

# Oxfordshire

January 2015

Limited Edition

*incorporating* Oxfordshire  
Homes and Interiors

On a  
wing and  
a prayer

Pilot Michael  
Hempstead's  
love affair with  
the Vulcan  
bomber

Meet the  
King of  
La-di-Dah

'Legs' Larry  
Smith on his art  
and life with  
the Bonzo Dog  
Doo-Dah Band





In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

**'Legs' Larry Smith in  
University Parks,  
Oxford**

**Photograph:  
Greg Blatchford**

# The King of La-di-Da



**L**egs Larry Smith is an Oxford-born artist, writer and musician – a friend of The Beatles and a member of the ground-breaking Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band. He also accompanied Elton John and Eric Clapton on tours of the States – often tap dancing in a tutu with half-a-dozen chorus girls.

You could say he has lived a charmed life – but not everything has gone smoothly for this multi-talented man.

Larry was born at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, in January, 1944.

His father, Alec, was born in Yorkshire and his mother, Olive, in Lancashire. Alec was a bricklayer and headed south looking for work. The family settled in Ferry Road, New Marston – but Alec worked for a while in Brighton, East Sussex.

Larry said: “It must have been like discovering Eldorado because my father wrote to his parents suggesting they move there. The whole family took his advice and moved to Shoreham. We had holidays in Brighton and in Manchester where my mother’s family lived.

“I remember the gleaming doorsteps polished to perfection by Manchester housewives in defiance of the soot and grime that covered everything.”

Larry was an only child but had a regular companion – his dog Trixie. He loved to take Trixie out for walks – and go fishing in the nearby River Cherwell. Growing up he thought the world was greener and the fish more plentiful on the University Parks side of the river. “I used to leap over the edge of the High Bridge and land in the park – which you were not supposed to do. My rebellion started early,” Larry recalled.

His education at Oxford’s Northway Estate Primary School was interrupted when, aged nine-and-a-half, he contracted rheumatic Fever.

“I was admitted to the Radcliffe Infirmary and then sent to convalesce in the Savernake Forest, Wiltshire. Surprisingly there were no opportunities for lessons or learning. In hospital there were no lessons so I relieved the tedium by drawing blobby people, cartoon-like sketches. But I missed a whole year of school and consequently failed my 11-plus,” he recalled.

“I was sent to Northway Estate Secondary Modern School and was lucky in that I found an inspirational art teacher in Grahame Miller, who recognised that I had potential.”

Mr Miller took Larry and fellow student David Mitchell to London, to the Tate gallery and to the Curzon cinema to see an art house film of Picasso painting directly to camera on glass.

Larry said: “I was inspired to paint and started to win art prizes. Grahame approached my parents, suggesting I should apply to art school because I had talent. I put a portfolio together and won a place at the Oxford School of Art which was where Oxford Brookes is today. The various courses gave me a good grounding in art but, when contemporary artists from London visited us, I concluded that the teachers were stuck in a previous era and London was where I had to be,” Larry added.

“I transferred to The Central School of Art and Design which is now Central St Martins and I studied there for three years, eventually receiving a National Diploma in Design.”

Larry particularly liked problem-solving and



**The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band's original line-up, with Vivian Stanshall, Neil Innes, Rodney 'Rhino' Desborough Slater, Roger Ruskin Spear and 'Legs' Larry Smith**

## Sylvia Vetta meets the man who tap-danced his way to legendary status in the music business, 'Legs' Larry Smith

graphic design and was attracted to the world of advertising, which in the 1960s was particularly innovative and creative. But the capital of the advertising world was across the Atlantic.

