

'Comedy is so worthwhile, it makes people happy'



IT'S the summer of 2002. The third batch of Big Brother housemates - Jade Goody, Kate Lawler, PJ, that lot - are getting headline-grabbingly lairy.

And one bloke in particular can't take his eyes off it - he's not allowed to. Years from now, this guy, 24-year-old Alex Horne, will invent a hit show of his own - a hilarious, Bafta-nominated gameshow called Taskmaster, in which top comics including Frank Skinner, Al Murray and Bob Mortimer tackle barny challenges he's dreamt up for them.

But for now he's in a crummy job as a Big Brother logger. That means he taps in details of every move the housemates make. It's an unglamorous slog ('I'm good at touch-typing, I don't get ill much, those are the qualifications...') but the experience is leaving its mark.

"PJ was the one Jade had a thing with..." Alex recalls now, 16 years on, as we chat in a bar in London's Regent Street. "It did feel quite odd, like we shouldn't be watching it, especially in the gallery."

Addicted

But far from playing down his links with that show, Alex freely admits Big Brother 3 - to which he became "completely addicted" - helped inspire his own TV hit.

OK, not the under-the-sheets stuff, but the unpredictable behaviour, the soap opera feel - and, yes, the weird tasks.

Lug a boulder as far as you can. Knock down a row of rubber ducks. Steer a wheeled bin through an obstacle course (one person inside, the others blindfolded, nobody speaking English).

These are some of the brilliantly pointless challenges Alex has set contestants on Taskmaster. Challenges that might never have been dredged from the depths of his mind, had BB not planted that seed of an idea.

The best bit of the Big Brother job was that two weeks before it started they sent us in as practice housemates," he recalls. "Not to stay, but to test the games etc. So yes, that was inspiring."

More so, I'd guess, than working on a potato farm, another of his pre-comedy jobs?

"Yes, for that as a conveyor belt moving that were moulty... and any loads. That's why, hopefully, your own potatoes have never had loads with them."

It's thanks to people like Frank Skinner, on the other hand, that Taskmaster finally took off on Dave in 2015, several other channels having declined.

Getting Frank on board for series one convinced other channels to follow. "Persuading him was weird at first. We had lunch, and he was just doing his... Since then, those who've taken on



BIG NAMES: Alex with some of the celebs who have appeared on Taskmaster



Alex Horne Taskmaster THE MIKE WARD INTERVIEW



Alex's challenges - overseen by the gloriously unpredictable Taskmaster himself, Greg Davies, with "Little" Alex as his sidekick - include Hugh Dennis, Josh Widdicombe, Katherine Ryan, Tim Key, Rob Beckett, Mel Giedroyc and Noel Fielding. One particularly apt task for Mel and Noel - Bake Off hosts past and present - was to destroy a cake. Mel crushed hers. Noel put his in a washing machine. Another time, contestants were challenged to score a goal. "Noel thought it would be with a ball,"

Alex explains. "But it was with a plastic bag. He was so frustrated. He's actually brilliant at football. He wanted to show people." Yes, the comics on Taskmaster do get competitive. Russell Howard, for instance - who's in the new series (starting tomorrow) with Tim Vine, Liza Tarbuck, Alice Levine and Asim Chaudhry - "starts off quite alpha". Tim Vine is "very competitive and very silly at the same time, probably the ideal contestant!" But come on, Alex, is dreaming

up daft challenges any way for a grown man to earn a living? Alex smiles. "I took me a while to accept this, but I do think making comedy is worthwhile. It makes people happy. "When you get messages from people saying, 'It's kept us going' when they've had an illness in the family, I think, yeah, it's doing some good. "I've had times when I've not been convinced it'll pay the bills. "That's when you have doubts - especially touring, away from my family." (Alex and wife Rachel have

three sons, aged five, seven and eight). But those doubts are surely long gone. Besides three further Taskmaster series, plus versions screened abroad, there's his musical comedy band The Horne Section, with a Palladium special on Dave later this month. That, plus The Button, for BBC One, where families tackle challenges at home, dished out by Alex via a box in their living room. "I'm actually talking to them from a little booth. Like when people enter Big Brother's Diary Room. So it does feel a bit full circle!" And since we're back on that subject, would Alex fancy being a Big Brother housemate for real? "I'd love to," he says, "if it weren't filmed and broadcast!"

● **Taskmaster returns to Dave tomorrow at 9pm. The Button continues on BBC One on Friday at 8.30pm.**

ALEX'S FAVOURITES
TV SHOW: Countdown
FILM: The Blues Brothers
COMEDIAN: Tommy Tiernan
SPORTS STAR: Steven Gerrard
ACTOR: Bill Murray
SONG: Havana by Camila Cabello
APP: Chirpomatic (identifies birdsong)
FOOD: Sausages
DRINK: Milk (semi-skimmed)
HOLIDAY DESTINATION: Any Eurocamp in France
CITY: Chichester
ANIMALS: My children

LOGGING IN: PJ and Jade on Big Brother when Alex worked logging housemates' antics

