



Norton, Graham (b. 1963)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A smash hit on British television, comedian and talk-show host Graham Norton has been out, proud, and outrageous from the beginning of his career.

Born Graham Walker in Bandon, County Cork, Ireland on April 4, 1963, Norton grew up Protestant in the overwhelmingly Catholic country. At the age of eighteen he enrolled in Cork University, planning to major in English and French, but he had what he described as a "psychotic episode" toward the end of his first year and dropped out.

Norton headed to San Francisco and joined a commune. He was briefly engaged to a young American woman but broke it off when he recognized his true sexuality. He had always "felt different" but had put it down to being a member of a religious minority. While this was surely a cultural factor contributing to his sense of marginalization, Norton realized that the essential cause of his feeling "wasn't the Protestant thing."

Norton returned to Ireland and resumed his course at Cork University. After receiving his degree, he moved to London to study at the Central School of Speech and Drama and to launch a career in acting. It was at this point that he adopted the surname Norton, his great-grandmother's maiden name, since another actor was already performing under the name Graham Walker.

While a student in London, Norton was the victim of a savage attack by a gang who stabbed him in the chest, causing him to lose half his blood. Somehow he was able to make his way to the home of an elderly couple who came to his rescue. The husband called the police while the wife held Norton's hand and comforted him. After he recovered, he attempted to get in touch with his benefactors, but the police would not tell him their address. Recalling the traumatic incident, he said, "The big thing I learnt is that we don't want to die alone."

For eight years Norton supported himself as a waiter and barman while auditioning for acting jobs with little success. He began performing stand-up comedy routines at a pub where he worked, however, and, starting in 1992, he presented his shows, with such politically incorrect titles as *Mother Teresa of Calcutta's Farewell Tour* and *The Karen Carpenter Bar and Grill*, at the Edinburgh Fringe festival. His *Charlie's Angels Go to Hell* was successful enough to move to London in 1997.

In 1996 Norton landed an acting job on the outrageously funny situation comedy *Father Ted*, which premiered on Britain's Channel 4 in 1995. For the next two years he made occasional guest appearances on the show in the minor role of Father Noel, an enthusiastic if not particularly bright priest. The comedy, which was subsequently telecast on American PBS stations, brought Norton to the attention of American as well as British audiences.

The opportunity that established his television career came about most unexpectedly: he was asked to stand in as a last-minute replacement for the host of a late-night talk show on Britain's Channel 5. He was

so well received that he won as Best Newcomer at the 1997 British Comedy Awards.

Because of this success, Channel 5 made Norton the host of a quiz show, *Bring Me the Head of Light Entertainment* (1997). Although the program had only a short run, it provided a showcase for Norton's comedic talents and led to bigger things.

In 1999 Norton got his own talk show on Channel 4, *So Graham Norton*, which immediately became a hit. At once charming, campy, and wickedly witty, he engaged both celebrity guests and audience members in conversations in which no topic was too outrageous and no chance for a double-entendre missed.

Norton had a wide variety of guests but often brought on entertainers who are favorites with gay fans, such as Elton John, Cher, Bea Arthur, and Grace Jones. His antics frequently included getting the guests to surf sex sites on the Internet or talk on the telephone with fetishists. "It was hardly the most subtle of programs, and I was hardly the most subtle of hosts," Norton later commented.

He was, however, among the most successful. He won the prestigious British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for Best Entertainment Performance for three years running and also received two British Comedy Awards among other honors. *So Graham Norton* was nominated for many entertainment industry awards and won several, including a BAFTA in 2001.

Just as Norton was starting to enjoy great professional success, he suffered a disappointment in his personal life when he and his partner of five years, American television researcher Scott Michaels, parted ways.

The weekly series *So Graham Norton* was such a hit that Channel 4 decided to put him on the air five nights a week and to rename the show *V Graham Norton*. This program was also extremely popular, but Norton chose to leave it after two years and try his hand at American television. He hosted *The Graham Norton Effect* on the Comedy Central channel in the summer of 2004. Although the show failed to attract a large audience, and Norton soon returned to Britain, the frequent reruns have made him well-known to American television viewers, especially gay men.

Although the BBC had signed Norton to a contract reportedly worth between 3.5 and 5 million pounds in 2003, the network did not find a vehicle for him until 2005, when he began hosting *Strictly Dance Fever*, a show on which aspiring dancers perform before a panel of judges. His role on the program is a departure from his previous television work, as he does not make his comedic talent the focus, but rather highlights the contestants.

The BBC featured Norton more prominently in another show that debuted in 2005, *The Bigger Picture*. Norton called the program "edgier and [more] adult than some other BBC shows," but noted that the tone would be different from that of his earlier series. "You can only trade on camp for so long," he commented.

The Bigger Picture still permits Norton to do comedic monologues and chat with guests, but the guest list now includes people who discuss serious current events. Although the program received poor reviews at first, it subsequently took off and was another success for Norton.

Norton teamed with Andrew Lloyd Webber in 2006 on the BBC show *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*, a contest to determine which of the participants would win the starring role in a West End production of *The Sound of Music* (book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse, music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein) in November of that year. The program was an immediate hit as viewers eagerly awaited the decisions of the judging panel that included Lloyd Webber, producer David Ian, actor and singer John Barrowman, and vocal coach Zoe Taylor.

In August 2006 the BBC outbid its competitor ITV to sign Norton to a "golden handcuffs" contract that will keep him at the network at least through the end of 2009. The deal was said to be worth some four million pounds.

Despite his busy schedule of television work, Norton occasionally does stand-up comedy shows in clubs and has had small parts in a few feature films, including Todd Stephens's *Another Gay Movie* (2006) and Amy Heckerling's *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (not yet released).

Norton's most recent romance, a long-distance relationship with an American singer named Kristian Seeber, ended in early 2006. Although Norton stated that he "[found] it difficult to imagine getting married" himself, he favors equal rights for gay and lesbian couples who wish to marry or adopt.

"I can't believe how anyone could be against gay couples adopting children," he said. "Are there really people who think it's best for children to be without a parent [rather] than to have a good, loving home?"

Bibliography

Armstrong, Stephen. "Seriously Graham Norton." *The Guardian* (London) (August 1, 2005): Media, 2.

Duerden, Nick. "Carry On, Graham." *The Independent* (London) (July 30, 2005): 12-15.

English, Paul. "Strictly Bolder and Wiser; The TV Star May Be Mellowing a Bit But Won't Be Tamed by the Big Interview." *Scottish Daily Record & Sunday Mail* (April 1, 2006): 4.

Glitz, Michael. "Graham's Crackers." *The Advocate* (March 13, 2001): 50.

Kennedy, Victoria. "My Heart's Broken, But I'll Survive." *The Mirror* (London) (April 1, 2006): 24.

Roche, Elisa. "Norton Will Get GBP 4m to Stay in His Job at BBC." *The Express* (Scotland) (August 18, 2006): 32.

Teeman, Tim. "How Do You Find a Girl to Play Maria?" *The Times* (London) (August 8, 2006): 6.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.