“In my penultimate year, with two other guys I put a portfolio together and headed for New York,” Larry said. “If you were British in New York in 1964 you were considered princes

*“If you were British in New York in 1964 you were considered princes – The Beatles were gods”*

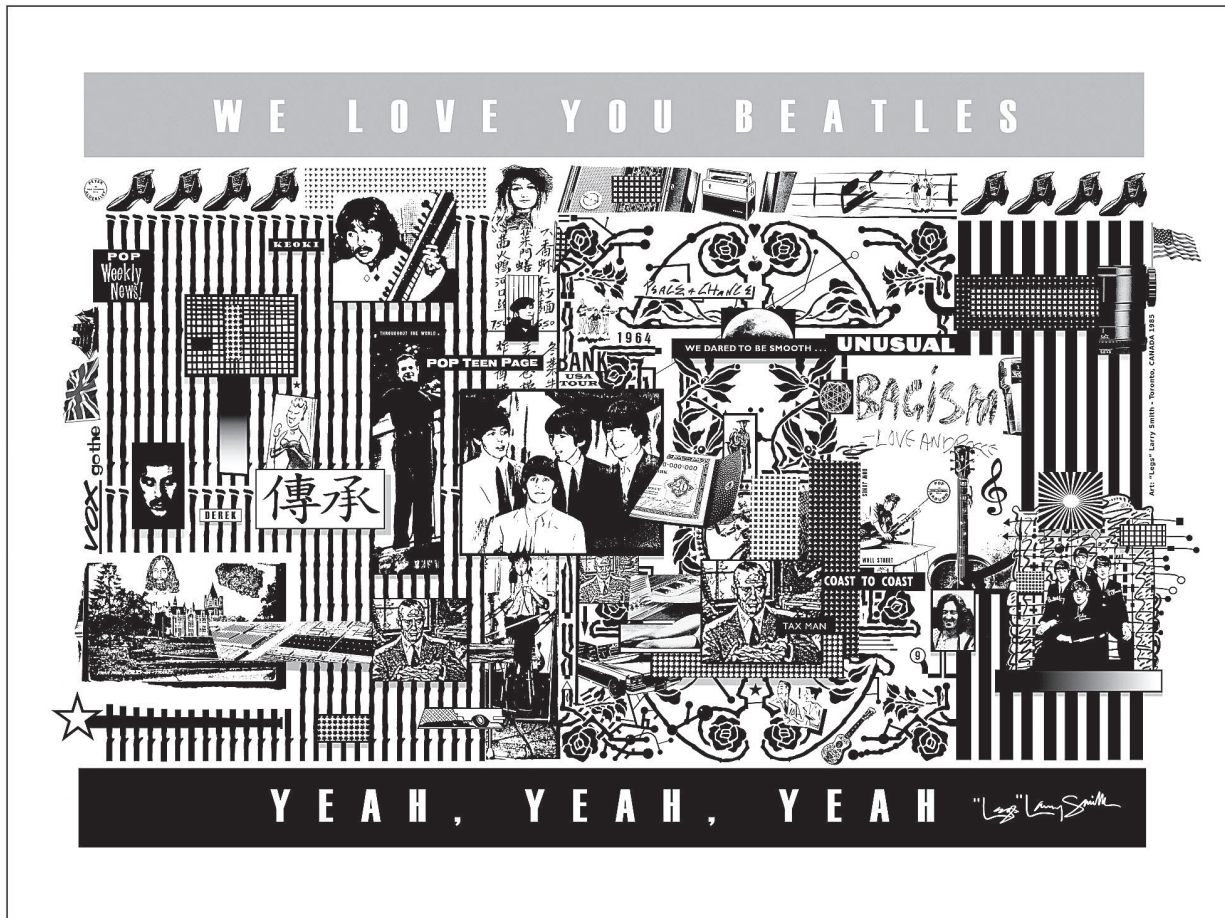
– The Beatles were gods. Taxi-drivers leant out of their cab windows and shouted ‘You guys are great.’

“We looked different, and had an aura of irresponsibility. Girls followed us in the streets, eventually plucking up courage to approach us.

“I tried telling them we were nothing to do with rock ‘n’ roll and that we were merely art students from London, but they simply would not believe it. ‘Wow London, England’ they gasped and asked for our autographs.”

Larry found he had acquired a rock ‘n’ roll image even before taking to the drum kit.

