

Kitson's last tape

JACKIE McGLONE

DANIEL KITSON IS TRYING HARD to avoid meeting his own eye in the mirrored wall behind me. "It's very disconcerting to keep looking at yourself," he mumbles. After about an hour, though, he stands up, catches a glimpse of himself and says: "Oh f***, my shirt's buttoned up all wrong."

I notice this sartorial slip-up the minute the self-proclaimed "lover, thinker, artist and prophet" sits down in the London café, where we meet, but I don't mention it, because I imagine the endearingly shambolic Kitson, who is single and lives alone, often goes out of the house wearing odd socks, with his shoelaces undone and his Oxfam-style, shrunken jumpers back to front or inside out.

So we stand in the middle of the National Portrait Gallery bookshop, while the serial Fringe First winner unbuttons and then does himself up again beneath his too-small, navy-blue duffel coat, which gives him the appearance of an overgrown, if somewhat hirsute, bespectacled schoolboy.

Perhaps the most intelligent, literate and technically gifted of stand-up comics and writers of his generation, the 29-year-old is the 2002 Perrier award-winner who has done everything he can to avoid fame, shuffling backwards into the limelight rather like fellow Yorkshireman Alan Bennett - to whose oeuvre his work is often favourably compared.

"That's a bit awkward, isn't it?" he sighs, adding that he's not worthy of mention in the same breath as a man he regards as a genius.

"It's just embarrassing to be compared to him. He's genuinely amazing, his generosity, his compassion and his brilliance."

Like Bennett, Denby Dale-born Kitson hates interviews. Apart from a brief appearance in Phoenix Nights as the myopic DJ Spencer, he steers clear of media exposure. He split from his manager in 2005 and now does everything himself, even his own press and marketing. He e-mailed me a few weeks back asking if it might be possible to get a wee mention for his upcoming Glasgow gig. "Don't worry if you can't be arsed," he wrote. I had interviewed him for his Edinburgh Fringe appearance last year, when he won a Fringe First (his second) for one-man show, C-90, which he brings to Glasgow next week, its first outing since a sell-out run at the Traverse in August.

In C-90, Kitson takes on the character of Henry, working out his last day in a unique music archive, a place where old compilation tapes are sent to be filed, and which is about to be closed down because, in the age of iPod, people just don't make such tapes for their loved ones any more.

The Scotsman's theatre critic Joyce McMillan described

C-90 as "a little classic of English dramatic writing and performance". Kitson, the son of two academics, says on his website that other reviews were "meant to be nice, but tended to miss the point". How so?

"Critics wrote things like, 'Kitson's going in a brave new direction' and 'Some of the audience clearly didn't know what they were coming to'. No, they did! You, the reviewers, didn't! But this is one of the reasons I haven't released any stand-up stuff on tapes or DVDs. I want people to come to my work at the right point, making the same journey through my stuff that I've made myself. I'd really like to whittle my fan base down to about 12... you can call them disciples if you like."

And then there were the notices bemoaning the fact that a show about the potency of cheap music had no music. "I'm proud of that in a smug way. I want audiences to hear their own music. Mine would be a bit introspective, melancholic indie stuff."

Did Kitson ever make compilation tapes? "Not really, I used to record bits of stand-up in my bedroom and give them to a girl I fancied. It didn't work. I gave my first girlfriend a compilation tape - straight down the line stuff, not proclaiming love. Then I stuck on it We Have All The Time In The

World. She was in her car with a friend, they put it on, liked it, then that came on and there was an awkward silence. The rest was silence."

He is, by the way, still searching for romance. He hasn't performed C-90 for five months. What has he been doing with himself? "Not a lot! I put the set in storage in Glasgow, after Edinburgh, so I've some work to do on it with my tour manager and the designer Suzanna Henry. A bit of tweaking's required, maybe of the words, too. I'm going to read it in my house next week, then learn it all over again," he says draining a bottle of mineral water, followed by organic pear juice. ("That's disgusting!" he splutters.)

After Glasgow, he'll tour C-90 around England, fetching up at the Brighton Festival in May, where a room is being built in a basement, with a wall of cassette tapes. "So that's quite exciting," he says, with a monumental yawn, especially since the 90-minute show is also being filmed there for BBC4.

In the summer, he's off to Australia, taking C-90 to the Sydney Opera House for three weeks, before touring to Brisbane and Melbourne, followed by a New York appearance at the edgy downtown theatre PS122, a converted school. "I like the idea of C-90 going there because the building looks so f***ed from the outside," he says. He'll perform the show in London, in December - "and then, hopefully, never ever do it again".

Meanwhile, he plans to bring It's The Fireworks Talking, a new stand-up show, in which "there'll be less pompous espousing of things", and another new monologue to this year's Fringe. "I've got three ideas for new stories, one of which I can't do for a year because it's too involved," he says tugging on his luxuriant beard.

Kitson's new one-man show will open at Regent's Park Theatre, in London, in June, prior to Edinburgh. "So, the idea is I won't get cripplingly bored of C-90. I shouldn't really, because each time I do it it'll be in a different room and a different space. I had no intention of touring C-90, but I became increasingly proud of it. It's the best thing I've ever done, certainly the most substantial piece I've written so far, although I never talk to audiences about it. I'm not very approachable and I always have my iPod headphones on."

Standing in the rain, Kitson pulls his duffel coat hood over his head, telling me about his idea for his 2008 Fringe show. If it comes off, Edinburgh will have never seen anything like it. However, he swears me to secrecy, then shuffles off into the crowded street, looking like the only sort of hoodie you might even contemplate hugging - although he won't thank me for saying so.

- C-90 is at the Arches, Glasgow, 23-28 January.