PICTURES OF LILLEY

BITS OF CHRIS LILLEY ARE IN ALL OF HIS CHARACTERS – BUT WHAT MAKES THE WHOLE MAN?

WORDS ANDREW FENTON  PICTURE JOHN TSAVIS
CHRIS Lilley giggles as he tells me about a man who stopped him in the street the day before we met. “He said: ‘Oh! You’re that guy who does lots of characters aren’t you? Yeah – you look like one of the characters! It’s a funny, if backhanded, tribute to Lilley’s acting abilities because of course he looks like all eight of the characters he played in his pair of hit mockumentary series, We Can Be Heroes and Summer Heights High. And it’s not just appearances. Lilley shares aspects of their personalities too. As we sit and talk there are flashes of the gentle, middle-aged housewife Pat Mullins, the mischievous Tongan troublemaker Jonah Takalua and the exuberant optimism of overachieving Asian student Ricky Wong. Sometimes, when Lilley tilts his chin to consider a reply, it’s like sitting with his narcissistic private schoolgirl character Ja’mie King. But today, as he slumps in a chair, wearing a flannel shirt and beanie pulled low, Lilley looks most like the South Australian twins, Daniel and Nathan Sims, he created for his first show and reprises in his latest, Angry Boys. Walking through life looking like those two is a little unfortunate, considering Daniel is a foul-mouthed ocker teenager who’s constantly making fun of his deaf ‘retard’ brother Nathan, who in turn is a chronic masturbator and defecates on police cars. Lilley is having none of it. “I’m nothing like any of these characters,” he protests, during a rare break in editing Angry Boys at Princess Pictures in St Kilda, Melbourne. “I honestly can’t see any similarity.” The New Yorker once described Clive James as “a brilliant bunch of guys” but it’s an even more fitting description for Lilley. And as it was for Peter Sellers – with whom he shares the ability to disappear into almost any character – it seems the hardest role for Lilley to play is himself. He’s engaging company but won’t meet my gaze preferring to stare off at one corner of the table. He makes it clear he doesn’t like interviews – but it’s nothing personal. He just doesn’t like having to analyse why he’s made certain choices or to try to explain what, if anything, his comedy shows mean. “People think that I’m some kind of genius, who’s got these statements to say and ... I’m not really,” he says. “I just put on wigs and do funny things. I feel that pressure.” Lilley, 36, is a mass of contradictions. He’s a celebrity who’s publicity shy, an underachiever at school now hailed as a comic genius, and a control freak who constantly puts himself in situations where absolutely anything could happen. His signature ability is to create an illusion of reality around an absurd situation, like the housewife rolling on her side from Perth to Uluru or the schoolgirl doing the 40-Hour Famine twice a week to keep herself “looking hot”. After We Can Be Heroes was broadcast, one viewer was so fooled by the documentary style that he wrote in to an ABC website to inquire why no one else but he seemed to notice that one of the women was actually a transvestite. “The funny thing is,” laughs Lilley’s producer Laura Waters, “Chris played two women in the show!” Only 14 episodes of Lilley’s mockumentaries have been broadcast but he has already amassed a legion of high-profile fans including Ben Stiller, Dawn French, Kylie Minogue and Janeane Garofalo. The guys from Little Britain were so taken with Summer Heights High they borrowed the format for their new series Come Fly With Me. But Lilley is most proud of a fan letter he received from Dame Edna Everage creator Barry Humphries – the comedian with whom he’s most often compared. “It’s pretty complimentary because he’s a really funny guy,” Lilley says. “We have different styles but I guess we’re both making observations of Australian society and that sort of stuff – maybe there’s a link there. And we both dress up as women.” He dismisses the other accolades. “Sometimes I think they probably come out to Australia and go: ‘What’s popular? What do I say to suck up to this country?’ It’s not Paul Hogan anymore,” he says. Like Hogan in the 80s, Lilley’s star is firmly on the rise in the US, where We Can Be Heroes screened on The Sundance Channel (renamed as The Nominees). More recently, in 2008, HBO – the pay TV channel behind True Blood and The Sopranos – screened Summer Heights High in its high-profile Sunday night slot. The channel backed it up with a huge marketing campaign,
plastering the streets of New York with posters and erecting a giant billboard on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. There were complimentary articles in Newsweek and The Hollywood Reporter talking about the cool new comedy sensation from Australia. "For the time it was on it was like their big flagship show," Lilley says. "It was amazing with Summer Heights High because it was never the intention. It was always just an ABC show and I thought it was going to be a little cult weird thing."

