



Left: a Yotel cabin at Gatwick. Far left: Simon on his houseboat with his daughter Charlotte

dealer. My parents were absolutely shocked. My mum was a very loving woman, but my dad was hard, very army, and it was beyond his ken that I could have gone this way.' Simon ended up spending two months in North Sea Camp, which at that time was a borstal-type establishment.

Suddenly, banged up, with a criminal record and no qualifications, the 18-year-old hippie felt far from mellow. 'I thought I'd really screwed things up,' he says. 'I'd had this perfect start, but once you become who you are, it's very hard to go back. I was a rebel without a clue.'

In terms of vocation, all he could be sure of was that he loved rock'n'roll, so the next ten years were spent as a roadie who became a lighting man who became a stage-set designer and eventually designed the stage for Live Aid in 1985. Drugs, incidentally, were off the agenda. Rod Stewart, the Stones, Led Zeppelin, The Who and his other employers could rage long into the night, but Simon had to be up in the morning. Nowadays he rarely drinks.

In the mid-Eighties he moved into television production, selling the TV rights to rock shows, and it was at one of the TV festivals in Cannes that he met Clare Macgillivray, then the publicist for Jim Henson, the creator of *The Muppets*. 'I had started wearing a suit and smoking a cigar,' he says. 'She was this rather elegant PR and so we married each other. Later we discovered that we had been playing these debonair parts and really we were hippies at heart.' They split up a year later, after their daughter Charlotte, now 17, was born. 'Clare and I have always been good friends and for seven years we lived in the same village.' Clare and Charlotte had moved to Rutland and Simon followed at weekends. More recently, Clare has returned to Scotland and Charlotte, who

cigarettes and had been trying to give up for years, so I went to Nicotine Anonymous for three years and those meetings were where I got through my divorce, where I learned to be honest about myself and also where I learned to do public speaking.'

He gave up the TV production work and, from 1991 to 1994, lived off the back of one good deal. 'I started working on Yo! Sushi in 1995 and that was what got me going,' he says. 'I was in the wilderness, my income was coming to an end and I had to look after my daughter and wife. I felt I was unemployable and I knew if I didn't get on with it my life could go very badly wrong. So I didn't do Yo! Sushi for great wealth, and as a result of finding a gap in the market, I did it out of desperation.'

It was a friendly sushi lunch with Mr Uehara, a Japanese pop star turned TV producer, that changed everything. 'I remember asking him what he thought I'd be good at and there was a long, Oriental silence,' says Simon. 'Then he said, "You should do a conveyor belt sushi bar with girls in PVC mini-skirts."' In 1997, after two years of sleepless nights and 18-hour days, Yo! Sushi opened on Poland Street, minus the miniskirts.

For the first week no one came. By the second week they were queueing round the block to sample the colour-coded dishes, the fizzy water pumps, the abusive drinks-serving robots and the T-shirted staff who yelled 'Yo!' a lot. It was experience dining with branding as powerful as Virgin or Easy, and expansion was the obvious way forward. Three years and six restaurants later, the business appeared to be doing very well. 'The money was rolling in,' says Simon. 'But when I was running the business, the money was rolling right back out again.' He brought in an operations manager, Robin Rowland, now the CEO, and

is doing A levels and assisting photographer David Montgomery, has moved into the houseboat.

The divorce triggered a powerful personal crisis in Simon. 'It brought me to my knees,' he says. 'I felt I was running out of time. It was really a big deal. I was very lonely and I had very little confidence.' He found himself looking wistfully at his old rocker pals who attended AA and NA. 'I remember wishing that I were an alcoholic or a drug addict so I could go to those meetings and get it all off my chest. I did smoke

within three years it was in good enough shape to be refinanced for major expansion and give its founder the security he had long craved.

He did one season of *Dragons' Den* but was rather too nice to the duds the BBC sent in to be pulverised. It did, however, make him quite famous and I think he's hungry for more recognition, but wants his TV work to be inspirational. 'It seems that every programme has to have jeopardy in order to bring in the big ratings, but why do you always have to see someone fail?' he says.

**H**e started work on Yotel at around the time he got his cash, giving him the luxury of time. His investors are a Kuwaiti hotel group, IFA, and his partner, Gerard Greene, a former hotel consultant. Yotels are cabins of about 10sq m, which look on to a courtyard. They have high-quality linen sheets, Wi-Fi, showers, flatscreen TVs and lots of buttons and gadgets. 'It's radical but it's classic,' he says. They take ten minutes to clean, cost £25 for four hours and have the unique advantage of being inside the airport, so you need only trot along the concourse to check in for your flight. Yotels opened at Gatwick and Heathrow earlier this month, the Amsterdam one opens in March and city centre sites are planned. 'Most hotels will proudly say, "We have 98 per cent occupancy." I can say, "We are doing 200 per cent." Because we sell by the block of hours.'

Simon and his partner own minority shares at present but will own a substantial part of the company if they deliver on target. He also gets a royalty from the licensing of the Yo! name. The hefty Middle Eastern financing means that expansion can meet demand fast. 'I think we'll be all over the world - this is not a UK-centric thing.' He has a Yo! Zone spa planned for Battersea Power Station and Yo! Home, his take on residential property, which will presumably be as heavily Japanese influenced as the rest of the family, is a couple of years away.

And so, at 55, he's revving up again, albeit with people in place to do the grunt work. He is the mentor, the innovator, the star. As for retirement, a few holidays boating in the Swedish archipelago or playing farm polo in Africa will do for now.

He had high hopes for Cherie Lunghi but laments, 'It wasn't right; she wasn't ready.' So he remains highly eligible with none of the rich man's neuroses about getting married again. 'I never thought I was very eligible or good-looking,' he says, holding out my coat with a flourish. 'But in a funny sort of way, I think I'm having my moment.'

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