*Continued on page 11*



From page 9

Looking for work the 'art students' took their design portfolios to the famous advertising agency McCann Erickson.

Larry said: "They sent us to an innovative sister company called McCann Marshall who gave us six weeks work. I worked on a logo design for Tab, a soft drink.

“They took us to endless lunches to show off three groovy English guys. An idea for my castaway object is the type rule given me in the *Time Life* building by Bill Free, the head of the agency.

“The pleasure and real affection I have for this rare piece of steel is quite something – for one thing, I can use it to defend myself and it has lots of tiny grooves for when I feel like being groovy,” Larry said.

The grooviness obviously rubbed off because the three young art students were introduced to Peter Max, a German-born illustrator and graphic artist who, with his friend Tom Daly, had started a small Manhattan art studio known as The Daly & Max Studio and they were making quite a name for themselves with their psychedelic artworks.

Larry said: "After our six weeks work we headed for Villa Park, Chicago, to visit my aunt Betty, who had married a GI. In the Midwest too, the local girls thought us 'glamorous pop-stars' and there were always a couple hanging around my aunt's house, leaning over the picket fence.

"We went to a drive-in, raced a GTO and 'hung out' at a cool new MacDonald's where we ordered endless Big Macs for 39 cents. The chain was just beginning to take off in the States.

“Charles C Cooper the manager, gave me his ‘degree’ certificate, his ‘Batchelor of

Hamburgerology' would you believe, and I still have it. Taking that to Oxtopia would probably make me extremely hungry – and I would probably get to sleep dreaming of hamburgers jumping over fences in one of England's green and pleasant pastures."

When the time came to leave the USA Peter Max turned up, in his canary yellow Volkswagen convertible, to drive them to the airport.

But when Larry called the airport to check on the Air Lingus student flight home he was told it had already left.

Larry said: "We had no money and were telling the story to a hysterical Peter when around the corner came an oriental gentleman, extremely 'posh' and suffering from an English education.

“He was carrying a bottle of Jack Daniels. He approached us and said ‘Excuse me, are you Liverpudlians?’ We said: ‘NO, NO, NO – we are definitely not. We had had quite enough of ‘adoring recognition’. We are from London and have spent all our money, missed our flights and have no idea how to get back to England.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Come with me’.

"We all bundled into Peter's car and headed off for Kennedy Airport swigging his Jack Daniels and beginning to care less and less about the flight home," Larry laughed.

"The stranger said 'Which airline?' Then answered his own question. 'You are British so you should really fly BOAC.'"

"This total stranger went up to the counter and asked for three tickets 'to London, England, please', produced a credit card and paid for our flights home. We made sure we refunded him and later discovered he was the owner of the Five Spot Jazz Club."

McCann-Marshall had offered Larry a job once he had finished his final year at college and he had every intention of returning to New York – before he met Vivian Stanshall that is.

Larry explained: “Vivian was a fellow student regarded as a cool dude. He stood out with his dandified manner and bright red hair. He was serious about Bonzo and was already forming the band and asked me to join as the tuba player. But I really fancied the drums.

“As a delinquent kid I had beat out rhythms with my mum’s knitting needles on her coffee table. But I borrowed his tuba, sat on my mother’s carpet blowing, huffing and puffing and by the end of a week had managed to make an acceptable sound.

"I returned to London and passed my second audition. The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band began to play twice-a-week in pubs."

When Larry reached the end of his graphic design course, he had the opportunity to head up an Italian design team in Milan.

"I did not take that either because queues formed whenever we played. Kenny Ball's manager Reg Tracey came to watch us. In his best Essex manner he said 'Hello boys. I will make you rich and famous.' Ho, ho," Larry said.

"We made our TV debut in February, 1966, performing *Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey* on *Blue Peter*.

