

Mr Chancellor,

It's a wonderful time to be a citizen of the North. We're hosting a summer-long Great Exhibition to showcase what northern artists, designers and inventors have contributed to the wider world; the toon, our beloved football team, marked a successful return to the Premiership with a top ten finish, and we're currently enjoying the most glorious spell of summer weather since 1976 - which I hope I haven't jinxed by mentioning it!

Jimmy Nail, the musician, actor, writer and producer, whose achievements we are honouring today, is a true son of the North. Indeed, his friend and collaborator, Matt Forrest, told me that he wouldn't give Lucifer a snowflake's chance in hell of stealing this particular northern soul.

Jimmy was born in Benton, in the east end of Newcastle in 1954, the third child and only son of James and Laura Bradford. His father was a shipyard worker, although he also had a brief career as a boxer and footballer. His elder sister, Val told me that Jimmy was "a really lively lad" - very bright, but who railed against the brutal, uncompromising regime of Manor Park School. Val and Jimmy both mentioned the life-changing impact that the tragic loss of their sister Shelagh, aged twenty, had on the family. Jimmy, who was only thirteen when she died, found the loss especially hard. Whilst he nurtured ambitions to follow his elder sister, who studied English at Leeds University and became a successful teacher and lecturer; Jimmy was told in no uncertain terms that the only options available to the likes of him were the shipyard, the pit or the building site. Little wonder then that he went straight from school to a welding apprenticeship at Parsons, which he hated.

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For many people, the name of Jimmy Nail is indelibly associated with the iconic comedy drama series *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, which recounted the adventures of seven English migrant construction workers who leave the UK to seek employment overseas. Jimmy played the role of Geordie bricklayer, Oz Osborne. He was very reluctant to attend the initial interview, and was only persuaded to do so by his then girlfriend, Miriam. Ian la Frenais, who wrote the original series with his partner Dick Clement, told me that the minute they saw him, they knew he would be perfect for the part, even though his acting experience at that point was confined to a brief walk on part in the Michael Caine film *Get Carter*.

Despite the huge success of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, Jimmy was concerned about being typecast and subsequent projects saw him play very different roles. *Crocodile Shoes*, which he scripted and starred in as singer Jed Shepperd, spawned three top twenty singles and a best-selling album. He was also widely acclaimed for his role as Agustin Magaldi in Alan Parker's film, *Evita*, with Madonna in the title role. In 2016, he played Parson Nathaniel in *War of the Worlds* at the Dominion Theatre, London.

Whilst Jimmy has been hugely successful as an actor, television writer and producer, it is clear that his first love was, and still is, music. His autobiography, "*A Northern Soul*" is littered with musical milestones – buying his first guitar, (a walnut-finish Gibson SG), playing his first live gig at a youth club in Gosforth, and forming his first band, The King Crabs, which he describes as a "classic four piece beat combo, supercharged with punk." As a local lass, I was particularly taken by his reminiscences of the Mayfair Ballroom, where he and his mates spent many a happy Friday evening watching "every band that made a mark in the seventies, and quite a few that didn't."

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His musical endeavours inevitably took a back seat when his acting career took off. However, the barnstorming success of the single “*Ain’t no Doubt*”, which reached number one in 1992, and the subsequent best-selling album, “*Growing up in Public*”, revealed that his passion for music remained strong. This was later followed by one of his most personal and poignant songs, “*Big River*” – an elegiac ballad lamenting the impact of the decline of shipbuilding and associated industries on the communities around the River Tyne. His friend Matt Forrest describes it as, “not just a Geordie anthem, it’s a universal story of love and loss, of the inevitability of change and hope for the future.”

Newcastle University is justifiably proud of its aspirational values of excellence, creativity and impact. Our place-based strategy includes a commitment to help build capacity in the creative industries that have become so important to our region. These values and commitments can also be seen in Jimmy Nail’s approach to the successful drama series, *Spender*, which he wrote, produced and starred in. Although scriptwriting was a completely new venture for him, with the support and advice of his friend, Ian la Frenais, he took to it like a duck to water. Jimmy was determined that *Spender* would showcase the region he knew and loved. The series, which reviewers hailed as “a visceral, vital slice of urban noir television”, was the first TV drama series to be shot entirely on location in the North East. Whilst it would undoubtedly have been more practical and cost-effective to shoot it in London, Jimmy knew what the investment and income generated by the show would mean to a region still reeling from the loss of many of its traditional industries. London’s loss was the North-East’s gain.

Civic pride runs deep in Jimmy. He cites amongst his heroes the late Sir Bobby Robson and the railway pioneers, George and Robert Stephenson, who had workshops in West Moor, not far from Jimmy’s childhood home in

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Benton. He is also a generous and committed philanthropist, although he prefers to do his good deeds quietly and without fuss. Joanne Smith, founder and Chief Executive of regional charity FACT - Fighting All Cancers Together - speaks most warmly about what Jimmy brings to the role of Patron; “I am absolutely delighted that he is now part of the FACT family - from the very outset he was keen to meet the people whom the charity supports as well as those who work for it. And when he says he will do something for us, he always delivers on his promises. I feel very honoured to be part of his special celebration today.”

What else can I tell you about Jimmy? I don't know if this is true, but I'm told he is a cat whisperer. Indeed, I am indebted to Matt Forest for providing photographic evidence of the alleged ferocious feline, which certainly looks very calm and docile in Jimmy's arms. Not sure I believe the bit about the zebras though...

Mr Chancellor, to borrow shamelessly from one of his own songs, there ain't no doubt that Jimmy Nail has made a significant contribution to the worlds of music, film and television and is a proud promoter of the cultural heritage of the North East. I, therefore, present him to you as a candidate for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, Public Orator

13th July 2018