



Jimmy Savile
photographed in his
Scarborough home,
2009, by Dan Davies

He was like smoke

What does it feel like when the man whose biography you've been working on for close to a decade turns out to have been Britain's worst predatory sex offender?

By Dan Davies

“

How does it feel to be defined by Jimmy Savile?” I was asked this question early last September, apropos of the long-running saga of the biography I had been trying, and failing, to write for what seemed like forever. It struck a nerve, not only because it denied everything else of importance in my life and served as another reminder of a project that had become a millstone around my neck, but also because having previously corresponded with women who claimed the DJ abused them as children, and spoken to TV reporters pursuing the story, I knew what was coming. After providing entertaining dinner party conversation for years, being Jimmy Savile’s biographer was about to cast me into a very dark place indeed.

Jimmy Savile was a man who polarised opinion long before he was posthumously labelled as Britain’s worst sex offender. Mention of his name generally provoked one of two reactions: either fond memories of a *Jim’ll Fix It* letter asking for a wish to be granted or a commentary on the rumours that he was gay, a paedophile or liked to have sex with corpses.

And yet despite his fame, and status as a “latter-day saint” thanks to the millions of pounds he raised for charity, nobody seemed to know who he was. When people scoffed and asked me who would be interested in a biography of fading celebrity oddball, I told myself that this was why he was compelling. This was why I had chosen him.

In fact, I’d chosen him at the age of nine, after watching a recording of *Jim’ll Fix It* from the audience at the BBC Television Theatre in Shepherd’s Bush. He seemed cold and oddly remote; he gave me the creeps. It was then I decided there was something very strange indeed about Jimmy Savile, starting a long and increasingly tortuous obsession.

In 2004, some 24 years later, I was sent to interview him for the first time. Having been first drawn to his darkness, I dragged with me decades of practiced prejudice. I’d spent the interim reading about him, collecting old annuals and scrutinising his every move and pronouncement. I was going to nail him, but he was too well-versed in how to turn difficult encounters to his favour. First, he threw me off balance

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by ordering two of his friends to frisk me in his flat’s foyer, then he disarmed me with his apparent willingness to talk about anything, including the rumours, and ultimately he charmed me with the kaleidoscopic account of his extraordinary life.

It was the first of three big magazine pieces I wrote about him. Like Louis Theroux’s TV profile before me, it served only as a platform for his eccentricity, or as he preferred it, his “oddness”, something he wore as a badge of honour.

The second feature, published 18 months later, was an account of a bizarre 48 hours spent in his company in and around his flat in Scarborough. On this occasion he extended me the “honour” of sleeping in his late mother’s bedroom, the one he famously kept as a shrine to her.

The third, printed in *Esquire* in 2008, focused on his remarkable level of influence and network of high-ranking contacts, and involved a number of lengthy interviews in a variety of contrasting locations. He was aware of the importance of providing “colour” and insisted it was much harder to write “a good news story than a bad one”. While none of my features could be described as hagiographies, I cannot deny that my deepening fascination became tinged with a certain, guarded affection.

I continued interviewing him until his death, staying with him in his flats in Leeds and Scarborough, lunching at The Athenaeum Club and in lowly transport cafes, and, in early summer 2008, even joining him on a short cruise on the QE2. Having spent my youth telling anyone who listened that he was evil incarnate, he succeeded in persuading me away from the belligerence of my younger self.

So how did I fail to discover the terrible secret that he took to his grave? My attempts to track the course of his peripatetic existence became all-consuming, but his

was a life designed to evade detection. He was like smoke.

Indeed, up until our last meetings he remained utterly inflexible on the subject of me writing a book about him. “No,” he’d bark. “Because I’d only have to correct everything you got wrong.” He invariably followed this by telling me he’d only written his autobiography in 1974 — a book that, in my view, revealed his darkness with its boasting of treating young girls as “rewards” — because he heard that a tabloid reporter was planning on writing an unauthorised book of his own.

Jimmy Savile was the curator of his own myth, spun into an elaborately woven tapestry of stories, repeated on rotation, often word for word. He was as economical with the truth as he was with his money and wilfully vague on dates and detail. When pressed to put a year to some event in his life, he’d reply, “1642 — how the fucking hell should I know?”

