

# Blind: Chris McCausland

BY PETER CACKETT

In the busy, stressful lives that many of us lead, a good way to unwind in the evenings is to watch one of the celebrity panel TV shows such as *Would I Lie To You?* or *Have I Got News For You*. One of the regular stalwarts of these shows that I have enjoyed watching over the years is the comedian, Chris McCausland. What is remarkable is that he has managed to achieve stardom through comedy despite experiencing problems with his vision from autosomal dominant retinitis pigmentosa as a child, and eventually becoming blind by his early 20s. At the time of writing, it has also recently been announced that Chris is to take part as a contestant in this year's BBC flagship show, *Strictly Come Dancing*. I was keen to find out more about Chris' rise to fame as a comedian and how his visual impairment has impacted on his career and influenced his comedy. I reached out to his agent and was delighted to be able to catch up with Chris virtually late last summer.

Chris was born and raised in West Derby Village in Liverpool. He first became aware of problems with his vision in the second year of infant school when he had problems seeing the blackboard. "I've got memories of them having to sit me closer to the blackboard or giving me something on a piece of paper, when everybody else had it written on the board," he described. The family were already aware that he may develop retinitis pigmentosa as his mum had previously been diagnosed with the condition. He had been attending St Paul's Hospital in Liverpool from a young age for investigations including electrophysiology, colour vision and visual fields to determine whether he had inherited the retinitis pigmentosa. However, he acknowledges that when he had problems seeing the blackboard, "it was fairly obvious what we were looking at."

I asked Chris if having a mum with retinitis pigmentosa helps him manage his condition and the progressive visual loss. "It's swings and roundabouts," he explained. "On the one hand, it's in the family, it's normal and everyone treats it with humour. It's this big frustrating thing and you wouldn't wish it on anybody, but it's also 'shit happens' I suppose. On the other hand, in maybe a Northern way as well, you kind of you get used to brushing things under the carpet and not actually dealing with it."

We discuss how vision loss affects people differently. He explained that there are different responses depending on how you become blind. "I look at people who've been blind since birth and they are far more self-sufficient and less aware of embarrassment and shame than somebody who loses their sight. They don't go through that process. Somebody who loses their sight in an instant such as a soldier in a roadside bomb, they've got this big day of reckoning that they have to come to terms with and life's going to be different."

However, Chris' vision loss was always a part of his life and was very slow. He had a lot of frustration to deal with and also experienced a lot of embarrassment and shame, especially in his late teens and early 20s, losing his sight and trying to hide it. "Over



that protracted period of time you become tougher in your emotions and more able to think things through logically rather than react emotionally. So even with things like spilling a cup of tea, banging your head on the door frame, not knowing where you are when you are lost, not being able to read the text on the computer when your speech software crashes and you can't access the bloody button that you need to press. There's a lot of things that occur, where if you lost your shit every time they happened, you'd never get anywhere. You become used to just kind of taking a breath, having a moment and then finding another way. Being creative and carrying on."

He has found that these techniques seep into other aspects of life that are nothing to do with eyesight. When other people react emotionally when something bad happens, such as to a family member that they're upset about, he can be guilty of going, "Well,

ok, listen, shit happens." Over time he has become very able to cope with his eyesight and look at it through comedy but also said that he is a nightmare to have around when anything emotional happens. "I'm an empty husk of a man!"

Chris attended for ophthalmology appointments on a regular basis for many years following his diagnosis but has stopped going now. This is because he feels that there wasn't much that could be offered and there still isn't. He also found it very repetitive, whether he went to St Paul's, Moorfields or Kingston Hospital when he moved there. "You would go for an appointment and had to go through the same thing every time. 'Let's do your family tree' and they draw it out. 'When did your symptoms start?' I'm not sure if the computer systems are any different now, but it was like every time you gave them all the information, as soon as you left, they would set fire to it and put it in the bin. 'I won't be needing this anymore!' In the end you go, 'What's the point?' You know the progression; you know where it leads and you know there's nothing they can do." He recognises that in the past, back in the 60s, 70s and 80s, there was value in attending to find out if there had been any new developments. However, now information is so much more accessible through the internet or podcasts.

It was from his late teens onwards that Chris gradually lost his useful vision and there was a steady increase in the number of tasks that he was unable to perform, such as playing football or reading ZoomText on the computer. It was in his early 20s that Chris considers he became blind, when he could no longer rely on his sight. "In a way, not being able to see anything is so much easier than being able to see something. You're trying to rely on something that is causing you more problems than good. When you hit the point where it's probably still getting worse, but it's gone past the point where you notice, you go, 'well I've just got this to get used to,' and it actually becomes a lot easier."

