

COOGAN'S BLUFF

Britain's reigning king of the comedy of embarrassment.

BY JOHN LAHR

On a sweltering morning in mid-March, three executive producers for HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm," David Mandel, Alec Berg, and Jeff Schaffer, lolled around in shorts at the patio table of a Malibu beachfront house waiting for the actors to arrive so that the day's shooting could begin. All were graduates of the *Harvard Lampoon* and of "Seinfeld." A month earlier, they had put the British comedian and actor Steve Coogan up for the role of Dr. Bright, a psychiatrist whose advice lands Larry (Larry David), the antihero of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," in a world of woe with his wife, Cheryl (Cheryl Hines), in the penultimate episode of the sixth and possibly final season of the series, which airs November 4th. It was a meatier role than most guest appearances, and the producers had been hoping, according to Schaffer, to "get someone great." They were all Coogan fans. Larry David, however, knew nothing about him.

In 2005, "The Comedian's Comedian," a British television special, asked more than three hundred respected comedy professionals worldwide to rank their favorite comedians. Coogan came in at No. 17, just ahead of Charlie Chaplin (No. 18), just behind Peter Sellers (No. 14), and well ahead of many more famous figures, such as Eddie Murphy (No. 32), Bill Cosby (No. 47), and Mel Brooks (No. 50). (Larry David was No. 23.) The forty-two-year-old Coogan is, in some ways, a British version of Larry David. He has captivated British audiences for more than a decade, with a run of enormously successful television series which are the kind of high-water marks of comedy in Britain that "Seinfeld" (for which Larry David co-wrote sixty episodes) and "Curb Your Enthusiasm" are for American viewers.

In his shows, Coogan, like David, has accentuated the negative and explored the comedy of embarrassment.

He specializes in creating characters, not jokes. Each comic persona has a distinct world view, a unique idiom, and a richly imagined backstory. Coogan's humor often trades on the almost Oriental complexity of the British class system, which means that his most memorable characters—the beer-swilling Mancunian slacker Paul Calf and his sluttish sister Pauline, for instance—don't always travel well beyond the borders of the British Isles. ("It really bugs me," Paul Calf said in one routine. "They say, 'Oh, David Beckham—he's not very clever.' Yeah. They don't say, 'Stephen Hawking—shit at football.'") In Britain, however, they are household names, as much as Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are here. If you were alive in England in the nineties, Coogan's character Alan Partridge was one of the cultural icons by which you measured time, a Malvolio of media personalities, on a direct line of wit between Basil Fawlty and David Brent. A hapless talk-show host demoted to radio d.j., Partridge was mean-spirited, self-aggrandizing, status-seeking, forever tempest-tossed in the Sea of Me. He was also a fun-house reflection of Tory Britain, the ultimate Thatcherite Middle Englander. His three series on BBC2 riveted the country from 1994 to 2002, attracting as much as twenty per cent of the audience share and selling more than half a million DVDs.

For a few years now, Coogan has been sowing the seeds of a successful acting career as well. He is the only British comedian since Dudley Moore to make significant inroads into the movie market, with fine performances in such films as Jim Jarmusch's "Coffee and Cigarettes" (2003), Michael Winterbottom's "24-Hour Party People" (2002) and "A Cock and Bull Story" (2005), and Sofia Coppola's "Marie Antoinette" (2006), as well as some not so fine outings in such big-budget Holly-

wood movies as “Around the World in Eighty Days” (2004) and “Night at the Museum” (2006).

By Coogan’s second day on the set of “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” according to Mandel, “it was just like he’s one of the regulars. It’s very simple to see when Larry’s having fun.” Mandel was holding the day’s script—a single piece of paper with seven typed lines—which gave the basics of the plot that Coogan, David, and Hines would flesh out through improvisation over the next eight hours: Larry, in an effort to get himself out of the doghouse with Cheryl, who has moved to a rental in Malibu, takes Dr. Bright there and tries to persuade him to accept the blame for everything that has gone wrong. As the crew positioned the lights around the wicker living-room furniture and adjusted the curtains of the bay window overlooking the glassy Pacific, Coogan, in conservative psychiatrist garb—blue gabardine suit, suede shoes, and glasses—milled around the set in a kind of focussed, anonymous solitude.