I decided to work my way up the river of his life, cross-checking his boasts and wild claims through research and interviews with those that crossed his path. He was like the central character in Woody Allen’s *Zelig*, possessed of an uncanny knack of popping up at key and unlikely points in history. His life story worked as a narrative history of popular culture in postwar Britain: MC-ing for The Beatles on tour, hosting the first *Top Of The Pops*, “opening the show” for Pope John Paul II, acting as go-between when Charles and Di’s marriage broke up — the list goes on. It was, I said, also a story about our childhoods — and how prophetic that was.

The plan was always to confront him in a final, climactic encounter with what I hoped would be the truth. But he was supremely controlling, which meant there was no prospect of me speaking to anyone who was close to him without it getting back to him and the line of inquiry being shut down. And anyone he would allow me to speak with would only propagate the line he had been relentlessly spinning for so long.

I had to work in wide, concentric circles, concentrating initially on finding those from his earliest days and, by extension, less likely to be in contact with him. Towards the end of his life, I presented him with some of

the memories these people had shared with me, such as those about his formative years in the coal mines of Yorkshire and as a racing cyclist in the late Forties and early Fifties.

Up until then, I think he believed he was grooming me, offering up all that access, taking me for lunch and fixing it for me to join him on the QE2 in return for me securing in print his legacy, on his terms; a legacy that he surely must have known was destined to end up like his gravestone — smashed to smithereens, dumped in a skip and destined for landfill. Why else would he have wanted his epitaph to be “It was good while it lasted”?

He said he wanted to see me do well, and was flattered that I offered him a level of coverage that his celebrity status no longer merited. Our birthdays were one day apart, his on Halloween, and he said that I was “half warlock to his full warlock”. On one

occasion, after I had recently split up with a girlfriend, he remarked that he thought we were alike because neither of us liked to be tied down. I did not take it as a compliment.

The rules of engagement were simple: I could not chase, but would have to wait patiently for him to serve up a rare chink of light that might illuminate something within. “You ask the question, I give you the answer,” was how he admonished my attempts to steer the conversation. Perhaps I should have stood my ground more but my strategy was to play him on the counter.

He told me about training under a famous hypnotist in the late Sixties. He claimed to have used his “powers” in ambulance call-outs and on casualty wards, and I wonder now whether that relentless syncopated drone, the “Yorkshire Dalek” as I called it, was employed to lull his victims and dull the senses of interviewers like me. Certainly, the soporific effect of the vast tapestry being unfurled sometimes meant I had to fight to avoid slipping under.

But if he succeeded in drawing me in and knocking some of the sharp edges off my suspicions, he never did manage to turn me. I always left our meetings with more questions than answers. In hindsight, I wish I had pressed him more about his attitudes towards women, or girls as it always was for him, but he was never going to give up

the whole thing go away was to flatly deny the accusations because he knew that within the Establishment there was no appetite for pursuing a man who had been seen to do much good, and who knew so many powerful people. It was his insurance.

Maybe it was why he also felt comfortable about making all those quips about “underage girls” and, during one of our last meetings in Scarborough, offering an unsolicited and quite startling defence of Gary Glitter. We had been talking about something entirely unrelated when he launched into a diatribe about how the disgraced singer had done nothing more than download child pornography in the privacy of his own home. When I responded that Glitter had gone considerably further than that, Savile’s reply was one of the most chilling things he ever said to me: “Are you telling me that some dirty paper didn’t put those little birds into him?”

In my mind, there was never any question that arriving at the real Jimmy Savile would entail a journey into the heart of darkness, hence the title of my book: *Apocalypse Now Then*.

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In plain sight: Jimmy Savile and Dan Davies on the QE2, Cadiz, 2008

something he’d guarded so assiduously and for so long; something that would lead to his certain fall. And I can be satisfied that I asked him about the rumours on every occasion we talked.

