

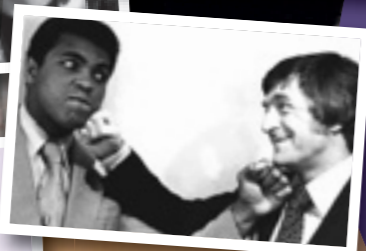
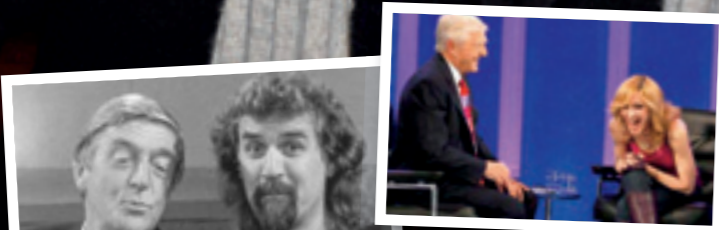
Parky in person

WIN!

Five readers will each have the chance to win a copy of Sir Michael's new book, *Parky's People*, which features a selection of the interviews he conducted as host of Parkinson.

Parky's People, published by Hodder & Stoughton, is a hardback coffee-table collection of memorable moments, RRP £20, featuring interviews with personalities from the worlds of sport, comedy, politics, arts and showbusiness.

TO WIN Simply tell us which bearded comedian holds the record for most appearances on Parkinson? And if you get stuck, there's a big clue on this page! Send your answer to Sue Lines, Arcadia Pensions, Cavendish House, 13 Portland Square, Bristol BS2 8ST by 31 January 2011.



Sir Michael Parkinson is best known as the man who hosted a string of successful chat shows during a fabulous TV career. But he would say that one of his most meaningful roles took place after the TV lights dimmed when he accepted the post of Dignity Ambassador for the Elderly. He has since written a report on what he saw during a year touring UK hospitals and care homes for the elderly. Good Company finds out more...

Michael Parkinson and the NHS. What's the connection?

Until something awful happens you're aware of the NHS, approve of it and think it's an indication of civilised society. But when my mother became ill, we needed it more than ever before.

And then you became more involved?

Yes. My mother spent the last three years of her life in utter confusion with a severe form of dementia and from that point on we entered the health service in extremis. First of all it was through home care and then through hospitals.

Were you happy with the care your mother received?

I was slightly disturbed at what I saw but I thought I could do no more about it than the average consumer and then – after my mother had died – I was approached about the position of Dignity Ambassador for the Elderly. It's about shifting attitudes, which is as important as anything else because some part of what my mother endured came about from general attitudes toward old people.

What brought you to that conclusion?

One day I asked the home if I could take her out and found myself facing

the problem of having to talk to her! By this time she was convinced I wasn't her son but her brother, Tom. I put some music on in the car, played Frank Sinatra and she, who could no longer remember my name, sang every lyric. Music is not going to cure patients in this condition, but it's going to make them feel better. I've seen lives improved by the introduction of music.

What were your goals as Dignity Ambassador for the Elderly?

I visited a number of hospitals and wrote a report based on my impressions of what I saw as a layman. I was astonished by the dedication and intelligence of the nurses and people who work in the NHS. They know what's wrong with the system: the bureaucracy, the targets. We need targets, but let's apply them sensibly.

The NHS isn't perfect, far from it, but if there's a problem it's not the fault of the people at the coalface.

What are the key issues for today's elderly population?

I think old people are thrown on the scrapheap far too soon. I was 74 when I retired voluntarily and I would have felt awful if someone had told me at 65 that I wasn't wanted anymore.

Did older people play a big part in your career?

Looking back, I've become aware of the number of mentors, older people, I sought out throughout my career in journalism and television. I was always looking for guidance from people who'd been to where I wanted to go.

Your respect for the elderly is reflected in your choice of favourite interviews, isn't it?

Yes. People always assume they'd be something to do with the glitz and glamour but the greatest interviews I've done have been with older people. I did an inspirational interview with Catherine Bramwell-

Booth, the granddaughter of the family who founded the Salvation Army. She came on the show aged 95. She was wonderful and fearless and had an opinion about everything.

The best interview I ever did, thanks to him, not me, was with Jacob Bronowski, who helped invent the atomic bomb.

Is there anyone you would like to have interviewed but didn't?

The Queen! Imagine if she was allowed to talk about the last 40-50 years. The only showbiz star I missed out on, with regret, was Frank Sinatra.

How do today's 'celebrities' compare with the stars of yesteryear?

Today anybody who's appeared on television for 30 seconds is a 'celebrity'. When I started interviewing, celebrity meant the likes of Bette Davis, Fred Astaire, Henry Fonda – they were as remote as Gods from Mount Olympus. Their studios hadn't allowed them to appear on TV before the early 70s. Now everyone is accessible.

Your career started as a journalist on a local paper. Still writing?

Yes. I believe writing is a real skill. Anyone can be a presenter – as long as they can sit up straight and read an autocue! My latest book, *Parky's People*, is a coffee table book of interviews with pictures taken throughout the shows. I've written a piece about the interview I did with each person.

So what are the chances of relaxing now and enjoying retirement?

My life has never been about doing nothing so I'm baffled by the question because other people would have very good answers, such as 'I make the Eiffel Tower out of matchsticks', or something. But I've never done anything like that because I've never had the time. I regard what I do as part of me as a whole, not a working part or a relaxing part!