Once the actors had blocked out the scene, he and David began to improvise an argument about who should take responsibility for David’s marital crisis. “I’m taking ninety per cent of the blame,” Coogan said. “I’m asking you to take ten per cent.” David refused; mayhem ensued. After each take, the writers huddled around the actors and rearranged the syntax of the scene, clarifying ideas, cutting excesses, adjusting words, resetting props, and debating character points. Gradually, they built up a grammar and a rhythm for the exchange. Around the fifth take, as the argument about Dr. Bright’s percentage of responsibility escalated, David began to crack up in the middle of the scene. Two or three times, he started to speak, then collapsed in guffaws. “I’m so sorry,” he said more than once. On the sixth take, Coogan’s exasperation—“I take one hundred per cent!”—set David wheezing like a tire deflating. He covered his face. “I can’t help it,” he said. On the seventh take, Coogan nailed it. He spoke of Larry as being under his “auspices”—a pompous term that somehow captured the preposterousness of the man and his situation. “That was pretty wonderful,” Mandel said, under his breath, and called, “Cut.”

During a break, David noticed me



Steve Coogan is, in some ways, a British version of Larry David.

scribbling on my notepad and sashayed over. “Why did I let you on the set?” he asked, then dictated, “Larry David looked pensive before the shot,” and headed off with a pensive look on his face. I asked him what was so funny about Coogan. “He’s just got a funny way,” he said, turning back. “When he started yelling, I hadn’t heard him yell before. That really made me laugh. I cannot keep a straight face when people yell at me on the show. In life, of course, I cower.” David went on, “He plays confusion and ineptitude very well.” Schaffer added, “Steve’s able to get a lot of comedy on reactions. He’s skilled enough to know that he’s gonna get huge laughs by saying nothing.”

Coogan seemed almost embarrassed to be the focus of attention on Larry David’s set. “It’s someone else’s show,” he said at the lunch break. “I want to do interesting stuff without overwhelming.” While he waited for a van to take him to his trailer, a couple of miles down the Pacific Coast Highway, he said, “I find it quite inspiring. It’s like playing tennis with someone who’s really good. It raises your game.” Even when he climbed into the van beside David, Hines, and the producers, who were heading to a local sushi restaurant, he maintained a polite, almost shy reserve. David was talking about his diet, about Coogan’s comedy, about something that the character George had said on “Seinfeld.” The van

swung into the show's base camp to drop Coogan off. "I respect you all. Goodbye," he said as he got out.

The spirituality of imperfection is what interests me," Coogan said of his comedy. In life, Coogan's imperfections have landed him, variously, in therapy, in rehab, and in the British tabloids, where he regularly sees himself depicted as a Viagra-gobbling, coked-up libertine with a sweet tooth for threesomes. In 1996, Coogan's four-year relationship with the lawyer Anna Cole ended—six months before their daughter, Clare, was born—after tales surfaced of his bedding another woman on a mattress covered in ten-pound notes. In 2002, Coogan hosted "a bevy of lap dancers" in his hotel room. "I was appalled and shocked to find out they were lap dancers," he said, when tabloid newshounds confronted him. "I was under the impression that they were Latvian refugees who needed shelter for the night." In 2004, another hotel-room jamboree with lap dancers was one of the more sensational indiscretions that put paid to his two-year marriage to the society beauty Caroline Hickman. In 2005, the singer Courtney Love claimed to have got pregnant during a brief affair with Coogan. (Coogan denies this.) This summer, in response to a suicide attempt by his friend the actor Owen Wilson, Love put Coogan back in the tabloids, characterizing him as a kind of Devil's henchman who had somehow pushed Wilson over the edge. ("It's horse-shit," Coogan said. He had been filming in Hawaii for six weeks and hadn't even seen Wilson since the previous January.)

Through the years, Coogan has come to believe that everything problematic about himself—his fears, his vanities, the public saga of his sexual misadventures—is also part of the solution, something he can exploit quite directly in his performances. "I've seen myself in my personal life behaving like an idiot *and* thinking, This will be quite useful," he said. "If I see something I've done that's funny, I will laugh out loud like I'm watching a character that's been created." He co-opts his own flaws in his work, he said, in order to deny "other people ownership of things that might make me vulnerable. To me, it's a battle of wits. You can't pretend you don't have that baggage, so the best thing to do is just use it all. The older one gets,

A KOSMOS

You lay in your last sleep, not-sleep,
head tilted stiffly to the right on the pillow
at a sharper angle than when you bent over poems,
year after year, and we plucked at each other's lines,

as if now you considered some even starker question.
Your I.V. tubes were gone. Your arms were bruised.
A blue cloth cap enfolded your pale, bald head.
It was too late to give you the lavender shawl I'd imagined

more for my sake than for yours.
Your mouth was suddenly tender, the mouth of a girl.
You had come very far, to come here.
Never one not to look at things squarely,

now you looked inward. Who knows what you saw.
And when, weeks later, we gathered
again at the house to say those formal farewells,
I went up to your study looking for "Leaves of Grass"

and found, instead, your orderly desk, unused,
your manuscripts neatly stacked, the framed
photographs of your girls, and, like a private message
from Whitman, who saw things whole, the small

dried body of a mouse. A kosmos, he, too. He, too, luckier.