In 2009, officers from Surrey Police went to his room at Stoke Mandeville Hospital to do the same, only this time he was interviewed under caution about four separate allegations of historic sexual abuse. It was a meeting that remained secret until after his death and might explain why he felt untouchable. All he had to do to make

On October 25 last year, just over three weeks after the scandal broke, Metropolitan Police Commander Peter Spindler revealed that the number of potential victims in Scotland Yard’s investigation had risen to more than 300. Spindler called it a “watershed moment” before remarking on Jimmy Savile’s ability to “hide in plain sight”. It is a phrase I used a couple of weeks earlier when being interviewed as Savile’s biographer on Radio 5 Live, and one that I had settled on long before for explaining why I had become, and remained, so interested in him.

I was curious about every facet of his life, not least why he devoted so much of his time to charity when everything he did and said pointed to an inherent meanness. Given the importance he attached to his Catholic faith and how long the rumours about his sexual predilections remained just that, I wondered whether his relentless philanthropy might be a grand bid for atonement for another sin in his life.

He was a hard man who acquired his street smarts in the rough and tough world of the Leeds and Manchester

dance halls. His infamous zero-tolerance policy with troublemakers, coupled with his underworld connections and the references I'd found to mysterious deaths of business partners in his past, led me to question whether he had ever been responsible for killing someone. Even as an old man, he still emitted the unmistakable odour of menace. And yet the longer I went without discovering a fire, the worse I felt about inhaling his smoke.

I also hadn't figured on him dying when he did, at a point when I had progressed only a short distance upstream. He had always threatened to live forever and his immortality, secured I was sure via some Faustian pact, was something I came to take for granted. When news of his death broke, just two days short of his 85th birthday, I felt he had robbed me. It is revealing, given what he wrote about his hopes for the final reckoning, that the debit of his many carnal sins would be weighed against the credit of his good works, that he was found with his fingers crossed.

During his three-day funeral, I experienced a range of emotions: sadness in being one of many thousands paying their last respects as his gold casket lay in state in the foyer of a Leeds city centre hotel; guilt about my persistent doubts as the coffin was carried into a packed St Anne's Roman Catholic Cathedral by Royal Marines ahead of a full requiem mass in which a priest described his life as an "epic of giving"; uncertainty about the future after walking away from what we all thought would be his final resting place, a concrete-lined tomb excavated at a 45° angle in a cemetery on the outskirts of Scarborough.

At the time, I had just started finding people who worked with or knew him from his days as a dance hall manager in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Most had remembered him fondly as a "larger than life" personality who provided the soundtrack for the best days of their lives. But there were other, more troubling memories.

"The big joke with Jimmy Savile was he was either going to be famous or in prison for screwing 14-year-old girls," one said. "He was a naughty man. I don't know how he got away with it," said another. Both these sources argued that such behaviour was viewed very differently back then and while I was troubled by what they'd said,

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I reasoned that events of the past could indeed be distorted if viewed through the lens of the present. Without testimony from those he abused, I certainly didn't have enough to report him to the police.

I felt torn by these statements, torn between an old man whose life had just been celebrated nationally and the darker reality I felt sure existed behind the carefully maintained facade.

Once the deluge of publicity surrounding his funeral had subsided, publishers rejected my book. They argued there was not enough interest in Jimmy Savile or, in some cases, expressed concern about what lay beneath. I knew I did not yet have the whole story. I also felt stupid at having wasted so much time, effort and headspace on him.

If the evidence of what lay beneath had started to

emerge, nobody could have anticipated the scale and scope of it. The lid was prised off in a blog written by a woman who accused him of abusing her in the Seventies, and was the starting point for the *Newsnight* investigation that had been controversially axed just a matter of weeks after his death.

The woman had initially used only initials in identifying Savile and other celebrities she claimed molested her and others like her. At the time she was a 15-year-old girl in the care of Duncroft Approved School for Girls in Surrey, while he was one of Britain's biggest stars, with an OBE to his name and a 50th birthday on the horizon.

I was alerted to the blog's existence in January last year. Its revelations painted a picture of an opportunist offender who used his power, status and profile to prey on the vulnerable. My reaction was disappointment and disgust, although not surprise. The woman was reluctant to talk to me having given an interview to *Newsnight*.