Most rising stars would grab such a chance to make inroads into Hollywood with both hands. But in true Lilley style he turned down numerous offers for films and knocked back the chance to make Angry Boys entirely in the US. HBO's publicists were also astonished to find Eagle lives overseas, they still email each other. "It was so thrilling, just getting on this bus to get dressed and props and costumes I'd planned and I was like: 'It's really, and there were Mr G costumers all lined up and all these most exciting days of his life. "The first day of shooting turning up on set in Melbourne in 2002 was one of the most exciting days of his life. "The first day of shooting was so thrilling, just getting on this bus to get dressed and there were Mr G costumers all lined up and all those props and costumes I'd planned and I was like: 'It's really, really happening'," he says. "It was really cool.

Big Bite lasted just one season before transforming into the even more short-lived The Hamish and Andy Show. Between series Lilley developed a treatment for We Can Be Heroes and sent it to the ABC. "I literally rang the ABC and they were like: 'Yeah, we'll do it'," he says. "It was so easy." He also somehow secured an amazing amount of creative control for a first timer, to leave school after Year 10. But Lilley's parents were so determined he'd complete his studies and go to university that he eventually swapped his commerce degree at Macquarie University. "Like most parents they were happy I was taking a more normal path," he says. "But deep down I knew I was never going to be teaching, I was just pretending." He spent all of his spare time playing music and performing with the drama club and eventually switched degrees to concentrate on music.

Kamahl says Lilley's father was a traditionalist who wanted him to get a serious job and wasn't pleased about his comic ambitions. "I don't know whether Hugh had a great sense of humour, he was fairly strict with the family," he says. "He was definitely a traditional Anglo-Saxon father. I think it might have been a struggle that his father was not sensitive enough to know his talents. I would not like to have seen what Hugh would have thought of some of the characters Chris has played."

His father died while Lilley was still at university. "I think perhaps if his father had lived, he may not have blossomed the way he has," Kamahl says. Lilley, however, says he was always going to pursue his dreams. "I was always interested in this sort of thing so I probably would have done it anyway," he says. "I don't think there's a direct connection."

After university Lilley embarked on a career as a solo musician, performing weird pop songs in pubs to eight or so people. He'd occasionally throw in a few joke songs which received such a positive reaction the act metamorphosed into musical comedy. This led him to comedy club appearances, where he'd perform as various characters - most notably Mr G, a drama teacher frustrated in his ambition to become a star. It doesn't require a psychology degree to suggest that the character, which Lilley invented after doing his first teaching rounds at university, was a projection of how his life could have turned out.

After that he had a dream run - Channel 7 was trawling comedy clubs looking for comedians and Lilley sent in a short mock documentary about Mr G. He says turning up on set in Melbourne in 2002 was one of the most exciting days of his life. "The first day of shooting was so thrilling, just getting on this bus to get dressed and there were Mr G costumers all lined up and all those props and costumes I'd planned and I was like: 'It's really, really happening'," he says. "It was really cool.

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writing the scripts, playing all the lead characters, doing the music and overseeing the editing. And whenever the
ABC’s script editors or executives made suggestions, he’d simply ignore them. “I sort of developed a way of just
going: ‘yeah, yeah, thanks for your advice, I’ll definitely consider it’ – and then not changing it,” he says. “I think I
have a really clear vision and when I hand the script over
I’m like: ‘This is it’. And I think they’re probably clever
enough to realise they’re going to get a better result when
they don’t try and meddle with it.”
Lilley’s need for creative control – the words “control
freak” spring to mind – seems to be behind his reluctance
to leave Australia to pursue overseas film roles or work
in American TV. “I don’t like doing things that I can’t
control,” he says. “Everything I do here I sign off on every
little frame of it. I just want to look back and see really
great things I’m proud of.”
You can’t argue with the results. Lilley has racked up
some remarkable successes. When We Can Be Heroes was
broadcast on the ABC in 2005 in a blaze of no publicity at
all, it still managed to pick up an average audience in the
major capitals of 750,000. And Summer Heights High in
2007 was even more successful – its first episode was the
highest rating debut for a comedy show on the ABC in
15 years and the series averaged 1.3 million viewers an
episode. The DVD became the biggest-selling Australian
TV series of all time and Lilley has a shelf full of API and
Logie awards as well as host male comedy performance
at the prestigious international Rose d’Or Awards.
He also realised his dream of becoming a professional
musician, releasing Naughty Girl (as Mr G) which
was one of the highest selling singles of 2008. Record
company EMI feted him like a real rock star for “about a
month”, taking him out to the ARIA awards and giving
him a Gold Record to hang on his wall and a spare one for
his mum. Silverchair invited him to hang out backstage
with them at the Big Day Out. “I was Mr Rock ‘n’ Roll
there for a while,” he says with a big grin. “I was living
the dream but I never imagined that would be my first
Top 10 single – it’s such a stupid song.”
Lilley’s success means he can pretty much do whatever
he likes. He’s negotiated an unprecedented co-production
deal between HBO and the ABC (with a presale to the
UK) for Angry Boys and filmed the 12 episodes over
seven months in Australia, Japan and Hollywood. Other
than that, though, he hasn’t reinvented the wheel. It’s
still a mock documentary series with Lilley in all six lead
roles, albeit slightly more dramatic than the previous
shows.
The preview trailer for Angry Boys was well received,
but Lilley was a little miffed at some of the online
comments. He puts on a snivelling whining voice and
says: “He’s doing the same thing again, he’s just dressing
up as characters – I’ve seen it all before.” Lilley sighs. “I’m
like: Michael Jackson did the same thing for his entire
career. It’s what I do.” Lilley created four new characters
for the show, because he admits he played it safe with
Summer Heights High, which only featured one new
character, Jonah. “I wanted to jump in at the deep end
and do something massive,” he says. This time he plays
former surfing champion Blake Oakfield, tiger mum Jen
Okazaki (mother of a famous skateboarder), offensive hip
hop star S.mouse and the tough but matronly corrections
officer Ruth Sims (Gran). The rather loose plot has Daniel
Sims inviting celebrities to his farewell party for Nathan
who is heading off to Adelaide to go to deaf school.
Lilley spends an inordinate amount of time researching
the real-life backgrounds of his characters – he hung
around with surfers to develop Blake and interviewed
various corrections officers to prepare for Gran. The
costumes and wigs are an integral part of playing
a character for Lilley – so much so that when he plays
Ja’mie he wears girls’ underwear and has even donned her
wig in the past to do the character in radio interviews.
Lilley says he becomes so immersed in behaving
like the characters that he sometimes can’t stop. After filming had wrapped up last year he took a trip to Broome with a mate. Every time someone took a photo he’d screw up his face and give them the finger, like Nathan Sims. “My friend was like: ‘Whatever you’re working on, it’s changed your personality,’” he says, laughing.