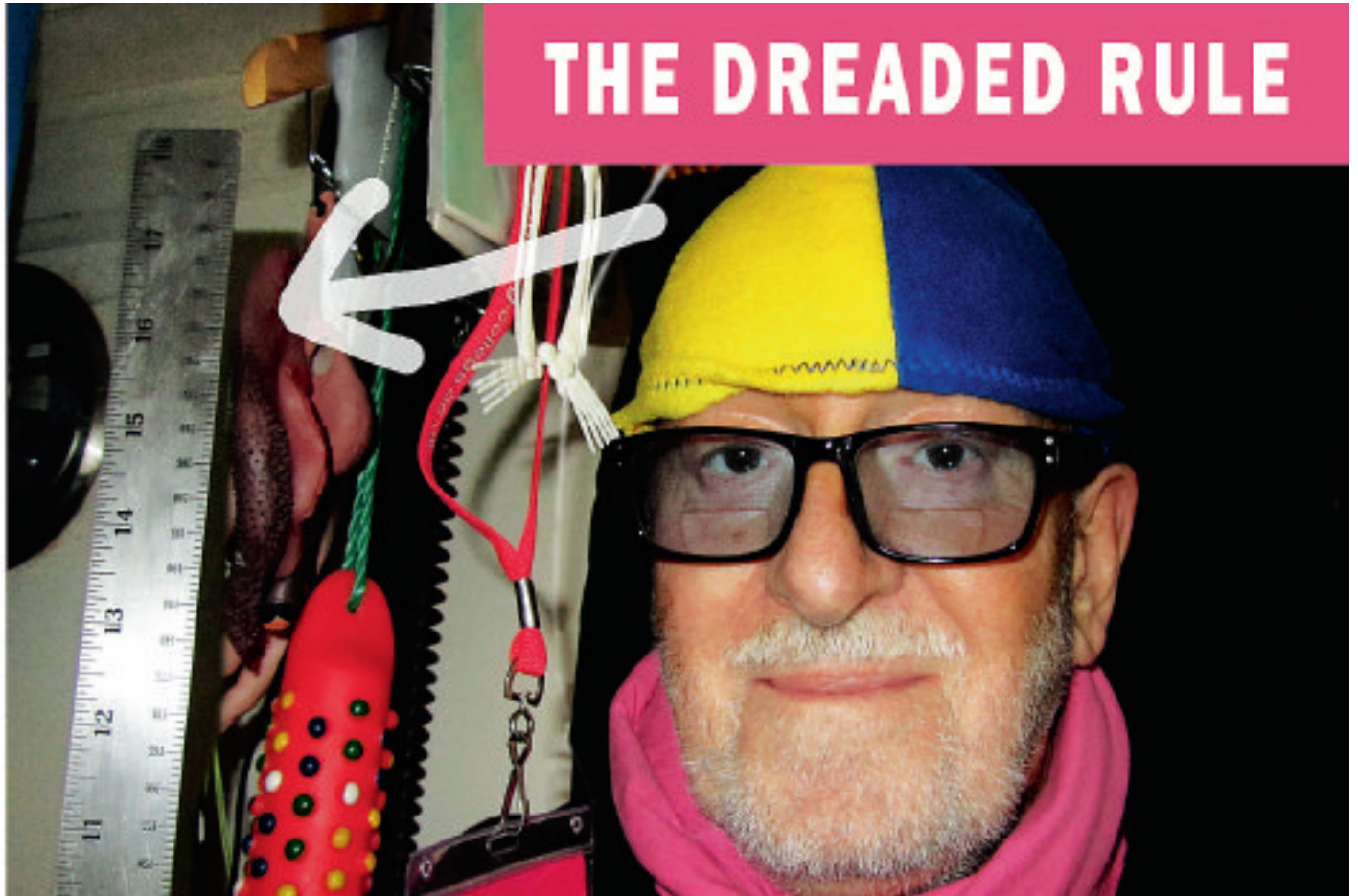
Larry's first sight of The Beatles came at EMI's Abbey Road studio – where both bands were recording.

"Such was the power of their image that we joined the cleaning ladies, secretaries and maintenance men on the stairs to watch as Lennon's black Rolls-Royce turned up," Larry

Continued on page 13



# THE DREADED RULE



From page 11

said. "They jumped out with their suits and their smiles and raced off to Studio A."