—Rosanna Warren

laughter becomes the only available option." As Oscar Wilde observed, to become a "spectator of one's own life... is to escape the suffering of life." Coogan displays a certain detachment when he's not performing, a kind of polite vagueness. He can't do "big emotional things," his producing partner, the comedy writer Henry Normal, told me. "What comes out is often just the tip of the iceberg. Somewhere within him, he feels disconnected from the world. Comedy is one way that he makes that connection. Part of what he's doing is reshaping the world so he can fit into it."

On another bright day in March, I visited Coogan in Hove, a genteel annex of Brighton where he and his current co-writer, Neil MacLennan, were thrashing out the story lines for the second season of Coogan's latest series, "Saxondale," which was scheduled to begin shooting in June. (The first season was shown here on BBC America last year.)

In the distance, the brackish Channel threw off glints of light; seagulls sunbathed on street signs beside Coogan's house, where the blinds of the front windows were drawn. Except for the gray Porsche parked in the driveway, there was nothing showy about the place or, when he finally answered the door, about Coogan himself, dressed in his usual mufti of jeans, cardigan, and T-shirt.

Coogan is thin, with a shock of graying, uncombed hair; offscreen, he seems subdued, at once guarded and restless. His house—which he moved into in 1999, though he spends a lot of his time in Los Angeles—revealed the single-minded focus of his transient life. In the spacious front rooms, boxes and racks of clothes waited to be sorted. Only his daughter Clare's room, its walls decorated with rainbows, a pink ballet skirt dropped like a grace note in the middle of the floor, showed any sense of life or order. Comedy is what gets Coogan's attention and—according to Henry Normal—

takes up ninety per cent of his waking time. "The other ten per cent are eating and going to the toilet," Normal said. "I don't think he has a day off unless he's forced to. Even if he has a day off, who knows what's going on in his head? He could be doing a sitcom about having a day off." (In 1999, Normal and Coogan together formed Baby Cow, now one of the biggest independent comedy production companies in Britain.)

A large Victorian desk with a leatherette top dominates Coogan's work room, but he rarely sits at it. He is a pacer. He doesn't write things down; he doesn't type; his gift is for improvising on his feet. "He's almost autistic," Normal said. "If he's trying to find a joke, you could set a fire next to him and he wouldn't notice." MacLennan, a large, genial, shaggy man with tired eyes, was at the desk with his laptop, poised to catch the sparks of the day's conversation and to keep Coogan's imagination from wandering too far off track. On the wall behind him, stretching from the fireplace to the ceiling, was a mosaic of color-coded Post-its, listing the plot points, character ideas, and key lines for each episode of the new season of "Saxondale" ("Regrets"—yellow, "Nostalgia"—turquoise, "Suicide"—blue). "It's been heavily compromised, because I ran out of colors," MacLennan said.

Tommy Saxondale, Coogan's most recent and most nuanced creation, is a former roadie turned pest exterminator, a man full of heroic gas, a combination of bombast and botched insight. He is also a potbellied, gray-haired projection of Coogan's own divided nature: a romantic contrarian struggling to come to terms with the confounding disappointments of adulthood and searching for ways to face down the uncertainties of the new century with a modicum of dignity. Each episode of the show begins with a session of an anger-management class that Tommy is taking. When, in one segment, the teacher argues that negotiation is better than conflict, Tommy responds, "Not always possible, is it? ... Take the urban squirrel. I would like nothing better than to hammer out a negotiated settlement." But the squirrels in public parks, he says, have feasted on hidden crack cocaine and become violent, drug-crazed rodents:

I have seen a squirrel with my own eyes punch a pit bull terrier on the nose. Say what you want about anger management. But, if it's

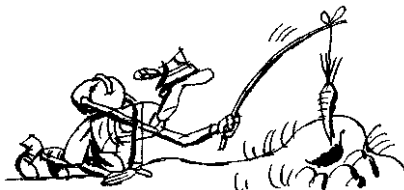
between me and a crack squirrel, I would take that squirrel down. I would take that squirrel down to Chinatown.

