



Pictures: HUMPHREY NEWAR

MIDLIFE CRISIS: Alistair started to play the piano as he passed the age of 50

Grand tour MIMIC SCALES UP ACT

I'VE a bone to pick with Alistair McGowan.

It concerns Elvis Costello. I used to be a big Costello fan, I tell him – until the day I heard Alistair doing a savagely sharp impression.

“I’ve never been able to listen to him since,” I say. “You ruined it for me!”

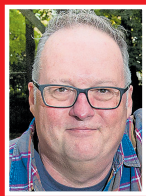
But if I’m expecting some sort of apology from the mimic sat opposite me now in a south-west London pub, I’m clearly out of luck. Alistair’s response is: “That’s very kind of you!” Seems he’s just chuffed that I’ve complimented his work.

Mind you, this isn’t a chap who’s ever much cared for pop music, even as a kid. “I think I saw about three bands in my whole teenage life,” he tells me.

Instead, his passion has always been classical. Which is why that’s the focus of his new UK tour that we’re here to chat about, kicking off on Wednesday.

It’s called *Introductions To Classical Piano*, because, well, that’s what it mostly consists of – Alistair at the piano, playing short classical pieces and chatting inbetween about the composers.

Sure, it includes impressions as well



**The
MIKE
WARD
INTERVIEW**

(“I think it’s the first time anybody’s played George Gershwin after doing Harry Kane...”). But it’s definitely a classical music show, he stresses.

If this all sounds a bit odd, given what Alistair’s best known for, then it’s even odder to think that only five years ago he could barely play a note. Learning to play was a challenge he set himself as he entered his 50s. Was he having a midlife crisis? “I was going to say exactly those words, yes. But it’s a very satisfying one!”

Even with a best-selling classical album now under his belt, Alistair’s not getting carried away. His wife Charlotte sees to that. “She’s a proper trained musician. She said to me, ‘If you’re going

for Alistair ON CLASSICAL PIANO

to do this show, you’ve got to put the comedy in there with it. You’re not good enough, you never will be, to do it like a concert pianist.”

“And she’s right. I thank her for lots of things in my life, but I certainly thank her for that. I’d never do a piano show without some words and something funny.”

So the impressions live on – particularly his football ones. Jose Mourinho did have to go (he’d only just perfected it when Mourinho left Manchester United), but he refuses to drop Arsene Wenger just yet (“It’s a good voice and a very funny joke”).

Perhaps his favourite is Ian Holloway, ex-boss of QPR and others – but he’s currently out of management. “I used to love doing him,” he chuckles. “I had a brilliant joke, which doesn’t really work with anyone else. Please, somebody reading this, re-employ Ian Holloway!”

Of course, mimicry often means mockery, and not everyone takes that well. Football is generally safe territory, but there’s been the odd exception. “I did

a lot of gigs at football clubs in the 90s when the person was actually present, and they didn’t whine at all. Only Alan Smith... I said he had a good nose for goal. He gave me a real look.”

Causing offence is the last thing he wants. “Your job is to make people laugh but you mustn’t forget the person’s feelings.” That’s why he dropped his impression of Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, much as he enjoyed it. “I thought, ‘I’m really belittling her...’”

So with this piano tour about to start, is he worried he’ll be belittled himself, with people questioning his musical talents?

Seems not. In fact, he’s kind of hoping that happens. “Sometimes virtuosic playing can put people off. So I hope people come and see me and think, ‘Well, I could do it as well as you.’ I’d love for them to go away and play.”

● **For details of Alistair’s UK tour, *Introductions To Classical Piano*, go to alistairmcgowan.co.uk**

I’d love it if the fans go away and play...