

Sir Terry Wogan celebrates his 35th Eurovision Song Contest



Thirty-five years ago, a fresh-faced young Irishman who'd recently joined the BBC from Radio Telefis Eireann (the Irish National Radio and TV Service) was asked to report on a then-serious music competition in Dublin for BBC Radio. Back in 1971, fewer than 2,000 made up the audience at the competition at the Gaiety Theatre to cheer on the likes of Clodagh Rogers, who represented the UK with *Jack In The Box*.

The competition was, of course, The Eurovision Song Contest, which last year celebrated its 50th anniversary, and the young Irishman was the legendary Terry Wogan – now Sir Terry Wogan, following last year's knighthood for services to broadcasting, writes Jane Dudley.

In 2006, Daz Sampson is the man flying the flag for the UK with *Teenage Life*, a rap with a chorus of schoolgirl backing singers, in a Contest of 37 acts (including semi finalists,

of which 10 will go through to the final) in Athens. The Contest will take place at the Olympic Stadium Indoor Arena before an audience of 18,500 and a global television audience of 160 million.

Sir Terry is rather modest about his part in Eurovision's success in the UK; the TV show achieves audiences of up to 11 million, many of whom tune in for Terry's anarchic, tongue-in-cheek commentary and his knack for saying exactly what audiences are thinking. "I've carried the British public with me with my views of it and that it is something you should enjoy rather than take too seriously.

"My first Eurovision was following on from Dana winning [with *All Kinds Of Everything*, as opposed to transsexual Dana International who won in 1998 with *Diva*] – I'm not entirely sure of the year but it's indicative that it was held in an old music hall with about 1,500 people and 18 countries. The presenters sat in the Royal box at the side of the stage. Compare that with Copenhagen [in 2001], with about 35,000 people – I might as well have stayed in London because I was so far away from the stage I couldn't see a thing!

"They once had to jam cameras and sound equipment and commentators' boxes and all the rest into a tiny little theatre – and now look what it's like, particularly in Scandinavian countries."

Following a disastrous few years for the UK in the competition – Jemini famously scored "nul points" in 2003, former *Fame Academy* student James Fox came 16th in 2004 and, last year, Javine came 22nd – Terry believes that we really

are in with a chance this time, providing countries vote for their favourite song rather than their “neighbours”. “I think we’ve got to do something different and Daz’s song is certainly different. It depends on how countries like the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia see rap. I would’ve thought that rap is probably only in its infancy in some of these countries, but pop music – that’s distinct from Eurovision music – tends to be fairly universal. So I think Daz is going to do pretty well.

“There’s no point in us continuing to try to ape, as we did last year, the Middle Eastern drum machine. Nobody expects that from us. In fact, listening to the Greek winner last year, there wasn’t that much difference between the Greek entry and our entry. There was the same drum machine, the same rhythm.”

The voting in the last few years has been a little erratic, to say the least, with neighbouring countries giving each other the coveted “douze points” and the larger countries, including Germany, France, Spain and the UK, finishing bottom of the heap.

“Our problem is the problem of all Western European countries – we’ll find it hard to get votes. It’s entirely significant that the four countries that support the Eurovision Song Contest the most are the four countries that came last, last year. We could all have been relegated if it wasn’t for the money! The fact is the Eastern European countries still see themselves as a bloc and they’re so used, traditionally, to voting for each other that they’re not going to vote for anyone else.

“It’ll take, I think, a few years for these countries to get used to a democracy and the fact that they don’t have to vote for their next-door neighbours, otherwise they’ll be invaded! It’ll be a little bit, I think, before Western European countries have a chance of winning.”

With 37 participating countries this year, the voting process will, once again, be a major part of the Contest. However, due to a change in the rules, it won’t take up quite so much airtime. “I think our viewers got a bit bored last year,” says Terry. “There’s no logic to having semi-finalist countries voting, it’s ridiculous. I think what they’re doing, because it’s extremely tedious, is they’re sweeping through the earlier votes, and then we’ll see the last few, for eight, 10 and 12 points.”

Terry admits that, after all these years of presenting the Contest, he does, occasionally, get slightly annoyed by the voting: “If I find myself getting irritated I have to pull myself together, but you can’t help getting irritated. Someone said, after Serbia and Montenegro withdrew this year, emphasising again the political nature of the Contest [the Montenegrin panel of judges was accused of tactical voting when a Montenegro band won so, rather than restaging the show, they decided to pull out altogether], why don’t all the songs withdraw and we’ll just have the voting! It’ll be the usual thing, Cyprus will vote for Greece, Iceland will vote for Denmark and all the Scandinavian countries will vote for each other.”

Despite this mild irritation with the Contest, Terry confesses that he wouldn’t have it any other way: “People say to me, ‘Do you like the Eurovision?’ Do you really think that I would go to all the trouble of travelling to the most obscure places in Europe to do something like this if I didn’t love doing it? You have to love it. It’s the same reason I get up at 5.30am to do a radio show. I love doing it. And as long as the public and the BBC enjoy what I do, I’ll keep on doing it.”