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Dennis the reformed menace

Wealthy magazine publisher and poet Felix Dennis hasn't used up all of his nine lives yet. He talks sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and cancer with Dave Owens

The phrase 'bon vivant' was tailor-made for Felix Dennis. I use the past tense as until he was 53, the multi-millionaire publishing magnate-turned-poet and environmentalist lived the high life in every sense; leaving a jet-setting vapour trail of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll in his wake.

The reformed playboy almost died due to his many addictions until overnight the road to Damascus was the only path left to follow.

"You know, you read novels about all this kind of nonsense and you sort of think yeah, yeah right, people don't do that... well I did.

"I literally travelled the world on Concorde and private jets, I earned hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds and I just spent it on frivolous rubbish and nonsense," he roars with laughter down the phone from his Stateside home on the shores of Lake Candlewood in Connecticut.

"I was creating huge companies and at the same time I was going out with far too many beautiful young girls on my arm.

"I was also taking recreational substances. And one day I had a wake-up call. I'd had a lot of health issues as a result of misbehaving over many years.

"I looked in the mirror and I thought this is stupid; you can't have a 50-year-old guy with beautiful 20-year-old girls on your arm. It just looks stupid. You've had a lost decade, which probably lasted 15 years. And that's enough.

"Now the drugs are gone, the drinking a bottle of brandy a night is gone. All the wonderful pretty girls you're flying all over the world in private jets? That's gone too. And it was kind of liberating and I did it straight away. I did it cold turkey."

But sobriety for a man whose life was an X-rated boy's own novel came at a price – boredom.

"I woke up one day and I thought as well as running companies I'm really bored. I thought, what am I going to do? So I started planting trees and writing poetry. It's my new addiction."

In an unlikely turn of events, Dennis, who has published more than 200 magazines and famously made the office hamster editor-in-chief of US Maxim, has reinvented himself as a best-selling author and poet.

He's also about to plant his millionth tree as part of a project to establish the Heart of England Forest

in Warwickshire.

It's the publication of a new poetry tome and run of live shows that is now occupying the 66-year-old's mind. His seventh book of verse entitled *Love Of A Kind*, published by Ebury Press, coincides with *The Cut-Throat Tour*, so named for good reason – in January of last year he was diagnosed with throat cancer.

Acknowledging the gallows humour of the show's moniker, he says: "I have this very faint but rather remarkable cut right across my throat that looks like I've been to see the wrong barber."

The circumstances of his diagnosis were in keeping with the remarkably unorthodox nature of his own life.

"I was diagnosed on the Caribbean island of Mustique by the local doctor who was very alert.

"His name was Dr Michael Bunbury. He had a look in my throat but didn't have one of those proper torches you strap to your forehead.

"However, he did have a children's Mickey Mouse torch (he cracks up laughing). So he shone this Mickey Mouse torch down my throat holding my tongue down with a spatula. And then he put them down and said 'stop what you're doing' because I was sat there scribbling and paying no attention to him.

"He said 'this is serious... you've got a tumour'.

And then the nightmare began."

If the words of the doctor were harrowing, the date of diagnosis will forever stay with him.

"Friday the 13th. It's not that I'm superstitious or anything," he laughs.

"So I chartered a private plane and rushed home knowing when the plane was landing that I was descending into hell. And I got that bit right."

What followed was torture for a man whose life has been built on the surety of his own preternatural decision making – he was wracked with indecision.

"There were two weeks where I wandered around, hospital to hospital, specialist after specialist, all of them



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saying different things and suggesting different treatments.

“One of the odd things about cancer is that you don’t go to the doctor and the doctor says okay, there’s only one thing to do and this is what it is. It’s not like that. It’s quite the opposite, as you get all these choices. And all these choices are life and death choices. If you make the wrong choice you are not going to be around.

“So the two weeks of making the decision and meeting all these clever doctors, consultants and specialists was very frightening. It was exhausting.”

Plumping for an operation to remove the tumour at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, near to his UK home in Stratford-upon-Avon, the surgeon saved Dennis’ voice.

“But it was a life changing event,” he states by way of huge understatement.

“It’s also horribly painful and also very irritating. Everything about it. You can’t swallow, I lost my salivary glands so I haven’t got saliva. There’s lots I can’t eat now like spicy foods, which I used to love. I can’t drink wine properly because it’s too acidic, even the best wine in the world.

“So I have to pour a lot of water in it. Can you imagine taking a bottle of Petrus and pouring water in it? Shocking.”

While the operation was a success, there’s no reassurance that the cancer won’t return, “not for at least five years,” adds Dennis.

Understandably for a man who has experienced one life-changing event, this latest brush with his own mortality has left its mark, both physically and emotionally.

“When you think about it, if you haven’t got a serious illness and your children, your family and friends are all okay and you’ve got food and shelter and a little bit of money in your pocket to buy a glass of beer or a new lipstick, just how bad is it,” he posits.

“And the answer that cancer teaches you is that actually, life isn’t very bad at all; in fact, it’s pretty good.

“What it has taught me is that you have got to plan for the future, but you must ration the past and you have to live in the here and now.”

■ **Felix Dennis appears at The Glee Club, Cardiff on Monday, July 8. Tickets from the box office on 0871 472 0400 or via www.glee.co.uk/cardiff**

FELIX FACTS

■ Felix Dennis was a famed participant in the notorious 1970 Oz magazine conspiracy trial

■ He founded Dennis Publishing with no capital in 1973 and became a multi-millionaire in just eight years

■ He does not own a mobile phone or an e-mail address or a driving license

■ He made a chart single with John Lennon which was released by Apple Records

■ He breeds rare pigs (and eats them!)

■ He co-authored the first biography of Bruce Lee as well as the biography of Muhammad Ali

■ He owns 20 kitchens in homes around the world and cooks in none of them

■ He estimates that in his lifetime he’s spent £100m on sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll

■ Fans of his poetry include Sir Paul McCartney, Stephen Fry, Jon Snow and Tom Wolfe

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