

Graham's crackers

British-chat-show host Graham Norton had a hard time coming out. Not as a gay man—all the friends he made at school just assumed he was gay, and eventually so did he. "I didn't come out. I drifted out," says Norton, the host of the wildly popular Friday night comedy talk show *So Graham Norton* and the unofficial face of the United Kingdom's Channel 4.

But Norton had a very hard time coming out as a gay man who's camp. "Camp is very much seen as a bad thing, because we all aspire to the sexual ideal of the straight guy," says Norton, speaking to *The Advocate* in his first interview with the American gay press. "I found that really hard, accepting that I am quite camp. But there's a natural lightness, a feyness to some people, and I don't know how that happens. You can meet your 12-year-old nephew, and you just kind of think, 'Mmm-hmm.' And suddenly he's asked for a pink bicycle with a basket for Christmas."

The 37-year-old Norton has no problem embracing camp now. After all, he sensibly points out, what's the alternative? "How many [camp] people do you know in their 40s and their 50s who will say, 'No one at work knows?' Where do you work, the Helen Keller Institute? Because they must."

Norton's chat show suffers from no such delusions. It's packed with gay icons like Joan Collins (who fondled a leather glove while chatting with a leather fetishist on the phone), Bea Arthur (who gamely talked to a "pedal pumper," a man aroused by revving car engines), and Grace Jones (who tried to match up underwear with the audience members who owned the garments).

The show also features a lot of surfing the Web for sex sites and placing prank phone calls to places like the



tourism board for Wet Beaver Creek, Ariz. ("I've never visited Wet Beaver myself," Norton said to the unsuspecting employee. "Friends have, and they say it's fantastic!")

He's naughty but not crass, with

the humor always on the gentle side—he doesn't get laughs at the expense of others. He spends most of his time being shocked by what others say rather than trying to say something shocking himself. And that

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When out TV talk-show host Graham Norton camps it up with the likes of Joan Collins and Grace Jones, the U.K. loves to watch **By Michael Giltz**



COURTESY CHANNEL 4 TELEVISION, LONDON

tactic is paying off.

"He's our big star," says Matt Baker, head of press for Channel 4. "So Graham Norton does so well for us. He gets one of our biggest audiences of the week at 11 o'clock on Friday night."

That's why Norton was just the focus of a bidding war between the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4, with one offer from the BBC reportedly being a two-year deal worth \$5 million. Norton re-upped with Channel 4, and his show will produce a hefty 36 episodes this year, meaning he'll be on the air almost every week. How did Channel 4 keep him?

"We pointed out to Graham that he wouldn't be able to do the things he likes on the BBC," says Baker. "[In 1999], he helped our viewers greet the millennium by having a woman firing a Ping-Pong ball from her vagina."

Other big plans include a possible remake of the Gérard Depardieu-Andie MacDowell comedy *Green Card*, this time based on Graham's travails getting residency rights for Scott, his American boyfriend of five years. Jonathan Harvey (scripter of *Beautiful Thing*) is working on a draft. Possible title? *Pink Card*.

Growing up in County Cork, Ireland, as a Protestant in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood, Norton didn't even realize at first that he was gay, much less camp. He thought the reason he felt different was that he was Protestant. "It was only when I left Ireland that I realized, 'Oh, it wasn't the Protestant thing,'" says Norton. "I'm still marching out of time."

Happily, despite the "natural lightness" Norton has always had, he wasn't bullied at school. "I was kind of the funny one," he explains. "This is a terrible thing to say, and I probably shouldn't. But I don't think people are bullied for being gay or being fat or whatever. It's just people sense weakness and people sense fear. So you can be absolutely nothing to pick on at all—I mean, the people who were being bullied at my school, you just thought, 'Why are they being bullied? There's a big poof over here; there's the fat girl over there.'

"But I think it's just unhappy kids get bullied. And it feeds off itself. I remember my mother—she's very hard—and her big thing was, 'Never react.' She sent me to primary school when I was 4 or 5, and she just drilled this into my head: 'Don't react.'"

Being the funny one, Norton embraced drama classes and—after drop-

ping out and being a hippie in San Francisco in the early '80s (OK, so he was a little late)—hit the comedy circuit doing an act with "naughty" titles like *The Karen Carpenter Bar and Grill* and *Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Farewell Tour*.

That led to stints on game shows and finally to Norton's *All About Eve*-like burst into stardom. He was asked to substitute at the last minute on the chat show of comic Jack Docherty and performed so swimmingly that Norton became a huge sensation, even getting nominated for "Best Newcomer" the same year as Docherty.

"It was an eggy evening," says Norton, laughing. "We were on the same table at the awards show, and we were nominated for the same award—him for his show, me for his show. The good thing was, it did save me from myself. I'd never won a prize before, so I'd [otherwise] have gone hysterical if I'd won." Norton did win, and he recalls, "I had to keep quite subdued. I couldn't run around the room screaming, 'I won a prize! I won a prize! I had to go, 'Yeah, yeah. It's really nice.'"

But in a twist that would have embarrassed even Eve Harrington, Norton didn't thank Docherty—or anyone else who worked on the show—for his lucky break. "I didn't," says Norton, putting his hand to his mouth in mock astonishment at his thoughtlessness. (That look of abashed delight is practically his trademark.) "I didn't thank anyone on the show. No one. I was thanking friends, people I'd worked in restaurants with. I'd forgotten, maybe, why I was getting the prize."

And practice doesn't make perfect. When Norton won an award last year, he bought everyone onstage so he wouldn't forget to thank them and then promptly forgot some of their names. "In the end, you can't help but offend. Best not to win prizes," he jokes. "People feel sorry for you, and you haven't offended anyone." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the *New York Post*.

Find more on Graham Norton and links to related internet sites at www.theadvocate.com

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