"I connect with his anger and frustration and his preponderance to pontificate endlessly," Coogan said. "I'm a bit insecure. That's fine. I just give it all to Tommy." He glanced out the window at his walled garden—a large square of lawn dominated by an apple tree with a picturesque wooden swing. On one side of the property, below a vegetable patch of peas, runner beans, spring onions, and radishes, was a covered swimming pool; on the other was the Sussex County Cricket Club. "There's great ambient sound around here," MacLennan said, referring to the "oohs" and "aahs" that emanate from the cricket matches. Coogan chimed in: "I find it very easy to work when I can hear the background noise of polite applause. ... He said ironically, knowing it was funny."

Coogan propped himself against the mantelpiece to scrutinize the Post-it notes detailing the episode that he was working on. In it, Tommy is fined for riding a train without a ticket, even though he offers to pay. "This happened to me," Coogan said. Refusing to pay the fine as a matter of principle, Tommy insists on defending himself in court. Coogan and MacLennan began work on his courtroom defense. Coogan offered, "Should he start his speech saying, 'Mark Twain once said ...'? I just wonder what's funniest. Is there a more pretentious person? William Wilberforce? That might be too pretentious. Someone whose name is loaded with the righting of wrongs and injustice ... Mahatma Gandhi."

"Nelson Mandela," MacLennan suggested.

But Coogan had already settled on Gandhi. "Some people might say, How can you compare nonpayment of a ticket to a British railroad station—Stevenage railway station—with Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance?" he began, in character. "Some people might regard that as ridiculous, even deeply pretentious. But this is why it's not."



Coogan improvised and tested; MacLennan challenged and transcribed. The *pas de deux* went on for an hour and a half. Finally, they took a tea break, and Coogan settled onto a black leather sofa. "I like doing someone who's got a few neuroses," he said. "The dysfunctional side of your personality is always funnier. It's kind of a double bluff. I like the idea of people thinking, Is he really that bad?" He added, "When I say things as Tommy Saxondale, it's sometimes me just getting things off my chest. We all talk crap and do stupid things sometimes."

Coogan's characters are, in a way, his confessional. His longtime friend and collaborator the playwright Patrick Marber told me, "The difference between Steve and a lot of celebrities is he feels a bit guilty about it all. There's an urge in him to be a good family man and a good boy." Coogan, who was born in 1965, grew up in Middleton, just north of Manchester, in a lower-middle-class Catholic family, and, according to Anna Cole, "his Catholic upbringing is a huge part of who he is." His parents, Tony and Kathleen, an I.B.M. engineer and a housewife, were progressive Catholics; in addition to their own six children (Steve is the fourth) and an adopted daughter named Maria, they took in a series of foster children throughout his childhood. In the liberal, vivacious Coogan ménage, the children all vied for the attention of their parents, who were not "particularly demonstrative," Coogan said. "You couldn't get a lot of their time." He used to run home from school during recess "to sit with my mum and chat about things, just to get an hour on my own with her."

"We're a family that puts a high value on being entertaining," Coogan's older sister, Clare, told me. Coogan was prepared to go to great lengths to make an impact. When he was twelve years old, he daubed himself with fake blood and wax skin "to make myself look like I was dead." Once, he made an effigy of a man and put it in the living room; the body was tricked out with a tape recording and lights. "When you went in the door, a light would come on, blinding you, and it would trigger the voice on the tape saying, 'Hello. Come in. Sit down. Do not attempt to see who I am,'" he explained. "My mum just went over and pulled the head off the effigy. I would do

things like that all the time. My sister remembers me saying a lot, 'Look at me!' 'Watch me!'"

Throughout his school years, Coogan told me, his report cards all said the same thing: "chatterbox, tendency to dream, slow in his work." Coogan, who was introverted and anxious, said that his obsession with comedy was just one manifestation of being "in my own world a lot of the time." He was so dreamy that his aunt dubbed him Stevie Wonder. "In our family, I would say, he was the least confident," Clare said. "He was very aware of being humiliated. Very early on, he lived with not being brilliant, not being good-looking. If we'd been puppies, I think he would have been the runt of the litter."

Still, from the age of three, Coogan displayed a startling gift for mimicry; he'd wake his siblings up at night to make them guess the identity of his latest impersonation. "I was like a windup toy for friends," he said. When he was a twelve-year-old at Catholic grammar school, his older brother Martin—who was the first Coogan to win fame, as the lead singer of the Mock Turtles, and is now a Manchester d.j.—would pull Steve aside and command him to do impressions. Coogan's impersonations included Margaret Thatcher, Michael Crawford, Roger Moore, and Sean Connery. He could also mimic his schoolteachers; once he was even invited to lead an assembly as his housemaster, checking the students' dress and extemporizing on school issues. "I wasn't the class clown," he said. "I had my own sense of humor, which was a little bit elitist. When the teacher asked me to do that, I was reluctant. I didn't want to be a performing monkey, but I did do it. It was the only thing I was good at, to be honest."

