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Wally Fawkes, the political cartoonist Trog, had an oldie moment recently when he was at the doctor's surgery for his flu jab. "I was in the waiting room with a lot of slightly apprehensive elderly people in various stages of decay when over the speakers came a faint sound of music. Suddenly the Nelson Riddle strings filled the room and the next thing we heard was Sinatra singing, *And Now the End is Near*. We all looked at each other and exploded with mirth."

Fawkes is now 83 [birthday in June] having retired two years ago after 60 years as a cartoonist because failing eyesight meant he could no longer see well enough to draw. Lesser men might have been depressed by this but he simply says at 80 you're allowed to retire, although he's sad there are politicians coming onto the stage who he's never cartooned, like David Cameron. His compensation is being able to draw on his other prodigious talent, that of being a jazz musician. "I think I would be a bit sadder about the whole business if I didn't have the clarinet playing but it's a very good outlet to have." He is self taught, saying the instrument took him up when he was 18 in the Benny Goodman era. When Fawkes heard the clarinetist Sidney Bechet he was "swept away". He says all he knew about the clarinet was that you blew down the narrow end; but it wasn't long before Bechet was describing him as one of the world's best.

His first band was the George Webb Dixielanders, to which he recruited the trumeter Humphrey Lyttelton, then an art student. Lyttelton returned the favour in 1948 when he formed his own band and Fawkes was a founder member. The two played together for years; but eventually Fawkes found there was a conflict between the pressure of touring every weekend and his Fleet Street day job. "I was getting further and further behind, and it was getting a bit nervous-making and I had to make a decision to keep the music for pleasure and the cartoon drawing

as a livelihood, because unless you're a band leader you don't make much money out of music." Nevertheless, he played with his hero Bechet in Geneva in the fifties and he still plays today.

Many musicians have begun their careers at art school and Fawkes thinks there's an empathy between cartooning and jazz. "You're drawing in the air really. With jazz, you've got to keep to the same chords and get them right, but you start improvising, as with a caricature. The clarinet and the pen are similar in that with the clarinet you depend on the reed at the end, and with a pen it's the nib. You dip the nib into ink and you dip the reed into your head.

The artist whose drawings most look to me like music is Quentin Blake – he's one of my favourites."

Art was his first talent and he knew he loved drawing from childhood. At 14, he won a scholarship to Sidcup Art School though he modestly claims it was all he could do. His promising art student years were cut short by the war, and he was forced to leave and earn some money for his family who had sailed to Britain from Vancouver during the depression years, "unaware there was a depression here too." His first job was to camouflage a factory in Woolwich. "I spent all summer doing it and then it was bombed; I got a rejection slip from Hitler – the severest criticism I ever got." From the remains of the bombed out factory, Fawkes rose again by winning a competition sponsored by the Coal Commission (who employed him to trace maps of coal seams). The competition entry had depicted a boxer apprehensively approaching the ring. "I was into boxing then; I was very aggressive in those days." It wasn't the first time the young Fawkes had been a prize winner: he was also a good cricketer and once won a cricket bat signed by Jack Hobbs.

Luckily for Fawkes, the art competition judge was Leslie Illingworth, the *Daily Mail's* political cartoonist, who became his "fairy godmother" giving him his first newspaper job. "I started on the *Mail* on my 21st birthday doing little column breakers. Leslie was the great man in my

cartoon life.” Fawkes took the pen-name Trog from his band’s nickname, the Troglodytes and returned one day a week to art school, this time Camberwell, where he was taught by John Minton. Three years later, the *Mail* asked him to draw a strip cartoon, for which he created a baby woolly elephant called Flook who became a household name. Originally meant for children, the strip evolved into a gentle satire and political commentary and was written by colleagues including Lyttelton, George Melly, and Barry Took. It lasted 35 years, by which time Fawkes had become disillusioned with the paper’s politics and was contributing cartoons to the *Spectator*, *New Statesman*, *Punch* and – in the ‘70s - to the *Observer* for which he drew two cartoons a week, one for the leader page and a ‘Mini-Trog’ for the front page.

His friendship with Lyttelton – whom he recruited to the *Mail* – has lasted a lifetime. Lyttelton describes him as “tall, placid and easy going, with a deep-rooted aversion to anything which threatened to make life complicated... and a Groucho Marxian sense of humour.... He doesn’t believe in speaking one word when none would do.” In his newspaper days, Fawkes was once temporarily made a foreign correspondent, covering a post-war international jazz festival in Nice where Louis Armstrong was the star. Being a man of few words, he failed to supply any copy but mentioned to the frantic newsdesk that Lyttelton, who was also performing, was an old Etonian. Ignoring Armstrong, the paper seized on the ‘Old-Etonian-ex-Guards-officer-sets-Nice-alight’ story, and the cartoonist was rescued.

A master of his craft, Fawkes thinks good cartoonists need highly trained graphic skills and political awareness, but he doesn’t believe in taking work too seriously. “It’s just part of the paper which is fish and chips the next day.” Nevertheless, his originals are sought after by many politicians, including the jazz loving Ken Clarke who says Trog is his favourite political cartoonist. “When I was a small boy I was a fan of Flook and in the past I’ve obtained one or two of his originals for a couple of bottles of brandy! Probably my favourite – although it’s not

terribly flattering – is of John Major and myself as a couple of beached whales.” Trog returns the compliment by saying the Tories should have put Clarke in control after Thatcher, although his own leanings are to the left. “I’m all for the left being sensible, or at least regaining its senses. I like New Labour but not the present leader. I’ve done lots of cartoons of Blair, week after week, and I think that’s what drove me blind.”

His reaction against the Establishment partly stems from being patronised as somebody from the ‘New World’ and partly, perhaps, from being a descendant of Guy Fawkes. “I think ‘Great’ Britain should readjust its self-regard,” he says. Trog was the first to cartoon the Queen and one of his more memorable drawings depicts her asleep at a Royal Variety performance. He is gently anti-monarchy but fervently anti-religion. “I treated the royals like people in show business. I think it would be a good thing to be without them; I think they’ll see themselves off. They’ll be easier to get rid of than the various religions that fuel hatred and bloodshed. I think God invented religion as a means of culling the human race.”

Although he claims to have nothing interesting to say (“That’s why I don’t talk to myself”) Wally Fawkes has left a remarkable visual legacy. Thousands of Trog originals, including the Flook strip, are now archived at the British Cartoon Archive at Kent University in Canterbury, which awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in 2001. His life has been fun, so far, and he’s quietly optimistic. “I like being old and look on it as an achievement; I just think of the things that I can still do,” he says. He listens to cricket on the radio, although he’s had to relinquish his MCC membership because he can’t see well enough, and he enjoys cooking, despite the dangers on the chopping board. He has no unfulfilled ambitions. “I hardly had any ambitions to start with. Just to survive, and make a living from art.” And every week he plays his clarinet in a Covent Garden pub. “I’m still playing in the west end,” he jokes. “I’ve got my name up in chalk!”