Chris did once have a guide dog to help him. "Lovely dog, rubbish guide dog," Chris explained. He had no frame of reference for what a guide dog should be like. "It was very boisterous and would pull

a lot," he said. Also, the dog took him where it wanted to go, and not where he wanted to go. "If it saw something on the floor that it liked the look of, that's where it decided it was going and you had to let it get there. If an old lady had that dog, she would have had two broken hips." In the end, he asked if the dog could have further training. After a couple of weeks, they got back to him and said, "This dog should never have had its license!" He now has a pet dog but it is very small. "The worst dog a blind man can have. Even now it's fully grown, it can run up your jumper and stick its head out the top."

Chris has a cane but hasn't used it to aid his mobility in years. He takes one out with him more as indication of blindness. "I don't find walking with a cane to be enjoyable in the slightest. It's stressful and it causes a lot of anxiety." He is also fortunate in that the work he does always involves some form of transport being provided. "I either provide my own driver for touring, or I'm working for TV, and the wonderful thing about TV is when you're making a show, they send everyone a car!"

Most of his low visual aid requirements are covered by his Mac computer and iPhone. He also believes that the recent emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is a game changer and he can't think of anything else that has or will change the world for blind people in his lifetime. He uses AI for tasks such as quizzing it about the content of PDF documents, helping him choose the correct photos for his social media and even selecting the correct colour t-shirt from his wardrobe. The only blind device he uses is an old Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) penfriend – this is an electronic pen with a set of readable stickers that you can leave on items with a voice note to tell you what they are. He has used this to label his vinyl record collection. "The contradiction for me is I love technology, but I'm a sucker for the retro vinyl."

Following graduation in 2000 with a degree in software engineering from Kingston University, Chris found challenges in finding employment as a result of his deteriorating vision. At one stage he applied for a job at MI5 and was called for interview to the headquarters in Central London. Ultimately, he did not get the job because of his eyesight as it took him too long to do the things he needed to do. "That was perfectly acceptable to me as it's not a job where you can be given extra time. You can't be expected in the heat of an investigation to have all materials provided in an accessible format. Like Waterloo Station blows up and they say sorry but the fellow we had working on this is blind and it just takes them a bit longer than everybody else."

He eventually found work in a call centre which gave him a sense of worth and confidence. It was while Chris was working at the call centre that he took his first plunge into comedy. Doing a stand-up comedy performance was on his bucket list and he just wanted to say he had done it once. It was in July 2003 that he first had a go at the Tuesday new act comedy night at The Bedford in Balham. "People laughed a few times and I wondered if I could get more laughs the next time." The good response spurred him on. "You can't avoid bad gigs. There must be people who have it on their first gig and say this isn't for me. Whereas I didn't have a bad one until number 15, and by that point you go, 'oh, that's just something that happens.' Luckily it wasn't my first one or maybe I wouldn't have done it again."

Chris continued performing on the circuit as a hobby in his spare time for another couple of years before he was able to support himself financially from comedy and give up his day job at the call centre. His break into television came in 2018 when he was invited to appear on *Live At The Apollo*. He admits being anxious before this performance, not about the gig itself but from losing the opportunity as it represented a potential gateway into mainstream television work. "The gig is as easy as it can get, three and a half thousand

people facing you and they haven't paid. They couldn't be happier. But this is an opportunity. What if I mess this up? You become your own worst enemy young grasshopper. First you must defeat yourself."

He waited another year for his first big break into the television panel shows which came with 'Would I Lie To You'? He has now appeared on most of these productions multiple times, including a memorable one on *Nine Out Of Ten Cats Does Countdown*, where he outperformed everyone else. He practised beforehand because, "For *Countdown*, it was about being really good and I thought that would be funnier than being rubbish at it because it would make the others angry in a comedy way." This interview was conducted before Chris had appeared on *Strictly*, and at the time Chris was feeling the same way about it. "I might be rubbish at *Strictly* and it's on live TV so you can't be edited to look good. But I will take the show and the training seriously, while trying not to take myself seriously. I want to come out with people saying, 'I didn't think he could do that.' Challenging preconceptions, that's the aim. It's not about inspiring blind people, it's about surprising the public by either being really funny about things that aren't to do with being blind or competing alongside or above other people." Of all the panel shows Chris has appeared in, his greatest sense of achievement comes from his time on *Have I Got News For You*. "It's been around since I was a kid and to go on that and do well on it and get on well with Paul and Ian, you come up buzzing."

I asked Chris about the challenges in performing as a blind comedian. He explained that when he arrives at a venue, he will get his driver Graham to help him estimate the size of the room. "I'll get him to run around the room and shout out 'back right' and 'back left.' It gives you an idea of the space that you're projecting to." I wonder if the audience is more at ease with him because he cannot pick on them, as he previously said at the start of his *Live At The Apollo* performance, "I am blind, which is going to be like watching any other comedian, except if any of you guys down in the front here do need a piss, you can just go." He acknowledges that the audience probably are more comfortable with him.