Coogan grew up in a television generation; his influences were primarily British TV comedy—"Monty Python," "Porridge," "Steptoe and Son," "The Two Ronnies," "Morecambe and Wise." (The economy and eloquence of Northern workingmen's club comedy also had a significant influence on him.) Watching comedy shows was a family event and "quite formative to me," he said. "Parents and children all laughing—it's a unifying thing." In a time before VCRs, Coogan would use a tape deck to record comedy shows and play the dialogue back to friends. When there was no dialogue, he'd

describe the action. "I used to get annoyed when I'd hear people telling the stories and not doing justice to the detail. The detail made it work for me."

By the time he finished school, enough people had told him that he should be on television that, he said, "I thought, Well, maybe I *have* got something." He had done badly on his A levels and had been rejected for a course in politics at Lancaster University. "I remember thinking, In every generation new people emerge—that's the natural order of things," he said. "I thought, Why can't I be part of that new generation? All those people must have started somewhere. I've got as good a chance as anyone. No baggage. No setbacks. I've got to try and do something. I'm not going to do it through academia."

At nineteen, Coogan auditioned for the London drama schools and was rejected by all of them. "I felt like an 'oik' from the regions," he said. "They cast a great silhouette, these young men and girls who came in, with inbuilt confidence." When he auditioned, later, for the Manchester Polytechnic, which offered a vocational course in drama, Coogan used that sense of intimidation to create a character called Duncan Thickett, a sort of whirlwind of ineptness. "Because I was doing a character, it gave me license," Coogan said. "I walked in with my books and dropped them all over the floor and scrambled to pick them up like I was very nervous. I did a deliberate rendition of an incompetent, idiotic person trying to get into drama school." "He was gawky, with a strange laugh and big glasses," Martin Nestor, who was one of the two adjudicators, said. "We thought, We mustn't laugh, because he'll think we're laughing at him. For two or three minutes, we were genuinely fooled into believing that this young man was a candidate. Finally, he broke it off and said, 'My name is Steve Coogan and I've come to audition.'" Needless to say, he was accepted into the program.

Coogan began to realize—"almost overnight," he said—that what he'd perceived as his handicaps were actually virtues. "I knew what ordinary working-class people sounded like. I had a good ear. A lot of these people from middle-class backgrounds were confident but they didn't know how ordinary people spoke. I suddenly thought, I'm better than them at

what I do. I felt like I had something." In order to get his Equity card, he started doing standup. At the time, there were no alternative comedy venues outside of London, so he worked the rowdy Manchester pubs, sometimes opening for his brother's band. He developed the habit of adding surreal scenarios to his impersonations: the pint-size comedian Ronnie Corbett in Vietnam, Sylvester Stallone as a social worker, Robert De Niro meets Alan Bennett. "I remember seeing him in Manchester and thinking he's too big for the crowd he's running with," Normal said. "They're aiming for the trees; he's aiming for the moon."

By the age of twenty-two, Coogan was earning a thousand pounds a night doing standup, as well as providing voices for the satirical TV puppet show "Spitting Image." Tapped as one of the up-and-coming generation of performers, he twice appeared in the Royal Variety Performance, where he shook hands with Prince Charles and Princess Diana. But his comic Waterloo came in 1990, when he was playing the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, with the comedian Frank Skinner supporting him. "He blew me offstage," Coogan said, anger still percolating in his voice at the memory. "We were sharing a flat in Edinburgh and the phone kept ringing. It was always for him. I was much better known than he was, but I was just doing impressions. Yeah, Steve Coogan—he does funny voices.' They were over me already, before my career had started." Coogan began to think of his impersonations as the theatrical equivalent of juggling, a trick that should be consigned to birthday parties. He hankered for the depth and richness of real characters. "I was very much aware that some of the more established people regarded me as lightweight," he said. "I was absolutely determined to redress it." He added, "I remember someone said to me, 'You're gonna have to pull a rabbit out of a hat, because you're flatlining.'"

In the end, he produced two rabbits. The first was a repertory of characters, which he developed with another Manchester Polytechnic graduate, the comedian John Thomson. In 1992, he took their show, "Steve Coogan in Character with John Thomson," to the Edinburgh Fringe. He also paid a cohort, Patrick Marber, to direct it. Marber, who became one of the most distinguished playwrights

of his era, had yet to direct anything. Nonetheless, he was Coogan's second rabbit, a rigorous contributor to the depth, shape, and backstories of Coogan's characters. "We met at a very good time," Marber said. "I was a bit lost and sort of waiting to be a writer. Steve needed a director. We had a very fruitful four or five years, when we made a lot of radio and TV programs together."

