

Ant Always Stands on the Left

Ant and Dec are always together on television. And in real life too.

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The most striking thing about Ant and Dec is not that you can't tell them apart, but that you can: apart from the light entertainment and children's shows that went before them, and apart from other people who made it famous and rich when they were young. Ant and Dec, both aged 26 (Ant is always on the left in photos), represent a new generation of TV hosts - not comedians (though occasionally they can be funny), not singers (though they used to do that all the time) and not really celebrities (slender tabloid interest, very polite when you meet them, only one uncharacteristic incident at a lap-dancing establishment) - but they can stand in front of a camera and talk to it as if it was a friend they used to know from school. To do this without artifice is a very valuable thing in television.

You can twist yourself in knots trying to explain their achievement, but all you need to understand is that they used to climb trees and weren't the sort of people who liked to watch children's television with an educational flavour. Their appeal is embedded in a little-remembered programme, their first, that went out at teatime in 1996. The Ant and Dec Show on Children's BBC featured a novel item called Beat The Barber, a quiz in which young people could win fantastic prizes such as computer consoles. Unfortunately, the child who got the least correct answers had their head shaved.

'The kids loved it,' Dec says. 'We were going to shave eyebrows instead, but nobody was sure if they'd grow back, so we did heads.' But there was outcry from middle England, and the BBC got 45 complaints. Someone said it reminded them of the concentration camps.

Before this, before they did SM:tv on ITV, before they hosted Pop Idol and the Brits, before they became the new Likely Lads and took responsibility for the dodgy official England World Cup song ('Campbell to Rio, Rio to Scholesey...'), they used to hang out at a fictional youth club in Newcastle called Byker Grove, and it is here that they met at the age of 13 and became friends. Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly both liked Newcastle United football club and the same sort of pop music, and they were soon intertwined in the televised storylines, including a love triangle in which Ant went blind after a paint-balling accident.

They earnt £300 an episode. Dec bought himself a sky-blue MGB Metro turbo and thought he was it. They were in the series for five years, and had to leave because, as Ant recalls, '18-year-olds should be getting drunk and they don't hang around youth clubs unless there's something wrong with them'. As was to be the pattern for their entire career, a new opportunity presented itself immediately.

Towards the end of their Byker Grove stint, their characters PJ (Ant) and Duncan sang a song in a nightclub. In the series, the song, called 'Tonight I'm Free', was bootlegged by the club's unscrupulous owner, and released as a single. PJ and Duncan made nothing, and split up vowing never to be a part of the music industry again.

Then they got offered a little money to be a part of the music industry again, and leapt at it: a three-album deal. The single ('Tonight I'm Free', re-recorded but still lousy) reached number 63 in the charts, and the next single made the top 30, and the single after that, the top 10. Their album was recorded and they went around the world miming to it on children's television shows.

How bad were the songs? Ant: 'Some of the early ones were pretty poor. But there's some stuff I'm proud of. Not that I'd necessarily put it on at home. I did always think, "How long can we possibly get away with this?"'

The first album sold about half a million. They didn't write any of the songs. For the second album they wrote half the songs and it didn't do as well. Then for the third album they wrote all the songs, and it sold terribly.

They earnt some money, but the big perk was an explosion of available girls. 'Germany was the best,' Dec says. 'We were at this after-show party in a hotel, having a few drinks. When we left the party, there was a line of girls sitting outside. We said goodnight to them and got into the lift. The next day somebody explained to us that all those girls are there for the taking, and you just point to them and take them back to your room. We said, "You can't just do that. You've got to buy a drink and make conversation." I didn't think all that stuff actually happened.'

Ant: 'I never got too bothered with that kind of stuff, probably because most of our fans were very, very, very young.'

They are recalling these days on the sunny balcony of a photographer's studio in west London. They're taking turns with ham baguettes, one speaking as the other eats, the ideal way to avoid their habit of finishing each other's sentences. It's true what people say: there's little difference on or off the television, and little difference between them and the people currently adjusting their cuffs for photos. Their earnings are not visible in their clothes - jeans, tracksuits - although their wrists are troubled by very elaborate watches. And they don't try to be especially funny, thank God.

The photographer Harry Borden has just had them holding hands and posing with bananas, and has shown them some photos he took when they were on tour years ago. Some of the pictures show a group of frantic fans with handwritten signs, one of which says, 'Put Your Nobs in Our Gobs'.

Dec: "'Point your Erektion in my Direction" - that was another one.'

Ant: 'Nobs in their Gobs... If we'd said, "Go on, then," we would have got arrested.'

Dec: 'It's like that joke: What's got 40 legs and no pubic hair? The front row of a PJ & Duncan concert.'

The pair had enough after three albums, and threw in the pop-star career at the age of 21. By then there was also a television career, and small heads to be shaved. It's hard for young people to fight the desire to set yourself apart from the rest of the world, but not doing so can also bring its rewards. Ant and Dec's work

for kids will be most fondly remembered for SM:tv Live, a Saturday ITV show that reminded thirtysomethings of Tiswas. It mowed down the opposition on BBC, and it grounded their reputation as presenters who worked hard at even the most trivial things. The show also established distinct characters: Ant was the harsh one, slightly coarse, looked like a male Victoria Beckham; Dec was sweeter, more vulnerable, less likely to thump you. Together they found a way to talk to kids without appearing naff, although the first few shows were disasters. 'Bad ratings, badly executed ideas,' Ant says. 'There were many anxious nights when I thought, "That's it for us." Thank God ITV had the courage to say, "You've got a year to get it right."'