In 1967 the Bonzos were booked on a six-week tour of northern cabaret clubs.

"Admission was free," Larry said. "For the price of a couple of beers you could see a line-up of top variety acts which meant that the clubs were packed with incredible audiences out for a good time."

"Staying at a venue for a whole week meant we could create a show and rehearse new songs during the day."

Then came the offer from Paul McCartney to take part in the Beatles' film *The Magical Mystery Tour*.

"We feigned illness, left the cabaret club and headed south," Larry said. "Paul wanted us to play as a backing band in a Soho strip joint and that is exactly what we did."

"Afterwards there was a wonderful party at the Royal Lancaster Hotel. Everyone came in fancy dress. Paul and Jane Asher dressed as a pearly king and queen. Lennon was toughing it out as a rocker in leathers. George Martin, their producer arrived as the Duke of Edinburgh with his wife as the Queen. When they arrived they were breathtakingly real – they looked so regal."

On Boxing Day, 1967, ITV launched a groundbreaking show called *Do Not Adjust Your Set*. it acquired cult status and ran till May 1969. The Bonzos played in each programme.

In 1968 the band had a hit with *I'm the Urban Spaceman*, a song written by Neil Innes and produced by Paul McCartney and Gus Dudgeon.

But during a tour of the USA in 1969 Viv Stanshall was taken ill

Larry said: "On returning to the UK we had a

*"Afterwards there was a wonderful party at the Royal Lancaster Hotel. Everyone came in fancy dress. Paul and Jane Asher dressed as a pearly king and queen. Lennon was toughing it out as a rocker in leathers."*

meeting and decided to split up."

The Bonzos played their final gig in January, 1970 – although it was not quite final because they reconvened a couple of times, sadly without Vivian.

Around that time Larry got to know George Harrison's personal assistant, Terry Doran.

"Terry and I were becoming good friends, hanging out at The Marquee club. Terry told George 'You've got to meet Larry.'"

"We had an official meeting lined up when he was recording *My Sweet Lord* over at Trident Studios. A couple of months later he telephoned and invited me over to Friar Park, Henley, for dinner. I figured he was lining up a sneaky surprise. He breezed into the grand hall, nodded hello and seated himself at the piano. There he was at his Steinway with a Tiffany lamp and the Wurlitzer jukebox casting a warm glow over proceedings when I realised that the song he was playing was about me! Oh, Lordy. We just clicked and became closer than close. He called me 'The King of La di Da.'"

The song was *His Name Is Legs (Ladies and*

*Gentlemen)* which can be found on Harrison's 1975 album *Extra Texture (Read All About It)*.

After the Beatles broke up Larry designed the cover for George's *Gone Troppo* album (1982). He also sang the theme song and appeared in his film *Bullshot* (1983).

"We did lots of incredible things together," Larry recalled. "I went with George to an Ayurvedic retreat in Boston for ten days where we met interesting people including Mo Austin, the head of Warner Brothers."

The retreat was led by the now famous Depak Chopra, now described as a "controversial New-Age guru".

"Depak said 'You have to find the place inside yourself where nothing is impossible.' I learned transcendental meditation and enjoyed blissful hot sesame oil massages," Larry recalled.

"I miss George. He had such warmth and a great sense of humour. There was one favour I wanted to return. I wrote a song about him and called it *Oh Keoki*. 'Keoki' is 'George' in Hawaiian. Hawaii is a paradise and we had great times there," Larry said.

Co-producer of the *Urban Spaceman* single Gus Dudgeon also produced for Elton John. He rang Larry and asked him if he would be willing to tap dance to Elton's song *I Think I'm Going to Kill Myself*.

The track appeared on the album *Honky Chateau* (1972) after which Elton asked Larry to accompany him on a tour of the USA.