Coogan closed the Edinburgh show with his new creation, Paul Calf, the philistine lager-lout. Calf came onstage with a beer in his hand, a mullet hairdo, and ash on his trousers. "I've got two bad habits: smoking and masturbation," he said. "I'm a twenty-a-day man—and I smoke like a chimney." The character immediately took off; so did Coogan. His show won the Edinburgh Fringe's Perrier Award for best comedy performance. "That was probably the most enjoyable award I ever got," he said. "When you're in the Edinburgh bubble, it seems bigger than the Oscar. Things happen in quick time. The first week, no one's heard of you; by the fourth week, you're a star." Throughout the hubbub, people kept asking Coogan if he was going to tour. "I'm working on a radio show," he'd answer, "with this new character, Alan Partridge." "A lot of people were saying, 'Don't bother with that. Get out on tour,'" Coogan said. He responded, "No, you don't know how good this is gonna be."

Paul Calf owed his bawdry and his edginess to Coogan's working-class Manchester past. Alan Partridge was more ironic and subversive, the result of Coogan's keeping company in London with the university wits at the BBC. "On the Hour," the radio show he'd joined in 1990, was a lively spoof of broadcasting, a traditional British genre that offers bright young things a place to show their intelligence before they're old enough to know their minds. "I asked Steve if he could come up with the voice of a sports commentator," the writer and producer Armando Iannucci told me. "I said, 'Not an impression, just something generic.'" The voice he came up with was both generic and specific. "There were about five of us in the room," Iannucci said. "We all felt we knew this person. We knew that it was someone who had aspirations to be taken seriously in the entertainment industry. A little blank. A little bland. He had a slight



"All right, now see what happens when you turn the faucet off."

inferiority complex, in that the news journalists looked down on him. He was trying to be professional, and yet behind it, if you prodded him, he would collapse." Almost instantly, according to Iannucci, Coogan's character was named: "He's an Alan," somebody said. Someone else said, "His surname is Partridge." A partridge is a small bird whose chest puffs out; self-inflation became the key to Alan's metabolism. He was at once thin-skinned, self-important, and stupid.

"Working with Iannucci was a revelation," Coogan said. "He really did reshape things for me. There was no setup, no punch line. None of the comedy I did with Armando was structured in an orthodox way. It deliberately drove a coach and horses through the rules at every opportunity." He added, "I remember thinking, I've been looking for this all my life. We knew we were onto something."

It was Marber, who was also acting and writing for "On the Hour," who suggested turning Partridge into the host of his own radio talk show. At first, Coogan was unsure. "I went, 'I can't believe the

character's good enough to sustain a radio show,'" he said. He thought of Partridge then as just a voice, and a somewhat crude one at that. But Marber prevailed; he titled Partridge's show "Knowing Me, Knowing You," with a wink to ABBA, one of Partridge's favorite bands. The format was three interviews—three eight-minute bits—and the first episode was performed before a live audience at the BBC's Paris Studios, in London, on March 14, 1992. Even though it was radio, Coogan decided to give Partridge a look. "I wanted the audience to buy into the conceit of the character," he said. "I went to Lillywhites at the top of Regent Street and bought some casual clothes"—a pink sweater with a golf logo, slacks, loafers—"and combed my hair in a funny way. That was sort of the birth of him."

From the show's first beat, Alan Partridge broadcast his powers of misperception, an almost unerring ability not to understand the import of what he was saying. "Those of you who know me from the world of sport will know that I like having a bit of a chat with brawny men on the rugby field," he began. "And having a

bit of a chat with the soft, fair, waif-like, moist creatures you find in ladies' sports." As an interviewer, Partridge's spectacular lack of curiosity was matched only by his ignorance. With a fictional sex expert named Ally Tennant, Partridge discussed the female orgasm. "What is it?" he blurted. "I mean how, how... does... it... manifest... itself? What do you hear? When it... ?... Well, what is it?" The smooth-talking Tennant turned the question back on him. "Describe what happens when you achieve an orgasm," she said. Partridge replied, "No, no, no, no, no, no! O.K. Let's leave it there. It's over. Leave it. A great lady or a mad old trout. You decide. Ally Harris! Ally Tennant. Ally Tennant! Sorry, Ally, for getting your name wrong... but I hadn't heard of you before tonight."