He also does not compare gigs or actively talk to the spectators and ask them what they do for a living, but that is more through limitation and necessity than a creative decision. He does get less heckles than the average comedian but does not think that blindness comes into it. "The kind of comedian you are affects that. Jimmy Carr gets a lot but his comedy provokes and encourages it. Kevin Bridges gets a lot, more than he would like, but his everyday Glasgow folk hero persona makes people think that he is their mate and they can just join in. If you ask him, he'll go 'I wish they'd shut the f\*ck up.' It all depends on how much you talk to the audience." Most of the time the heckles aren't bad and it is predominantly people in the audience thinking they are funnier. However, he described one notorious gig at Up The Creek in Maidstone where everyone died on stage and somebody shouted out, "You are the weakest link, goodbye."

I asked Chris that if there was a procedure that could restore his sight whether he would accept it. "Definitely, one hundred percent," Chris replied. "The lovely thing about the career that I have built is that it wouldn't affect my comedy. Yes, there are a lot of clips out there of me taking the piss out of not being able to see, but my stand up show would still work. It would just be five minutes shorter," he laughed. However, he wouldn't want to regain just a little bit of sight, as he would not want to be in the position again where he was trying to rely on something that was unreliable. "Retinal implants which give a dot matrix resolution. I don't want to see curves and shapes, but if you could perform a stem cell transplant and restore my sight to how it was when I was 11 then of course I would take it." Chris believes that the biggest issue with being

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blind is lack of independent mobility and if he could get that back in a confident way then it would be worth doing.

Chris does not see himself as a role model for the visually impaired. He believes that blind people don't need inspiring and there's a lot of blind people out there who are very capable but just need the opportunity to do very well. His main aim from when he started comedy was not motivating blind people but representing them and changing people's opinions. "Many people have a very clichéd, stereotypical, old opinion of blindness. You know sometimes I will come out of a building into a taxi and they will say 'How did you do the stairs?' And I reply, 'Well, I knew they were there and me legs work.'"

I wanted to know if Chris had a piece of life advice for anyone. "Don't be an asshole; be nice to people. Take your work seriously, but don't take yourself seriously," he replied. "Unless you're a judge," he added. Chris' advice for anyone about to embark on a career in comedy is to be yourself and try not to be something you're not, as the audience will see through it. He also recommends not speeding up when you're nervous because that is the worst thing you can do as you lose the audience completely. "Also, write your own stuff and don't be nicking material because you need the respect of the audience and your colleagues. And if you're blind, don't bother as I don't need the competition," he quipped.

I was keen to know which song would headline the Spotify playlist of his life. For Chris, it is a heavy metal song called *Blind* by Korn. "Losing your sight, there's a lot of aggression, and a lot of frustration builds up when sometimes it's best to let it out. I think sometimes heavy metal music is like the musical equivalent of punching the punch bag."

For Chris' future plans, his immediate aim is to get through *Strictly Come Dancing* in one piece as he is finding the prospect of appearing quite daunting. He has also really enjoyed hosting a Saturday morning talk show on ITV over the summer and would like to do more of this work but at a different time slot. Although he really loves his stand up, he would like to do some more acting, maybe in a film or an HBO-type series, but he is aware that he is quite niche in terms of casting. "The biggest restriction isn't working on a film set, it is the plausibility of the casting as being blind will limit what the character can do."

As we rounded off our discussion, I commented that Chris comes across as someone so upbeat and positive about life that nothing would faze him. "Well, things do," he replied, "but it's that logical process that worse things can happen. I'm very lucky for the opportunities as there are so many amazing comedians out there that are still on the circuit but they haven't had that opportunity. So, it's a very privileged position to be in as a comedian to be able to do a theatre and have people turn up."

A final question I asked Chris was if he has any advice for ophthalmologists managing conditions which are slowly progressive such as retinitis pigmentosa. "Stop putting all of them notes in a bin!" he said. "If you're gonna go to the trouble of drawing a family tree, have it laminated and kept in a file. Honestly, embrace AI and then start getting those biological cures out there. Because I think technology is a great aid, but it's not a substitute, it's a coping mechanism. The only way you're going to do yourself out of a job is by curing every eye condition. Do that and then find something else to do."

As we said our goodbyes, I wished Chris good luck for his performances on *Strictly* and his stand up tour, *Yonks*, in 2025. He replied saying that he would look forward to seeing *Eye News* magazine as the guest publication for the final round on a future edition of *Have I Got News For You*. What maybe does not come across in this article is that throughout our conversation, Chris had me in stitches of laughter and for the rest of the day I had a smile on my face – a testament to his skills as a comedian.

## INTERVIEWED BY

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