

# Sorry For Laughing

## THE BUSINESS OF BEING FUNNY

So how do Funny Business go down with TVNZ?

"There have been great reviews and great reaction and great feedback and I don't think they can help but notice. Especially since we've been posting all the reviews to them."

Willy de Wit giggles. "And we've been writing anonymous letters, Dear TVNZ, we think Funny Business is the best show I've ever seen in my life."

As one quarter of Funny Business, Willy de Wit is biased, but he does have a point. New Zealand television comedy has been dying a slow and terrible death over the last two years. The last two series of *McPhail And Gadsby* were just bloody awful. David McPhail can now be found selling insurance, a cruel but telling career move.

The pace of the TV laugh-track has been set by the fast new British school of comedy, the "Alternative" humour of Ben Elton and his bunch of short, ugly friends, *Black Adder*, *The Young Ones*, Mel Smith And Griff Rhys Jones, Fry and Laurie, the highly underrated Ruby Wax, the lot. Some of the UK alternatives are pretty awful too, of course, like *Who Dares Wins* and *Spitting Image*. The Funny Business series screens on Monday nights after *Spitting Image*, doesn't it?

"You mean *Public Eye*."

Same thing.

"Well... *Public Eye* has its audience, it takes up from where *McPhail and Gadsby* left off." Willy



Funny Business (L to R): Willy de Wit, Ian Harcourt, Dean Butler, Peter Murphy.

fumbles diplomatically. "I s'pose in ten years we'll be hitting politics. But it seems we attract a younger audience and that audience because they've had more exposure to comedy through *The Young Ones*, *Alas Smith & Jones*, and video, they understand humour better."

"There's no point in our coming in as someone new," adds Ian, "and then doing current affairs satire. It's been done."

What makes Funny Business laugh?

"Things we do on the show, you know, hoons, the milkman sketch, Mormons, Kevin Fallon."

Funny Business arrive with a

half-dozen beers, which is a good way to start an interview. Three of them — Willy de Wit, Peter Murphy, Dean Butler — weren't in the Levenes commercial. Ian Harcourt was. They all talk at once, except for Willy, who talks all the time.

Funny Business are funny, but they're also new, and young.

"I think it's a cycle," says Dean. "As comedy gets more and more removed from the public the comedians actually lose touch with what's going on, and that's when someone new can get up and say what's going on *right at that moment* — it's instantly recognisable, and funnier."

Willy: "Did you go and see *Allo*

*Allo* when it toured? That epitomises an older audience." Gud mow-ning, your brasts I want to suck, there's a stiff breeze blowing through here, don't gety cocky with me, mate." And the audience was like, roar, roar, roar."

Ian: "It's just a hunch but I think rock music has lost out as the vehicle for creative young people to turn to. There's so much hype and crap now, it's the pretty face rather than the good musicians who win out. I think the whole comedy boom in Britain is a result of energy which would have gone into forming a band, ten years ago; now energy goes into alternative cabaret. (pause) I mean that was certainly *my* motivation, I

couldn't play the guitar, so ..."

Willy: "It's a real cliché to say it but there is a desire to laugh in this day and age, it's a cliché but I believe it. I mean, comedy is the last refuge of the non-conformist mind."

All: "Wooooooooooooooooo!!!"

Funny Business began as a live Comedy-Shop affair, first moving into television with a pilot show for TVNZ. Chris Knox did (and continues to "do") the animation, the F.B. Four wrote the scripts, and the pilot never screened.

"I think there were just problems at TVNZ at the time," Willy shrugs, "politics, budget, a lack of commitment at the time. But it was really good for us. It gave us a hell of a demo tape!"

In the UK it was the threat of Channel Four that inspired the BBC to give the green light to *Not The Nine O'Clock News* and its Alternative kin. Maybe TV3 looming on the horizon has similarly inspired TVNZ, but whatever the motive the results and the production levels of the *Funny Business* series are pretty impressive.

"We were so lucky with the makeup and art department," Willy grins. "The Mormons were perfect, so were the hoons on the beach. We actually had the real hoons confused, they'd come up to us and ask, Got any piss mate?"

"We didn't go *out* to say "fuck" and "shit", our screening time was knocked back a bit because of the language. But we actually tried to tone it down and were then told we could go and be a bit more raunchy. We couldn't believe it."

What's the difference between being funny on TV and being funny live?

"In TV you can set the scene, keep it fast-paced, set things up quickly, whereas the things we do on stage are by necessity a little more ... stripped down."

"Basic."

"Elemental."

"Minimalistic."

"You have to walk on stage and tell the audience, 'Imagine we're in a car, like, and there's sun and everything.'"

Now Funny Business are poised on the brink of a national tour ("It's going to be called the Pretentious Names Tour," chirps Willy, "after Bowie's Serious Moonlight Tour, and the Glass Spider Tour"), which will not only pay the rent but also promote the impending release of their comedy album. Yes, it's Funny Business the Record. The F.B. Four will be out on vinyl any minute now.

"All of the songs are on it," says Willy, "and we've re-written some of the sketches. A lot of them come up better in that radio sort of format anyway. I'm really intrigued to see how the album's going to go. RCA have implicit faith in us. We couldn't believe the reaction of this guy at RCA, he's adamant that it's going to sell, um, (meekly), eight million copies." (pause)

"Mind you, he was pissed, wasn't he?"

CHAD TAYLOR

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