

Meet our Chas and his rock 'n' roll allotment

CHAS HODGES revs up his 1943 Willys Jeep. "Hold on tight," he says as we make the half-mile journey to his pride and joy: his allotment, situated "somewhere in Hertfordshire". Chas is best known as the Chas of the popular rock/cockney (or rockney for short) band Chas & Dave. Dave is his old friend of more than 50 years, Dave Peacock.

Together they have sold millions of records and had hits including Gertcha, Rabbit, Ain't No Pleasing You and Snooker Loopy as well as writing songs for their beloved Tottenham Hotspur football team.

Aside from the music, however, Chas has very green fingers. He once won an award for his mammoth onions (this is not a joke). Just last year the grandfather-of-two won again at his village vegetable show.

While onstage he is the geezer belting out tunes and playing the piano, in the flesh Chas is a charming and gentle man. Softly spoken and quick to laugh, he is hugely enthusiastic about how much he loves both music and growing vegetables, which he says complement each other perfectly.

"Sometimes if I am having trouble with a song I will nip down here on me bike, do a bit of weeding with me hoe (that got bent when I ran over it in the Jeep), and it just clears me mind and I can go back to it refreshed," he says wearing his trademark glasses and a straw trilby.

"Like music I can be here pottering

'Beetroot leaves are better than spinach'

around and not realise the time. Only music and gardening are like that for me."

He is clearly in his element as he gives me a guided tour: "Come and smell this wild garlic," he says pulling a piece from the earth. "It doesn't get fresher than that."

Next he holds up some newly unearthed spring onions: "You get them in the supermarket and there's no smell. Hmm lovely," he sniffs, and smiles. "Here, you can have that as a present." He laughs as he hands me the first of many such gifts.

Chas is not a new convert to Grow Your Own: he has had allotments since 1972. Born in 1943 and growing up in post-war Edmonton, north London, he has loved the idea from a very young age.

Indeed in his very entertaining book, *Chas And His Rock 'n' Roll Allotment*, he recalls the time he grew some lettuce with his mother. When it was barely ready to eat he picked it and feasted on a lettuce and salad cream sandwich: "I can still remember the taste of it to this day."

He also credits two widowed sisters, Glad and Grace, for getting him on the road to growing his own fruit and vegetables. They lived next door to him when he moved to Broxbourne in 1972 with his wife, Joan, and their daughters Kate and Juliet (his son Nik would come along later and now plays the drums for Chas & Dave).

"My sisters were like something out of the Victorian period. They were of that make do and mend generation. They even had some blackout material they had saved from the war. I really admired them.

"I was brought up in a family and we weren't all that well off and everything was used and nothing was wasted. And that

JANE CLINTON talks to the *Sunday Express's* new columnist, **Chas Hodges**, who from next week will guide us in his own irreverent way through the highs and lows of *Grow Your Own*

Picture: LUKE SANTILLI



GERTCHA: Chas gets to grips with the vegetables on his countryside oasis in Hertfordshire

is still in me now." Initially, however, they were doubtful Chas had what it took: "I would leave my best carrot out for them to see," he says. "Then one day I left out a potato and they were convinced it would be full of holes once I cut it but it was perfect and then they realised I might be OK at it."

He grows lettuce, courgettes, celeriac, beetroot, shallots, gooseberries, parsley and butternut squash, to name just a few. Beetroot leaves, he says, taste as good if not better than spinach.

While he takes great pride in his allotment and tends it nearly every day depending on his musical commitments, he says all too often people try too much too soon and lose interest: "My motto is, 'a little and often'," he says. "If you do too much you'll do your back in and get put off."

As for the winter months he wears longjohns, wraps up warm and makes sure he has lots of good comedy such as Hancock's Half Hour on his MP3 player to listen to on his headphones. "I will be digging away, laughing to myself."

He credits his allotment with giving him exercise and peace away from performing although he adores what he does. He cites Chas & Dave headlining at the Royal Albert Hall this year as a particular highlight.

Much like his love of gardening, his musical interest can be traced to when he was a small boy, although it followed a tragic turn of events: "Just before my fourth birthday my dad killed himself," he

'Music always puts a smile on your face'

says. "We never knew why. It was tough. It was 1947; there was me and my brother, Dave. Mum was always hard up and she used to play the piano Friday, Saturday and Sunday at a little local club and I knew on Monday we would have a nice spread on the table because she had a few bob from the weekend's gig. I always say that music and the piano put a smile on your face.

"I also remember there was a lot of sadness when me dad died and relations would come round and I could sense it but as soon as the piano was played and me uncle would get a quart of brown ale from the pub everyone was smiling and I thought, 'This is what you should do'. This is why the music I play is to make people happy. I think it comes from there."

He gets a mental and physical "buzz" from playing and feels something is missing if he doesn't have at least one gig a week.

"I feel like I've missed a night's sleep or a day's food," he says, adding he has played three gigs a week for the past 50 years. "Even when we go on holiday, if I don't find a piano, well..."

As the sun starts to lower on Chas and his rock 'n' roll allotment he rips up some Salad Bowl lettuce for me and begins to dig up some beetroot and mint. "Here," he says proffering a root of fragrant Bowles mint. "It will make me happy that it's going to a good home. You'll enjoy it, and the smell of mint will follow you home. Lovely."

● Go to [facebook.com/chashodgesrockandrollallotment](https://www.facebook.com/chashodgesrockandrollallotment) to chat to Chas about his passion for grow your own

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