Both easily humiliated and quick to take revenge, Partridge locked horns with a character identified as "Britain's greatest living novelist," Lawrence Camley, who was promoting his enormous novel "The Soul of Time." "First reaction to your book—don't drop it on me foot," Partridge said, before turning to his enthusiasm for Sherlock Holmes:

ALAN: What I thought was great about Sherlock Holmes was that not only was he a super sleuth, he was also a hard worker. 'Cause not only did he go out and solve the crimes, he came home and wrote it all down. Fantastic. That's why I admire him.

LAWRENCE: (Pause) Y-e-s. I... I've always thought it was a shame that Conan Doyle had to kill him off.

ALAN: I think you'll find it was Moriarty that killed him.

LAWRENCE: Yes, I know, but ultimately, of course, it was Conan Doyle.

ALAN: No, it was Moriarty. Definitely.

LAWRENCE: Yes, I know, in the books it was Moriarty. But, of course, the ultimate responsibility was Conan Doyle's.

ALAN: Hang on. As far as I know Moriarty acted alone. Or did he?! This is interesting—you think that there was some sort of conspiracy involving this shadowy Doyle figure...

LAWRENCE: No, no. I'm sorry, Alan. I'd like to let this go, but I really can't. Sherlock Holmes did not exist.

ALAN: He did.

LAWRENCE: Look, if he had existed, how would he have been able to describe in intimate detail the circumstances of his own death?

(Pause.)

ALAN: Um... The Nobel Prize for Literature. You never won it. What went wrong?

In 1994, "On the Hour" transferred to a television format titled "The Day Today," and Iannucci sat Coogan down

with footage of sporting events and gave him a microphone. "Steve didn't really know much about sport," Iannucci said. "It kind of helped, because he's genuinely struggling to describe what he's seeing." Partridge's vacancy and his vamping were almost surreal. "The goalie has got football pie all over his shirt!" he boomed, commenting on stock footage during his countdown to the 1994 World Cup. At other times, as in a tone-deaf report on bobsledding, Partridge's banter became an extravaganza of bunkum:

Ironic, really, to think I had Bob Sleigh in my class at school—a boy who had no interest in the sport whatsoever.

This course actually reminds me of when I was tobogganing at the age of sixteen. I hit something and fell off. I was concussed. Hit a cat. No cats here, of course. The groundsmen are quite strict about not letting cats onto this course. If one of those things comes down on a cat, it doesn't stand a chance. A bit like standing on a wasp. Not pleasant, but it's gotta be done.

Coogan's own radio show, "Knowing Me, Knowing You," also made the jump to TV in 1994. Coogan seems to have recognized that his time had come. "The first night I met him"—in April, 1992—"he told me he was going to be famous," Anna Cole said. About six years after that conversation, in a Manchester kebab shop, Coogan and his younger brother Brendan found themselves in a fistfight with some locals over a misunderstanding about a girl. "I remember grabbing the guy's head and banging it on the floor," Coogan said. "As I stood up, the guy I'd been on top of said, 'Are you Steve Coogan?' I said, 'Yes, I am.' He went, 'I've got your DVDs.' I ended up signing my autograph for him."

In the course of three television series, Alan Partridge went from national television talk-show host to local d.j., his shrinking workplace a metaphor for his tragicomic collapse. "That was 'Big Yellow Taxi,' by Joni Mitchell," he said, in the first episode of the TV series "I'm Alan Partridge." He was speaking between songs on Radio Norwich—a provincial



city's "third-largest radio station"—at 4:35 A.M. Partridge went on:

A song in which Joni complains that they've paved Paradise to put up a parking lot. A measure which actually would have alleviated traffic congestion on the outskirts of Paradise. Something which Joni singularly fails to point out, perhaps because it doesn't quite fit in with her blinkered view of the world.

Divorced, with two children who evinced no interest in seeing him, Partridge inhabited a sensational isolation of his own making, which was reinforced by his room-emptying prejudices, his patronizing attitudes toward women, and his appalling taste. (He was a fan of the death penalty, the right-wing tabloid the *Daily Mail*, and Paul McCartney's group Wings—"the band the Beatles could have been.") Unfulfillment was Partridge's terrain and also the source of his humor.

The closer Coogan got to spoofing himself, the funnier he was. "I would say things as myself and the writers would say, 'That's funny,'" he said. "I would go, 'I wasn't trying to be funny. I was just being me.' They would go, 'Yeah, but what you said sounded funny, so just have Alan say it.'" "As a person, he's not cool," Cole told me. "A lot of that comes out in the characters. He used to wear so much aftershave lotion when I first met him that sometimes you could hardly breathe. He's like a Northern boy come down to the big city." Iannucci said, "Were it not for the fact that he has this fantastic gift for comedy, Steve is fundamentally a guy who reads a lot of car magazines." (Cars, inevitably, were defining possessions for Partridge.)