Larry said: "I flew out first-class and Elton and I eventually met in a huge gymnasium somewhere in the Mid-West. We entered from different sides of the arena and slowly strode

*Continued on page 15*



From page 13

into the middle – meeting like two camp gun fighters in a western. The tour itself was magical. I did my dancing but Elton and I also did a song-and-dance routine to *Singin' in the Rain* – which went down a storm. After each show we looked for an Indian restaurant. However, in those days, there did not seem to be any apart from in New York and maybe LA. We became good friends, whizzing about America and had some unforgettable silly times together.”

One of them was in 1972 when Larry, Elton, John Reed (Elton's long-time partner and manager) and John Lazar arrived to take afternoon tea with Mae West in her apartment in LA.

“We had been informed prior to our arrival that there was to be ‘no smoking’ in the presence of Miss West, or in Miss West's apartment, so we stubbed out our ciggies in the hallway,” Larry said. “We braced ourselves – not quite knowing what to expect. Someone stepped forward and bravely buzzed the bell.

“Her black-tie butler opened the door and bid us welcome and we were reverently shown into a ‘breathtaking world of white’

“However, the quiet stillness of the room, coupled with the acrid bouquet of orchids, gave it the air of an undertaker's chapel of repose – a mortuary. It was unsettling. We were all nervously staring at each other and talking in whispers. Five, ten silly minutes drifted by then Chan, the butler, reappeared saying

‘Gentlemen – Miss West.’

“Staring straight ahead through giant ‘panda’ eyes with lashes caked in thick black clumps of make-up, and platinum blonde hair piled to within an inch of the chandelier, she glided among us, passing through us, an arm raised in greeting like the Statue of Liberty, and broke the ice with: ‘Ummm . . . wall-to-wall men – I like it!’

“She was bright, intelligent, focused, and a delight to be with. I was touched by her warmth and her spirit.”

Two years later Larry returned to the USA on tour with Eric Clapton.

“I opened, did a few funnies and then announced Eric. Then, halfway through the show, when Eric was about to do one of his blistering solos, I rushed out with a toy plastic guitar and mimed his solo. I then smashed it up and jumped on it. It went down amazingly well with the audience,” Larry said.

“For the final show the roadies gave me a superb new Jumbo acoustic guitar to smash. I said ‘Guys this is a beautiful guitar. I can't smash this. ‘Yes you can’ they said. ‘We loved your stuff and it is the last night’.

“When the magic moment came to smash it all the roadies rushed onstage, lifted me aloft and wrapped me up with gaffer tape. There I was, bound up like an Egyptian mummy when Pete Townsend came onto the stage picked up the guitar and smashed it.

But by this time Larry was not finding everything about touring fun and decided to take a break.

He said: “I spent the next 30 years in pubs and bars, with a notebook and a pencil – convincing myself that I was working. I was offered lots of opportunities but generally always messed them up at the last minute.”

He was invited to become a DJ on Capital Radio, but when it came to the audition – “I got horribly drunk and rang and cancelled.”



**Below, Non-smoking woman, by ‘Legs’ Larry Smith**

It took a long time, but family life helped him beat his demons.

“I moved to my Oxfordshire village in 1989 and became friends with Sylvia Larkin Smith. I married her daughter, Sarah, 12 years ago.

“Having children has focused me. We have 11-year-old twins Rebecca Daisy and Delphie Rose. Alcohol was the monkey on my back and I have finally sent that particular monkey to join the troupe on Gibraltar. I have not had a drink in 11 years and I'm somewhat proud of that,” Larry said.

“Now, work is the thing. I start work around five every morning in my garden studio – my ‘shedio’. I have got all this damned creativity to release, a portfolio of promise and pleasure. It has been like a rebirth. I have gone back to the beginning – to good old art. When I write music I tend to think visually to set a scene. Art helps.”

What was his final choice to take to our desert island? Perhaps unsurprisingly it was his trusty type rule.

*“I have got all this damned creativity to release, a portfolio of promise and pleasure. I have gone back to the beginning – to good old art”*



■ For more, visit the website: [www.legslarry.com](http://www.legslarry.com)