

I DIDN'T KNOW I WAS WORKING CLASS UNTIL THEY STARTED CALLING ME THAT; I JUST THOUGHT WE WERE POOR

KEVIN BRIDGES



He'd been working comedy clubs for a good six years beforehand, fine-tuning his mix of observational and polemical humour and honing his delivery until it seemed effortless (unsure of what to do with his left hand while holding the microphone in his right, he drew attention to it in his routine). Relatively few of his current fans would remember Bridges's club days. Not the punters bellowing "KEVIN! KEVIN!" from the stadiums' upper tiers, the hecklers who interrupt him midflow or the smart aecs who climb onstage for a selfie and an autograph — as happened at the 3000-seater Edinburgh Playhouse towards the end of his last tour. It was a disturbance that caused the usually good-natured Bridges to snap.

"Ach, you know, when I look back on all that touring, just so many dates, I think I went a wee bit crazy. Every night there's that one guy shouting or doing utter shite. It's hard because your mind is racing and you're putting so much into the show, finding other angles to make it funny, working hard to make it look easy ..." He pauses, shrugs. "Suddenly this guy is onstage wanting me to sign his copy of my book. I'm like, 'Come on, mate, feck off', joking, and the audience is booing him — then he starts telling me he comes from the same area and that I've forgotten my roots. The next day the tabloids were all like, 'Bridges' foul-mouthed rant'."

His sits back, looking crestfallen. Bridges is fiercely proud of where he comes from; to say otherwise feels almost litigious. It is precisely because his material draws so heavily on his background, coupled with his ultra-relaxed stage persona, that makes him so approachable, and why some of his special fans might think of him as a friend.

"You're at a comedy club to hear what somebody's got to say about the world, about life," he says. "Leave your phone at home. Switch off."

Weary of not being able to drink in a pub, eat in a restaurant, ride on a bus or walk through town without being recognised ("I've had arguments with taxi drivers about where I went to school") he took the whole of 2016 off. Among other things he lost weight through a combination of diet and exercise, met his current girlfriend, who manages a West End restaurant, and decamped to Madrid to do a six-week course in Spanish: "No one knew me. Each week was a different class of Americans and Scandinavians. I felt like I was in witness protection."

Bridges never got into comedy for the fame. He never even had a plan. At high school he was that funny guy, the chubby dude who never got the girls, who wasn't picked for sports teams and didn't excel in much except for English and cracking up his classmates. Bridges is aware of the clichés peppering his backstory. As he writes in the introduction to his bestselling 2014 memoir, *We Need To Talk About ... Kevin Bridges*, "A comedian's autobiography? I wonder if he's ever used humour to deflect from his insecurities? To avoid being bullied? Is there heartache behind the humour? Tears of a clown? Yes, all of that."

The son of Patricia, a home help, and Andy, a care worker, Kevin and his brother John, 10 years older, grew up in a council house, in a tight-knit family where Christmas presents weren't opened until 2pm ("After Mum got home from work") and his father was laid off work with severe rheumatoid arthritis when Kevin was 12 or 13. Traditional socialist values are in Glasgow's DNA, Bridges has previously said. Much of his comedy is fired by a sense of injustice.

"In my last show I talked a lot about the demonisation of people who are on benefits. I remember how depressed my father was when he was told he couldn't work. So when I hear politicians talking about dole scroungers sitting on their fat arses and all that shite, maybe I feel a duty to point out that they should be having a go at Starbucks and Amazon, these huge companies who aren't paying their taxes. Just don't turn the poor against the poor by going on about some guy on 80-quid-a-week benefits."

A nervy child throughout primary ("I think I'm still an anxious person"), Bridges was 16 when he got chucked out of high school: "I'd become the funniest guy in the school and was the happiest I'd ever been even though my grades were falling, my school reports were shite and my parents kept getting called in." Bridges's party tricks included phoning the school reception from class, putting on a silly voice and insisting on speaking to his teacher. "My mates were always going, 'What's Bridges going to do today?' I had to keep turning over material. I had to treat school like a gig."

Bridges was working stacking shelves in a supermarket when — thanks to a book voucher given to him by an aunt — he bought *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk and comedian Frank Skinner's autobiography. The former's abandon-all-conformity vibe, alongside a memoir written by a success story from England's working-class north ("Frank writes so well about coming up through the club circuit and how everyone just thinks he's the guy off the telly"), was all the motivation he needed. Bridges emailed Glasgow comedy club The Stand and went on to perform a slot at their open-mic night. He was 17 by then, still too young to be served a pint, so his dad had to accompany him. His routine grew from there.

The British comedy circuit was a steep learning curve. He'd never met anyone gay, or black, or posh before ("I didn't know I was working class until they started calling me that; I just thought we were poor"). He wrote about what he knew, got laughs and his first professional booking, and as the gigs rolled in started gambling away his earnings. "I had too much free time and would stand in the bookies all day, squandering huge amounts of money," he says. "I've got an addictive personality so I had a chat to the ex-Celtic striker John Hartson, who went public about his gambling addiction, and he said, 'Don't fool yourself thinking you can put just £5 on a horse. It is never just £5.'"

Bridges rejigged his priorities, saved his money and paid off his parents' house.

"The proudest thing for me was telling my

mum that she could quit her job," he beams. "Last year I bought my parents their own box at Celtic FC with their names on the front. I still remember being a kid and my mum saving up so that we could go and watch a game, then taking a loan to get us season tickets."

"That year off helped me see that the most important things are enjoying my life and doing things with my family. I'm not a flashy guy like [Irish boxer] Conor McGregor. I'm not OTT and going about in minks." Another smile. "But with your parents it's different."

His sabbatical also helped Bridges rediscover his enthusiasm for comedy. Even if compliments about his old routines and stadium shows filled him with dread: "After I got back from Madrid

people kept coming up to me and say, 'I loved you when I saw you at the Hydro last year.' All I could think was, 'Last year. Last year.' " A grimace. "I'm not one of those guys who has to keep working in case one day it all ends. I just wanted to enjoy doing comedy again."

He did his first comeback gig in January, under the radar at an open-mic night on the outskirts of London. Unannounced, with new, more universal material that made him laugh, stuff that just felt natural. With proper first-night nerves: "I felt so ill it was like that first gig at The Stand all over again. For 30 seconds you're thinking, 'Fuck, I'm onstage. It is so bright up here. The audience are really close. That's my voice on the microphone."

"Then instinct kicks in. You get that first laugh and it's such a weight off your mind."

There have been three or four small unannounced gigs since then, here and there when he feels like it, his routines fleshed out with ideas he's jotted down on the bits of scrap paper he finds in his jeans pocket, or strewn all over his house.

"I'm always taking notes 'cause it's never too late to do a gag. You can comment on the room, the day's news or the area; if I'm in Perth or Melbourne I might remember something I've seen that day and think, 'F.k it, I'm going to open up about it.'" The smaller gigs are the toughest: you get the most nervous because the crowd have such high expectations after seeing your DVDs and big shows, so you're getting compared to your previous stuff.

"But I've been getting such a buzz trying out this new material ... So you know, look out Australia."

Bridges does a Murray-style fist-pump. "I'm back."

Kevin Bridges performs in *Just for Laughs*, Sydney, Monday to September 17.

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