

INTERVIEW STEVE COOGAN



A funny old business

As a movie star, Steve Coogan could while away the hours with the Hollywood stars who are fans of his comedy yet prefers to stay in England, writing scripts for the small screen. He explains his extraordinary work ethic to **Ian Burrell**

Steve Coogan has a flight to catch to Hawaii, to shoot his latest movie project with Ben Stiller. It could have been a short hop of a journey from Hollywood, an interlude from the round of partying, networking and hanging out that is considered the right of those who, like him, enjoy international recognition for the work they have done in front of the camera.

Coogan, though, has spent much of the previous week in a courtroom in London, not as a result of more excesses with lap dancers and cocaine, but because he has been honing his favourite comic creation, Tommy Saxondale, who, in a new series starting this month on BBC2, finds himself in the dock. The comedian says he was astonished to see in the lobby of the courtroom a panel listing former High Sheriffs of Surrey that included Penelope Keith and Richard Stilgoe. While filming, he has been staying in a hotel by the Thames, an establishment more refined than Alan Partridge's motel and one where staff have resisted the temptation to serve Coogan's food on an oversize plate.

For an hour and a half, he sits at a picnic table in the hotel grounds, still wearing the hair extensions that transform him into Saxondale – a rock roadie turned rodent exterminator, fighting to reconcile his self-image as a counter-cultural child of the Sixties with his reality as a bearded pest-controller in small-town Hertfordshire – and explains his dedication to making British television comedy.

"More than ever, I now appreciate being able to do inter-



Rebel without a cause: Coogan's favourite character Tommy Saxondale BBC

esting work in television. It matters to me. You can be blinded by the lights of Hollywood, especially when you think there's this pot of gold somewhere. It's not healthy. Saxondale stops me selling my soul, basically."

In part, Coogan's willingness to stay away from LA and write television scripts day after day in the office at the top of his house in Hove is due to frustration with the fact that *Saxondale*, weighed down by the public hunger for a new incarnation of Partridge, has not enjoyed the ratings that its creator feels it merits.

"I was a bit disappointed that [the show] didn't capture the public imagination. If people have a certain expectation and it does-

n't immediately fulfil that, they look at something else. You don't get an immediate fix of visceral comedy within the first 10 seconds [of *Saxondale*]. It really rewards application if you listen to it and pay attention. There's lots of layers in there and lots going on," he says. "He is my favourite character, because for me he's more complex than any of the other characters I have done."

The second series is the result of nine months of working with his co-writer and executive producer Neil MacLennan, who lives nearby, and joins Coogan in the task of smothering the office walls in Post-it notes of ideas. "In the end, there's no substitute for sitting down and putting the

hours in. It's a good discipline to write every day for several months and take your time over it. The office looks out over my back garden and beyond that to Sussex cricket ground, and we occasionally hear cheers and 'Howzat!' when we are writing. The cheers are not for us, though – I wish they were."

This is not to paint Coogan as a twisted funny man grinding his teeth in frustration at the humourless masses who fail to appreciate his talent. How could he feel unloved when he has three feature films in the pipeline? What's more, he is a pragmatist and a student of the science of comedy. According to Henry Normal, his business partner at

Baby Cow productions and friend of 20 years, "comedy is somewhere between mathematics and music – there's a rhythm to it".

Coogan understands that a multi-layered character such as Saxondale – who is at once a wit and a bore, a rebel in suburbia, a man of principle and a prig – is going to be a bit rich for some sections of the comedy audience.

"The British have an opposition when you try to be at all intellectual with your comedy – there's a deep mistrust and suspicion of that. They say, 'Just be funny, don't try to be clever.' But we wanted to do comedy that was about something, have the character articulate something

about the baby-boomer generation that is now getting old and disconnected with the world. Nobody has properly articulated that."

Saxondale, Coogan says, is a metaphor for a world in flux, where the members of those generations that grew up with a common disgust for the Vietnam War or the policies of Margaret Thatcher now don't quite know where to vent their spleens.

"When Tony Blair walked in to Downing Street with an electric guitar 10 years ago, it confused everything," he says. "The war in Iraq... it wasn't a Conservative government that oversaw that war. It's complicated and confusing. It isn't clear-cut. That's what *Saxondale* is about. It's slightly directionless anger."

So in series two we see Tommy welcoming squatters to his Stevenage neighbourhood, warming to these kindred spirits until his more conservative midlife instincts surface. "Although he's not a Trotskyist or anything, he empathises with the squatters because he imagines them to be like a last bastion of opposition, although they're just a load of drug addicts and stoners. He wanted to like them, but when he went round to the house... oh my God, they were just grotesque. He told them to tidy up and pull themselves together." The scene recalls an episode from the first series, in which Saxondale is confronted by a group of aggressive animal-rights vigilantes and responds by shooting one of them, Dirty Harry-style, with his pellet gun.

Coogan breaks off for a sec-

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