As did Summer Heights High, Angry Boys treads a fine comedy line between being provocative and being offensive. There are racist jokes, defecation accompanied by a rap song called Poo On You and references to bestiality. That’s just the first four episodes, and Lilley promises it gets even weirder as the series goes on. The last series provoked a tabloid storm for allegedly perpetuating racial stereotypes, for making fun of kids with Down syndrome and for making light of rape and drug deaths. There were calls for the show to be censored, and thundering editorials. Lilley says the strong reaction convinced him to tone down Angry Boys … for about 5 minutes.

“It’s never my intention to go out and do things that upset people but I find entertainment really interesting when it’s challenging and a bit confronting,” he says. Producer Waters hints that the really offensive stuff never makes it to the final edit. “There are lots of things where you get a gut feeling, that’s gone too far, and it comes out, so I have complete faith in what goes to air,” she says.

Lilley’s scenarios are laden with irony, of course – you’re supposed to laugh at characters who hold offensive views, rather than agree with them. Unfortunately, not everyone gets irony. “I remember after We Can Be Heroes someone came up to me and said some dumb thing about Ricky Wong like: ‘Oh yeah, you really stuck it to the Asians!’ I was like: No, it’s a much more layered story, there’s much more to it than that. That just frightens me that some people are tuning in (for that). What an awful thought,” he says.

Lilley’s most controversial character this time around may be S.mouse – a black rapper who drops the “N” word a lot. Given how sensitive people are to anything that could be construed as “blackface” in the US, did HBO express any concern? “No they love it,” he says. “They’re probably counting on a bit of controversy to get people tuning in. There’s a big difference between that old-fashioned blackface thing and what I’m doing. It’s almost like a really weird idea that there are all these kinds of people you can play and you can never play one of these ones.”

Angry Boys, premiering around the world over the coming months, is likely to be another hit for Lilley, and catapult him to a new level of fame. But that’s the aspect of his work he’s uncomfortable with. He’d much prefer to live an ordinary, everyday life, but that doesn’t always work. A few days earlier he had been having drinks with friends at a pub when word got around on Twitter he was there. Before long there was a queue of people wanting to take a photo with him. “The whole night was ruined because I just got photographed the whole time,” he says. “All of a sudden you’re doing a public appearance. People want to have their little souvenir but they don’t want to actually engage with you, they just come up and go (in a bossy voice): ‘Hi, we’re getting a photo with you, stand over there.’ I’m too nice. I think I’ll just have to be a dickhead and say ‘no photos’.”

I decide this is the most amusing time to ask if I can take a photo, so I can accurately describe him for this article. “Really?” he says dryly. “I’ve never had this happen before.” Then, in the moment before the camera clicks, he screws up his face like Nathan Sims and gives me the finger.

Angry Boys screens on ABC on May 11.

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US rapper S.mouse.