After the series ended, in 2002, Partridge resurfaced in 2003 in a TV special, an homage to his career; in 2005, he made a charity appearance. As a character, he is now resting, but there is a chance of his cinematic resurrection. Recently, Coogan pitched the idea of a movie in which Partridge is held hostage at the BBC after a terrorist takeover and tries to work out a peace settlement. "Your position is you want to destroy the West," Coogan said, launching into Partridge's imaginary negotiation. "The West's position is, broadly speaking, they don't want to be destroyed. Is there a midway between those two positions that could satisfy us both? Rather than suicide bombings, you achieve so much more with a sternly worded letter." Coogan added, of the movie, "Part of me wants

to do it, part of me wants to do other things. If I did something else that caught the public in a high-profile way, then I'd feel more able to go back."

I saw Coogan one last time, on a gray, chilly day in early June, as he emerged from a run-down Ministry of Defence building about forty-five minutes south of London, where the "Saxondale" production was headquartered. It was 8:15 A.M., on the first day of shooting; Coogan, who had been up since five, walked out as Tommy Saxondale. For all intents and purposes, he was a completely different person. He'd been aged ten years. His smile was a shantytown of ragged yellow teeth; his hair was a wiry gray thicket; his paunch made him walk with a waddle. "I'm getting slimmer, Tommy's getting fatter," he said. Coogan's current girlfriend, the actress China Chow—the daughter of the restaurateur Michael Chow—appeared with coffee. She asked him, "Do you feel excited or scared?" Coogan said, "I don't feel either. I just feel ready. My blood pressure and my pulse drop when I start working. This is my comfort zone. It occupies everything in my head in a good way."

The morning was spent filming a series of scenes in which Tommy tries to persuade his suicidal friend Martin (Kevin Eldon) not to throw himself off a roof. Tommy is a combination of big-hearted concern and bluster. "If it's the middle of the night and I'm fast asleep, I want you to shin up the drainpipe and hammer on me window," he tells his morose friend. Martin takes him at his word. Four times, he comes to Tommy's door; each visit reduces Tommy's concern. In the course of the episode, Tommy moves from a twenty-four-hour open-door policy to suggesting only telephone contact, then only texting. Along the way, he dispenses Coogan's own prescription for fighting depression:

You know, those demons in your head are just pests taking a dump on your mental carpet. And I'm gonna show them the door. I'll force-feed them a blood-thinning anticoagulant of good vibes until the dark thoughts die, screaming in agony in your head... in a good way.

Comedy, Coogan says, is a form of "self-medication." And "Saxondale" is a comic reflection on the existential chal-

lenge of his middle years. "Lack of introspection has been my problem," he told me. At lunch, on the top deck of a red London transport bus that had been turned into a canteen, he picked over his lamb cutlets. "I feel that I'm in a different place than I was two years ago, a much more calm, controlled environment," he said. "When you're young, you think, I'll just get over this hill and then everything will be on an even keel. Then you get used to the fact that, no, you're never gonna get to the point of equilibrium. All you do is move forward. That's what life is—being in motion."

When he was younger, driven first by ambition and then by the momentum of his fame, Coogan made time for work but not for life. "Why should I go around Europe? What's that gonna do? What's the dividend?" he said of his attitude then. He had a feeling, he said, "of not enjoying the moment, just going, 'Good. That's achieved. Next.'" Coogan knows that he needs to be "kept busy"; these days, however, he's often busy with things that he hasn't done before. He has taken up hiking; he goes on vacations, frequently renting a cottage in Ireland where he holes up by himself for weeks at a time, reading books. ("I'm a slow reader, so I get through, like, three," he said.) Recently, he made a cheese-and-onion pie, using vegetables from his garden, and served it to his daughter. "One of the proudest things I've achieved," he said.

Back on the set, in the front seat of Tommy's yellow Mustang, Coogan tried to improve his last line, the bravado of which was meant to mask Tommy's compassion fatigue. In the scene, Tommy tells Martin that he can come over if he gets depressed again. "You sure that's O.K.?" Martin asks. The script called for Tommy to reply, "Am I sure? Am I one hairy-arsed son of a bitch?" Coogan turned other options over on his tongue. "Am I sure? Was Jim Morrison a wanker? Was Ravi Shankar a sitar player?" he said. "Is Van Morrison a grumpy man?"

When I left the set, Coogan was still in the front seat of the car, running the scene. I remembered something he'd once said about the piquancy of performing: "It's like flying when you become someone else. It's very liberating. It's a very calm place to be. It's like curling up in a warm blanket. At those moments, life is very simple." ♦