

Meet veggie comedian **Dave Spikey**

Stand-up for the animals



Vegetarian Society member and top comic, Dave Spikey, should be a well-known face to all of you by now as not only the co-writer and star of acclaimed comedy series 'Phoenix Nights' and recent BBC2 series 'Dead Man Weds', but also the 'face' of this year's National Vegetarian Week! The Society's Events & Communications Officer, Matt Parkinson, caught up with him in the middle of a busy touring schedule...

● **What first made you consider becoming a vegetarian?**

About 20 years ago my wife Kay and I were driving to work at The Royal Bolton Hospital when we got stuck in traffic beside a lorry carrying battery chickens to their final destination. The hens looked terrified and tortured and had injuries incurred either by the journey or their previous year(s) in the battery cages. They had few feathers, injured bloodied feet and damaged beaks and I thought, "How can we do this? How can we justify this treatment of innocent creatures?" By the time we got to work we had decided to become vegetarian.

I must stress that this didn't happen overnight; it took a couple of years weaning ourselves off certain foods but slowly but surely we worked our way down the evolutionary scale until we arrived at molluscs. From there it was a short leap into the meat-free world.

I might add that in the years since, we have given a home to many liberated battery hens. From time to time a man brought them in a balaclava – not the chickens, that'd be stupid, they'd fall out – he had the balaclava on. We have had years of pleasure watching these beautiful, intelligent birds regain both their feathers and their dignity whilst pecking round our back garden. One of the greatest joys in our small contribution to animal welfare has been watching the chickens leave the hen house for the first time after their arrival from the constant "daylight" wire cages of the battery house; treading very carefully and deliberately on the alien grass surface, they emerge one at a time, the bravest, cleverest, more

adventurous first. Within no time at all they are laying the most beautiful eggs, fearlessly exploring the garden and basking, wings spread, in the sun.

● **What's your food style? Healthy wholefood, exotic 'global' cuisine, veggie pie and mash, or perhaps tea round at yours is a complicated gourmet affair?**

Everything from veggie bangers and mash through to Thai, Chinese, Indian, Spanish – it would be easier saying global wouldn't it? Depends on how the mood takes me but at the moment I'm in a Thai phase. I was working in Edinburgh the other night with my wife, Kay, and we dived into a fantastic Thai restaurant on Hanover Street (I'm sorry I've forgotten the name!). I had Beancurd Penang and Kay had a chilli aubergine dish and we shared a fabulous bowl of vegetable noodles.

At home, I'm the cook. I find it very creative and therapeutic. People think that being a veggie you don't have meat and two veg, you just have the two veg! My specialist dishes are veggie spag bol and certain Indian recipes like malai kofta which I picked up on holiday (not the only thing I picked up in India).

● **They say people look like their animals, and I believe you live in something of a menagerie... which (if any) of your co-habiting creatures do you bear a strong resemblance to?**

My badger, Billy. In fact, we look so similar that I've had to start dying the black stripe out of my hair. That's why it appears to be



all grey/silver. It had to be done, it got to the stage that everyone down the corner shop and the pub was mistaking me for Billy.

● **In Dead Man Weds, one of the main storylines focused on the genetic modification of animals. Was this simply a comic device or were you trying to get a message out there? What are your views on the use of animals in medical research?**

In my work in haematology my main interest was in the inherited disorders of haemoglobin such as thalassaemia and the haemoglobinopathies, the most “known” of which is Sickle Cell Disease, so I sort of knew the science of genetics. Add to this the fact that when I started writing Dead Man Weds some years ago “Genetically Modified Crops – Good or Bad” was making the news as was Dolly the sheep so, as I was looking for a sinister background for GeneUS I thought – genetically modified animals to feed the world. Giant cows – think of the milk, chickens – size of the eggs etc. As for animals in medical research? No. What right have we to inflict pain or suffering on them? What have they done to deserve such inhumane treatment? What sort of lives do they have? Answer – sad, short, painful, terrifying lives. And for what, when nothing absolutely conclusive in terms of positive results is proven and eventually most drugs and medicines have to be tested on human models anyway?

● **You’re perceived as a down-to-earth Northern bloke who works the stand-up circuit. Are people surprised to find out that you’re vegetarian?**

Strangely enough, they are surprised. Madly, even more so when they learn that “No I don’t eat fish”!

Them: “Why not?”
 Me: “Because it’s an animal...?”
 Them: “No it’s not.”
 Me: (!) “Yes it is.”
 Them: “What about mussels?”
 Me: “No.”
 Them: “Don’t you like them?”
 Me: “They’re animals.”
 Them: “Noooooooooo!?”
 Me: “Oh yes.”
 Them: “Well, how do you know a carrot doesn’t have feelings?”
 Me: “Why don’t you **** off, you lame brained moron?”

● **You’re currently touring the UK. Do you find it easy to get decent veggie food in unfamiliar towns and cities? Have you come across any fantastic restaurants along the way that you can recommend to our readers?**

Yes, it is still difficult unless you’re in a big city. I’ve had great veggie food recently in Edinburgh, Swansea, London and Manchester but the selection is understandably reduced in some of the nation’s other large towns. But then you just have to use your common sense. If I’m hungry I generally stay out of pubs where my choice will inevitably range from veggie lasagne, veggie chilli, veggie curry at the lower end of the market to the only marginally better pre-prepared spinach cannelloni or goat cheese tartlet at the higher end. And let’s be frank, it’s generally rubbish, so you just have to look for a good local Chinese, Indian, Italian etc. Kay and I have a three point plan – look for a restaurant that has a decent veggie choice, is full of locals and has a good atmosphere. Recommendations? Well I’m hopeless with names so this might be no use whatsoever!! But that Thai restaurant on Hanover Street, Edinburgh. And that Spanish restaurant that

doesn’t serve beer, just wine, in Swansea. You know the one, it’s really rustic inside and doesn’t have a menu, just a blackboard. In Manchester I like loads of places – The Living Room is not just a posers bar, it has a great restaurant, Dimitris for their monumental mezzes and San Carlos is a great Italian. I had the best Saag Aloo since I last visited India at a small bar off St Anne’s Square called Yatra, and a brilliant veggie oriental lunchbox at the Lotus bar the other day. My favourite vegetarian restaurant (and this will come as little surprise) is Greens in Didsbury. Plus there are also some fantastic restaurants in and around Chinatown.

● **Following the huge success of ‘Phoenix Nights’ and ‘That Peter Kay Thing’, do you have any plans to work with Peter again in the near future?**

No. I’m really very busy with my own projects at the moment. I’m on tour till the end of May, then I film my new stand-up DVD and then go back on the second leg of the tour in Autumn to promote it. I’ve written a comedy/drama called Magnolia, about a small painting and decorating firm, which I’m hoping will get commissioned, plus a spoof documentary about a Sunday football team that I’ve filmed a promo for and am very hopeful about.

● **Finally, we hope we raised a few laughs with the National Vegetarian Week leaflet and advertisement campaign. As a professional comedian, how do you think we did?**

I think you did fantastic. I was very very impressed with the campaign and especially liked the rude food film which was brilliantly conceived and filmed and was complemented so well with the sensual “bolero-esque” music. I really hope it gets the attention and acclaim it deserves.