A couple of months later, I was approached by Mark Williams-Thomas, the television presenter, criminologist and child protection expert who had picked up the investigation for ITV. He explained to me that his further inquiries had left him in no doubt that Jimmy Savile was a predatory child abuser who was now going to be outed for his crimes. I continued with my research and we stayed in touch. Both of us were unprepared for the storm that followed.

In the immediate aftermath of ITV's *Exposure* documentary, I was asked to write a four-page exposé in

The Mail on Sunday, bylined as Savile's biographer, albeit a biographer with no biography to show for his years of work. I was contacted by national newspapers and sought out for radio and television interviews and appeared on a special edition of *Panorama*. Foreign television stations and journalists from leading newspapers in Spain, Germany and the US requested interviews or comment. If this was my moment in the spotlight, I hadn't reckoned on it coming on the back of my long association with a serial child sex offender.

More embarrassingly, my extensive experience of Savile also led to a debut in the "Street of Shame" pages of *Private Eye*, where I was named and shamed for a "gushing" piece I had published in *The Mail on Sunday* the day after he died.

After a life in which his fame was uniquely contained within the borders of Britain, Jimmy Savile's infamy was suddenly international. I felt vindicated for staying with the story and hopeful that my book might now see the light of day after all. I also experienced a sick apprehension about where the story might lead next.

After 17 straight days of Savile being front page news, though, I was spent. Friends had been phoning me to check whether I was OK, obviously thinking that the whole thing must have been an awful shock. I wondered, meanwhile, what my wife's relations were now thinking about the section on me and Jimmy Savile in the best man's speech at our wedding just a month or so before. Even my 13-year-old nephew, who didn't have a clue

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who Jimmy Savile was before all this, seemed to enjoy taunting his uncle about "hanging out with paedophiles".

I tried consoling myself with the thought that my instincts were right about him all along. But as more victims came forward and the revelations became ever more awful, it felt like my intestines were being twisted. All I could say was that I was not the only one; he fooled prime ministers, princes and popes, hospitals, big corporations and national charities. As I found out in further interviews, he also duped those who claimed to have been members of his inner circle.

Looking back now at the hundreds of pages of interview transcript and listening again to those tapes, what's striking is how he structured his denials. He started from a position of guilt — he'd tell me he didn't have the internet because he didn't want someone to break in, steal his hard drive and accuse him of downloading porn — and worked his way outwards, almost as though he'd been practising his alibis, like his stories, for years. I confess to wondering whether he was going senile and losing his grip, especially when he made his unsavoury jokes about underage girls. He was an old man from a bygone era in which being surrounded by teenagers made him look young. And that was the thing about Jimmy Savile; he was always old.

Or maybe he was trying to tell me, to absolve himself of guilt. It could have been intended as the finale of a sick high-

wire act he had been performing for much of his life, although I doubt that very much. I don't think he felt any guilt. After all, he put it all out there for everyone to see in his books and in his interview banter, so who could blame him if he was utterly convinced that he'd never be caught?

Over a period of 40 years, police forces up and down the country dismissed complaints about him, while within the press, his reputation for being litigious and the popularity he enjoyed ensured newspapers never felt confident enough to go to print with the information they had. Even in death he seemed to exert a power, as the BBC, which failed to act on reports and rumours about him in the past, decided to axe the *Newsnight* report that would have unmasked him.

Is it any wonder his victims were wary, if not frightened of him? By targeting the young and the vulnerable, while simultaneously surrounding himself with important people whom he regarded as protection, he correctly calculated on being able to satisfy his urges without jeopardising the myth.

Given the repulsion I felt in my youth towards Savile and the zeal with which I attacked his good name, I now wonder how the top room in my house has come to be dominated by teetering piles of research notes, bulging files of newspaper cuttings and boxes of old books. Every time I stand outside the back door of my house to smoke a cigarette, I tell myself not to think about him, and what he has cost me. And every time, I fail. If I am to be defined by him, I am determined it will be for getting to the truth. And then I hope to bury whatever's left inside a concrete-lined tomb. 📄

Dan Davies' biography of Jimmy Savile will be published by Quercus in 2014



Two of Dan Davies' earlier articles about Jimmy Savile, published in *Jack* magazine, 2004 (left), and in *Esquire*, 2008 (right)

