



Calum knows best

Tim Teeman



Brought Up By Booze
BBC One
★★★★★

Calum Best is commonly perceived as a perma-tanned poser, shirt unbuttoned to navel, tumbling out of nightclubs, a blonde or three attached to his arm. It was a surprise, then, to find

him presenting an exceptionally moving and enlightening Children in Need documentary. **Brought Up By Booze** followed Calum as he tried to disentangle the mess and upset suffered by children of alcoholics, using his experience as the son of George Best as the foundation of his investigation — 40 per cent of adults admit to drinking “too much” in front of their children, apparently.

Typically, celebrity-fronted documentaries are candy-coated pills, the famous face nothing more than a script-spouting cypher. Not this time: Calum spoke, eloquently and powerfully, from experience. He didn't play for sympathy, he didn't lapse into therapy-speak, he wasn't going through the motions. This was revealing and raw, with no candy coating.

He first spoke to his mother, Angie, about what life was like with George. She didn't hold back. “Tough,” she said. “Very emotional. A drain on the psyche. Your father drank every single day for 30 years.” Calum remembered how desperate he was for his father's attention or love. He was always looking up to him, literally, just desperate for any tenderness. He recalled that his father in turn would be looking to his fans. “Everyone tells me how great my dad was,” said Calum, “but I'm trying to figure out who he was.”

Although Calum didn't talk to Alex Best, George's second wife, it wasn't an easy picture that took shape. It bore out the many tabloid headlines that blared around George Best. Calum recalled that, aged 11, his father's decline was already visible. He'd wander around in a shellsuit, his beard bushy, the skin on his fingers peeling off. Calum accompanied his dad to his testimonial game in 1988, where George's behaviour became as “unpredictable and confusing as it could be”. He simply disappeared. Little Calum

left the hotel to call his mum from a payphone. She called the front desk and he was given the key to his room. His dad didn't reappear until the following evening: he'd been on a bender.

Calum related all this with a candour, maturity and sensitivity that was surprising in itself. He was excellent, too, with the children of alcoholics he encountered at various support groups, all of whom were as confused yet impressive and brave as Calum had been. One girl recalled her father coming to her nativity play. All she wanted was for him to be like the dad at the front with the video camera, watching his own daughter perform. Her father, however, collapsed in a messy heap.

Calum found the pub where he and his father would drink in London, the Phene Arms in Chelsea, now a building site. Naturally his father had a permanent seat there. “He raised me in this place,” Calum noted. Calum would carry him home: “As long as I knew my dad, it was me, him and alcohol.” First he joined his father on these drinking sessions, then he realised that the drinking was killing him. He met a young chap called Dominic who had found 20 or 30 bottles of vodka in his mother's room, and a grown-up daughter who didn't want her mother at her wedding because of the damage and chaos she associated with her mother's alcoholism.

This documentary didn't beat you over the head, it wasn't a public education film, and its engine was Calum's genuine determination to find out what lay behind his father's drinking and the effect it had on their relationship and on their family — and its effect, or hangover, on Calum now. He admitted that he drank a lot himself: indeed, before returning to Belfast to see where his father had grown up, he had gone on a bender with friends. He also has “commitment issues”.

Calum recalled his father returning home from one drinking bout and slurring, “You're not my kid”, grabbing Calum by the throat and then punching him. They never spoke about it. “That wasn't my dad,” Calum said, but someone taken over by alcohol. But of course the painful thing to recognise was that that was his dad. “Why did he choose to drink and not get better?” Calum wondered. He returned to the house where George had grown up and we saw archive of the streets crowded for Best's funeral... For Calum, there are so many George Bests. The hero footballer, the drunkard, the unpredictable parent.

On the white board of a leading rehabilitation centre, Calum wrote, “Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future!” and with one of its directors he spoke candidly about his feelings of guilt and confusion. There were no easy answers or moment of cleansing affirmation. Calum concluded that he loved his dad and that he was happy he had started to talk about what had happened. This could have been a sob-fest or vanity project: it was neither. It showed a new and impressive side of Calum Best and it surely will have helped other children of alcoholics like him. There's depth to that perma-tan.

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