work on. We also would have parted company at some point – now we're still friends and there's no better live band in the world.

"In 2019, after I interviewed Bono at his home for the Boomtown Rats film I directed, he invited me to stay on and have a cup of tea in his kitchen. Both of us were amazed he knew where the tea bags were!

"Our chat was funny and as natural as if we were sharing a beer in The Pink Elephant or a coffee in Captain Americas – as we did many moons ago. A stand-out memory without a selfie.

"And I wouldn't have met the love of my life – or had such a rewarding family life. And that beats any 'what if' nonsense."

The love-of-his-life is award-winning TV producer Máire Kearney whom he married in 2004. They have three "wonderful teenagers", Joanie, Daniel and Emma, and live (with Ted the dog) in Portobello. Billy has two other children, Sam and Louis, from two previous relationships and Billy says he rejoices in his family.

“Louis now lives in Amsterdam with his Dutch partner Vera. We all get on well. Last year we all had a lovely night out in London with Louis’s mum Susanne and husband Jeremy. Blended, extended or upended family – the main thing is ensuring the next generation are number one.

“Sam and his wife Ciara Ryan are expecting their first child – all going well, I’ll be a grandfather in summer. Life is never boring.”



Billy McGrath and his wife Máire Kearney

He describes his comedy as “funny – with a bitter twist here and there. Growing up I loved BBC radio comedy, Monty Python, Peter Sellers. The first films I really laughed at were *Take the Money and Run* and *The Producers*. I’m a big comedy fan.

“My favourite performer has to be the late great George Carlin. Once I reach the stage miles with *Gusto* and get a week in a small theatre, that style of social political stand-up would be on my radar.”

Seeing as he mentioned politics, what makes him angry about Irish life?

“Petty politics and small-minded politicians arguing over oversights in election expenses when there are so many more important issues out there,” he says.

“If we’re not careful, dedicated and experienced politicians will be rejected at the next election in favour of Sinn Féin. Bubblegum isn’t the only thing that loses its flavour. I fear for the next decade.

“Also, as a person in their third act, I’m aware that the experiences and skills of healthy and wise OAPs are totally ignored. We’re supposed to be happy with a fiver on the pension – but there are so many areas we can get involved with, to enrich our own lives and society. Like education – teaching English to new immigrants – and setting up active retired community groups especially in remote regions.

“I’m sure there are such groups out there and everyone should be encouraged to get active in body and mind. I read somewhere that more older people die early of loneliness than illness. Half the reason I decided to do an MA in screenwriting at the age of 68 and get back on stage at 70 was to challenge myself.

“There are probably thousands of retired people reading this. What did you want to be when you grew up? Never stop dreaming – or scheming.”



He says he's "fit enough, but misses playing football because of dodgy knees."  
What wisdom has life taught you?

"Be the best father you can be," he says. "Respect the opinions of others. Plan for the future. Be good to people on the way up as you may meet them on the way down.

"And avoid millennials – they walk around as if they rent the place," laughs the 70-year-old boy who stammered.

A laugh so loud that Ted wakes up.

GUSTO with Billy Magra is live this Friday February 17 at 8.30pm in The Town Hall Theatre, Galway & Saturday February 18 in The Record Room at The Commercial, Limerick. Book at [tth.ie](http://tth.ie) and [eventbrite.ie](http://eventbrite.ie). Tickets €15/€10. Nationwide dates to follow

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