

the press conference with PETER STRINGFELLOW

by Rob McGibbon

When it comes to the papers, nightclub owner Peter Stringfellow is something of a national treasure, a cartoon legend in heavy gold, a leopard-print silk shirt and an emblematic '80s mullet. He's like a loveable soap-opera character with a never-ending frothy storyline.

A Sheffield steelworker's son, Stringfellow opened his eponymous London nightspot back in 1980. It became *the* watering hole for anyone from Hollywood A-listers to *Corrie's* Chris Quentin actors, and, above all, gossip hungry and champagne thirsty showbiz hacks. Stringfellow is a rare breed of celebrity who actually likes journos, so "Stringy" was born.

The Hippodrome followed and then clubs in LA, Miami and New York, but the empire collapsed in the mid-'90s and only the original venue survived. His fortunes were revived with lap-dancing and now he has clubs in Paris and Dublin, and in May 'Stringfellows Soho' arrives, a £4 million "extravaganza" geared to international high rollers. All clubs are on a theme — sexy strippers get naked in three minutes for £20 worth of "Heavenly Money". However, scribes please note: to Stringy his venues are "table dance clubs" and his girls are "dancers-stroke-entertainers".

Now 65, Stringy has rarely been on finer form. He's engaged to 22-year-old Bella Wright, a former ballerina. They live in a plush riverside apartment. He has a villa and a boat in Majorca and many millions in the bank. Warm and fun, Stringy is as genuine as they come. What you see is what you get.

Professional to the point of monastic abstinence, I forego the chance to chat over champagne and lithe naked girls to sip tea with Stringy in his little back-room office a few doors up from his infamous den of bacchanalia. Oh, well.

I can't tell you what a rarity it is to interview someone who actually likes journalists. Particularly tabloid journalists. Why?

Quite simply, I connect with journalists, we have an affinity. I am comfortable with journalists because I have an identification with them and we are somewhat similar. While I am famous — I'm not a star but a celebrity, a well-known person — I am still the same as you guys. We spin around celebrities. Stars come into my club and it's great for me. You could say Rod Stewart is one of my best star friends. I haven't seen him for five years. Tom Jones and I used to get drunk like mad. Wonderful, but I haven't seen him for years either. If you can meet a person three times and call him your friend, then



"I like G-strings — there's nothing worse than a bright white bum with spots on it. I thought, don't worry, no-one will notice. What was I thinking?!"

Jack Nicholson is my friend. But journalists, I see them all the time. For my 65th birthday party and the 25th anniversary of the club (*last November*), my invites were all to newspaper people. As much as anything, that party was a "Thank You" to the press. It is they who have been coming all these years — they are my celebrities.

Most journalists like a good bevvie and you are famous for your hospitality. What have your "entertaining expenses" come to over the years?

Jesus! Since the beginning? (*begins counting*). Umm, that was 10 grand... those parties, 20 grand each... that night (*quickly gives up*). It's impossible to put a figure on it. You could average it at, say, £100,000 a year over 25 years, so it runs into millions. But I don't count because whatever I have spent is nothing to what it has brought me in publicity. I just know if I get a quarter of a page, or two pages in a paper like *The Sun*, or the *Mail*, well, you can't buy that. And all papers are welcome. I don't ever put one above the other. If it's *The Star* or *The Sunday Times*, fine, they all have their own readership and

are the same to me. And I don't underestimate the influence of the provincial press either. They have hugely loyal readerships, so they are also important.

But I never think, Right I am entertaining this journalist because I want publicity. Forget it. I don't operate like that. I have a drink with a journalist because I want to and I will have fun too. They are a great laugh and know how to enjoy themselves. The best bargain I have ever had is giving a journalist a drink. I have not got enough books to put all my press cuttings in. There isn't a taxi driver in London who doesn't know where Stringfellows is and much of that is down to publicity. I have a lot to thank the press for — I am famous throughout the world because of them.

You are good friends with many tabloid editors, does that provide any protection if things ever get heavy?

No way. It doesn't save me at all and it would be unreasonable to expect it to. If I do something bad enough, then I am going to end up on every front page, no matter who I know. It's no good me saying,

"Remember those few drinks we had..." I wouldn't dream of it. Absolute loyalty with journalists is difficult because a story is a story, they have a job to do and I understand that. And if something is in the public interest, then there is no debate. But I don't have anything to hide, so I don't feel people are looking to cut my legs off.

