

I gatecrashed Blind Date – now it’s back

As the original TV dating show returns tonight, *Nicola Gill* relives the moment Cilla outed her as an undercover reporter

I didn’t become a journalist because I fancied the quiet life. In 25 years, I’ve experienced horror, hubris, hilarity and everything in between. But I suspect that whatever else I do in my career, I will forever be known as “the *Cosmo* journalist who went undercover on *Blind Date*”.

The first favourite and utterly fabulous prime-time reality TV game show was compulsory viewing back in the Nineties. Then, Cilla Black’s original *Blind Date* was a cultural phenomenon, with ratings that TV bosses can only dream of (15million at its peak). It was a more innocent era, before the “scripted real-life” genre, and on the cusp of the internet. A time – imagine – when there were only four channels to choose from and viewers believed everything they watched was real. When the picker asked contestant number one what his favourite vegetable was, no one wondered if David from Dagenham’s answer had been written for him and rehearsed a dozen times before the cameras rolled.

But the suspicions were there on Fleet Street, and at 27 years old I was perfectly placed to go undercover to discover the truth about what went on behind the scenes. When my then editor at the *Daily Star*, Hugh Whittow, asked me to invent a backstory and try my luck on the next round of *Blind Date* auditions



CHANNEL 5/RAY BURMISTON, SHUTTERSTOCK

(alongside every other rookie reporter with a sufficiently low public profile), I didn’t think twice.

I plunged myself into the role of Nicky, the temp from Guildford, who travelled the world between work, seeking sun and fun times with surfers. During the next few months, I winged my way from first to second auditions, leaving the *Daily Star* for *Cosmopolitan* magazine but taking the story with me. (I lied to the *Star* and said I hadn’t got past the first stage.

Sorry, Hugh.) Eventually I made it to that final, infamous, inglorious denouement on the sofa in 1997.

When the show returns to TV screens tonight in a new incarnation on Channel 5, hosted by Paul O’Grady, the flashbacks are sure to return. To this day, it still brings me out in a clammy glow to recall the moment Cilla turned to me with a suddenly steely glint, having gently steered me to say how much I loved surprises. I should have sensed what was coming. But I didn’t. So when Cilla uttered the now-immortal line, “Well, Nicola, I have to say I’ve got more than a big surprise for you, because I know what you’re at ... You’re a reporter for *Cosmopolitan*,” prompting a fit of vicious boos from the audience, it required every ounce of my journalistic nous to say what essentially amounted to: “Oh yes, that. Sorry!” I may have been smiling (and apologising repeatedly), but the only other time I’ve been that scared was when I was held up at gunpoint while backpacking in Central America.

One audience member, on hearing I was a journalist, shouted out, “You

killed Princess Diana” in a genuinely aggrieved voice, as Cilla ticked me off for depriving a real contestant of the chance to come on the show. (I plead innocent to the former and guilty to the latter.)

I vaguely remember being ushered off the studio floor before Cilla appeared beside me in the wings, speaking in conspiratorial tones. “I think you’re brilliant and what you’ve done is fantastic, chuck,” she said. “I’ve never disagreed with a

producer before, but we had a fight over this. I didn’t want to do that out there. I think you’re fabulous and good luck to you. I hope this works out really, really well for you.” I certainly didn’t see that coming either.

The original *Blind Date* producers were furious with me for spilling the beans. They fought back by claiming they had ultimately outsmarted me, grown suspicious that I was “too sophisticated” to be the ditsy temp I was supposed to be, and traced one of my calls back to a phone box outside *Cosmo*. In fact, I found out months later there had been a mole at Hearst, owner of *Cosmo*, where several people knew I was doing the show. One of these people had found herself chatting to the *Blind Date* producer at a party and, worse for wear, mischievously tipped him off.

Why were they so furious? I’d revealed that each of those three envelopes containing “different” holidays for the contestants to choose their “date” from were in fact all holding the same trip to a B&B in Wigan. And I was nudged with winks, comments and suggestion towards my

choice of date. The Q&As were scripted and practised, and the show was, in fact, all about making great TV and not helping contestants to find true love.

So when it was suggested recently that I might like to visit the set of the new *Blind Date*, maybe sit in the hot seat again, watch a recording, and meet the new version’s team, I was tempted but suspicious. Really? No hard feelings? Was I going to be double-crossed again?

Being recklessly risk-friendly (I later learnt the other reporters sent to the same auditions had gone to the pub instead), I said yes. Again, I almost didn’t make it past meeting the co-executive producers, Graham Stuart and Matthew Worthy, as they revealed they’d been worried my visit was part of another elaborate set-up, which only made me worry they were double bluffing.

I was almost as nervous as I was the first time around when I stepped tentatively back on to the studio floor to be shown around the set. In fact, persuaded to perch back in the picker’s stool by Stuart before the cameras started rolling, I had the

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same feeling of dread in my stomach as 20 years ago. I may now be settled with a boyfriend and two children, but it suddenly felt like yesterday.

So, what’s different about the new *Blind Date*? Not much really. It’s the same familiar format and virtually the same set. The picker asks three members of the opposite sex some innuendo-laden questions. But this time around they’ve also filmed all-male and all-female episodes.

Paul O’Grady is brilliant, like Cilla’s waspish, razor-witted, utterly filthy aunt. Much of what he said between takes, Stuart begged me not to print. Mel Sykes takes on the role of “our Graham” perfectly. But otherwise the new show is very faithful to the old.

Many of the contestants genuinely want to find love, the producers told me. To the “swipe right” generation, speaking to dates before meeting is quaintly retro. “They’ve told us they’ve forgotten how to make small talk,” says Stuart. “So much in society has changed since the original ended. Compared with shows like *Take Me Out*, *Blind Date* has a naivety and innocence from a bygone era.”



Cult classic: Cilla Black’s *Blind Date* with Nicola Gill in 1997; above, Nicola back on the set of the new series



Paul O’Grady hosts the new series of *Blind Date* tonight on Channel 5