What have been some of your worst experiences at the hands of the papers?

I have had three kiss and tells, which weren't exactly nice, but I deserved them. The first was in the *Sunday Mirror* in the 1980s. When they came to me, I remember saying, "Hey, fellas, can't we talk about this?" But no, the story went straight in the papers. It was a bit of a shock, but I was terrible in my relationships and I was never faithful, so I had it coming. I was living a lie and it was embarrassing to get caught out. The pain the stories caused my girlfriends was unforgivable and wrong of me, but the newspapers can't do that against me these days because I don't do it.

The one time I wanted to sue was in the 1980s when Princess Diana came to The Hippodrome on an official visit. This was the pinnacle for me, but the weekend before, the *Sunday Express* published a story saying that Diana was being lured into a web of depravity run by this man Stringfellow. They made all kinds of insinuations, so I took Queen's Counsel. It was explained to me that I had no grounds to sue because I couldn't prove I had been damaged. Reluctantly, I withdrew. From then on I took a very relaxed attitude to the press. If it's just a matter of shooting arrows at my image, forget it. But if they ever made a serious inaccurate allegation against me — like questioning my honesty — then I would fight.

One of your long-term girlfriends, Lucy Carr, sold her story to the papers. That looked pretty bad. What happened there?

Yes, that was a little bit hurtful, but it was a mess up. When we split we agreed it was not going to be a newspaper article. However, she was very distressed and said she needed people to know we were finished, but that I hadn't dumped her. I spoke to the *News of the World* and *The People* to see if they wanted the story if it was not salacious. They were very honest and said, "No, we're only interested if it is a real kiss and tell." Fine. They needed her to say I was crap in bed, or something, and they were dead straight about it. The *Mail on Sunday* said they were happy with the girl's story, so Lucy did an interview. She said, "I'll be OK, I know the press." I said, "Just tell them what you are happy with, nothing more." She did use those words — "old guy... a bit boring... rather small boat" — but it's the old cliché. She didn't mean it the way it came out. Journalists move lines around and connect them up to sound better, and that's what happened. It hurt a bit, but it's candy floss. It comes and goes fast.

Did it harm me? No. If you're going to be news, you've got to take it and keep smiling.

STRINGY'S NEWS SCHEDULE



Newspapers: I get *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *The Times* delivered every morning. The thing I love about *The Sun* is Trevor Kavanagh. He is one of the brightest political writers around. I know he has stepped down recently, but I have read *The Sun* for years essentially for his comments. I get the *Sunday Times*. I like AA Gill and I even like reading Michael Winner. The *Style* section used to be great but that has become too female focused. I also always get the *News of the World* and the *Mail on Sunday* or sometimes the *Sunday Express*. If I am in Majorca, I get the local paper *The Daily Bulletin* and the *Daily Express*.

We have a cuttings service that sends in every story about Stringfellows. We get piles and I go through them all to get a sense of how we are perceived. I particularly look at the regional press coverage.

Can we get to the bottom of those legendary thigh photographs?

Both of them were taken in Barbados. The first was about 10 years ago. I bumped into Andy (*Coulson*, editor of *NoW*) and Hogie (*showbiz snapper Dave Hogan*). They were there doing a story with Robbie Williams. We had lunch together then went off to do some pictures with my beautiful girlfriend. Hogie took a picture of me from behind and it was published everywhere. It was a bit embarrassing, but my butt is in good shape, so it was fine.

That picture took me 10 years to live down — then it happened again last year! One morning I couldn't find my beach stuff, so I put on a G-string. I like G-strings — there's nothing worse than a bright white bum with spots on it. I thought, Don't put that on. Oh, don't worry, I said, no-one will notice. What was I thinking?! I didn't see a soul, but a few days later my bum and my big fat belly were all over the papers. And next to me, is my drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend who just happens to be yawning! Argh! I could not have set up a better photo for the press if I'd planned it.

The G-string was no problem, but the belly drove me mad. Terrible. Michael Winner wrote in his column that his week was made by seeing me with a belly bigger than his. Does it get any more depressing? I let myself go for a little while, so after that I had six months of the booze and got back into shape. OK, those pictures knocked my ego a bit, but they do zilch harm to my business. If anything, it gives me a lift. My clients are mainly male and they just go, "Oh, Stringy, what's he been up to now?"

You got some flak from the pack when you banned fat people from the club in 1994. What was that all about?

That was a killer and I had to fight that one. This woman walked in and she was a terrible mess. She was really big, but not only that, she was sloppy with it. She was wearing flat shoes and was shuffling around. I said to my manager, "Who the hell is that?" and he explained she was with a group of gorgeous girls. I said, "I don't care, she can't be in here."

I went over to the bar and this guy asked what had happened. I explained the situation, but I had no idea he was a journalist and a day later it was all over the front page of *The Sun* and went round the world. People were outside with placards. I had calls from Australia, Japan... from all over. I felt stupid and I had to do some pretty major back-tracking.

You are on record as claiming to have had 2,000 lovers. Is that a headline you liked?

Aaaargh — No! It is so embarrassing. If there is one thing I wish to God I had not said, it's that. As true as it is, it sounds such a childish, braggart thing to say. It's not something I needed to give the world and it's the stupidest thing I've said in 26 years of dealing with the press. I can't think of one other thing that I would take back. I can laugh at everything else, but I have to live with that stupid statement. Every journalist digs that out of the archive.

Magazines:

National Geographic is the only one I buy regularly. The articles in there fascinate me and if I had not been in this industry I would love to have been an archaeologist. It was impossible. I did not have the education. See this? (*pulls out a tooth on a gold neck chain*). This is a dinosaur's tooth, a real one, 220 million years old and comes from the Arizona desert.

Television:

I watch BBC TV news most, but I go to Sky to get a balance. Occasionally, I go to Fox News because it's quite entertaining and is a mix between a magazine and a newspaper.

Web:

I don't use the web a lot. Although I'm getting more into it and that's because of my own site. I update that all the time by phoning my designer and dictating new bits to put on — what stars have been in, what parties are coming up. The main focus is the retail store.



I think I am going to have to pin this one on Andy (*that man again!*). We were drinking one night with Rod Stewart and a couple of other stars, can't remember who. Bill Wyman had just brought out his autobiography in which he said he had kept a list of all the girls he'd slept with. I said something like, "I can't even remember how many I've slept with — I've lost count!" The conversation got going and Rod tried to work out his total and then I did a rough calculation based on the '60s, '70s and '80s. It's amazing what sounds like fun when you're on your second bottle of champagne. I looked over at Andy and thought, That's all right, that's just Andy, having a drink. When I picked up *The Sun* a few days later I thought, *Oh no. Fuck me!* I have never lived it down since.

Although everyone has this image of you as the relentless playboy, you must also be a canny businessman beneath it all to still be going?

I must be. I know my business, and I am the best in it. But the business side always gets overlooked because it's boring. No-one wants to talk about that in an interview and neither do I really. I just accept that I am good at what I do and I don't feel it's necessary to see it written down somewhere. The people who should know are my bank and the people who work for me.

So there is a cartoon version of me, which I play up to a bit. But journalists who interview me often go away and put things in afterwards that I have not said, because they want me to fit in with that image they have. They go through the archives, find some cliché and repeat it. But I don't really care too much because I am comfortable with who I am and I have always liked being me. I know my limitations and I know I'm not Brad Pitt — but I am happy to be me.

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Peter Stringfellow's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

"The Pope Asks For Invite To Stringfellows Dublin and Stringfellows Soho"

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

"By Public Demand Stringfellow Accepts Four Year Dictatorship of Britain". Wonderful. It is so simple to put this country right, but I would have to be a dictator to do it. I loved the BBC series *Rome* recently — I was sad when it ended — so I would happily accept the title "Caesar Stringfellow".

What would be the headline you most dread?

"New Labour Says No Smoking Law Was Such A Success We Will Now Ban Naked Girls". That would be hell — for everyone!

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask?

Professor Stephen Hawking. He came to the club not long ago and I was genuinely honoured to meet him, I was knocked out. But he would not talk to me about the universe! I asked if he would like to chat, or look at the girls and he put that thing to his throat and said, "Girls!"

He is a man who lives inside his brain. You look at his life and what happened to his body and I would ask him, Do you believe in God?

What question would you never answer?

Anything that might do harm to someone I love. You say stuff when you are younger that is a bit insensitive. One of the pleasures that comes with old age is you become more caring and understanding. I like being my age.

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?

"Watch this space — I'm coming back!"

Portrait
Phil Adams