The show took shape after a panto season during which the pair rediscovered how to talk to their audience. Ant: 'They confirmed that what the BBC was doing was a bit patronising and just boring. They had a four-minute item on asthma.' Dec: 'Longer. They would literally do a seven-to nine-minute piece on asthma with an agony uncle.'

Ant: 'But when I was a kid I hated that sort of stuff. I'd always rather watch cartoons or climb a tree.'

They performed sketches about fancying people on television. Some began comparing Ant and Dec with Morecambe and Wise, which was absurd even on the most superficial level: there was no straight man and no funny man. 'It's a very hard thing to explain when we sit with writers on our shows,' Ant says. 'But then if they show us a sketch, instinctively we'd know who we'd play. For instance, if one of us had to get pregnant, it would be me.'

The pair never disrespected their medium. 'We never wanted to move to a niche slot at 11 at night so that we could be a lot cleverer and bluer,' says Ant. 'We just want to do those big light-entertainment shows we loved as kids.'

Dec: 'When we were first doing kids' shows with the BBC they asked us where we wanted to be in a few years' time and we said we want to be where Noel Edmonds is.'

Noel Edmonds is now surplus to television requirements, of course. Even Jim Davidson's Generation Game has been seen off by Ant and Dec and Pop Idol, the unexpected hit of the year. 'Most people their age would be just learning about television,' says Claudia Rosencrantz, the controller of network entertainment at ITV, who says she watched them on Saturday mornings even before she had children. 'But they've grown up within television.' Rosencrantz believes their appeal is simple: you just want to spend time with them. 'They enjoy making each other laugh,' she says, 'and you watch them and think, "I'd like to be their friend."'

Their role on Pop Idol was choosing to be friends with the contestants, bringing them down gently in the face of an embarrassing performance or a kicking from the judges. Their schtick was: it's a heartless world, and we were useless once, too.

But not everyone has fallen for their self-deprecating charms. At the end of last year, the comedian Arthur Smith reasoned that their growing success was unpalatable, and hypocritical: like so many television stars, they pretended to be normal people while also being millionaires driving the fancy cars. 'The reason I don't love the twinkly Geordie duo is that they are so lovable,' he wrote in The

Guardian. His considered opinion was that they were 'crap', a verdict inspired by some of the gush that ensued when the pair announced that they would be leaving SM:tv Live last December. 'Goodbye Ant. Goodbye Dec,' one paean ran. 'Saturday mornings will be an empty, desolate, joyless place without you.' The tabloids and celebrity magazines have had a quiet time with them, for which they're grateful. Ant: 'We're never really spotted falling out of nightclubs. We don't go to places where there are photographers hanging out.' But there was one incident last October.

Dec: 'It was a Sunday exposé. We went lapdancing. We were pissed. It was a lads' night out. There were loads of us. I don't want to dwell on it.'

Ant: 'Mostly, we're a bit cleverer than that.'

'They're very smart - very clever about the choices they make,' Claudia Rosencrantz says. Clearly, she is delighted to have found two reasonably cool people in their mid-twenties who do not regard light entertainment as a dirty phrase. She has several new Ant and Dec projects lined up, all brokered through the pair's own independent production company. A reworking of *Whatever Happened to The Likely Lads* was broadcast last night. The pair are nervous about how people might react.

'Some people are very cynical about it, but we're not trying to replace Bob and Terry,' Ant says, having just done so. 'The reaction among people we talk to in Newcastle is, "Great, can't think of two better lads to do it. But don't fuck it up."' The updates included replacing references to Enoch Powell with Ann Widdecombe, and substituting the barbershop scene at the beginning with a coffee-bar scene. Bob (Dec) does that mega-mocha-grand-latte-half-skimmed-chocolate-sprinkles-no-cinnamon bit, and Terry is appalled and has a cup of tea. There are two other ideas for new primetime Saturday-evening series for next month. The first has involved the duo in many meetings with Granada and the Independent Television Commission over a brilliantly simple format which would appear to be very difficult to engineer - a live quiz show in which the winning contestant takes home the entire contents of the advertisements broadcast while the programme was on air. The adverts would be watched like never before, and their price of transmission could become astronomical, but there are complexities in franchise regulations and in syndicating the same ads throughout the country with out regional variations. The other programme sounds good, too: finding the people who wrote in to *Jim'll Fix It* but failed to have their wishes acted upon, and doing them now.

These shows were under discussion when I met Ant and Dec for the second time in an office at the LWT building on the South Bank, during which they were clearly frustrated that they still didn't know what they'd be allowed to do next. I wondered for how long people would refer to them by their first names alone, and would there be Ant and Dec at 60? It wasn't a problem, they said, for they doubted they'd be presenting television much beyond the age of 55. They hoped they would be friends for ever, and said they argued only when they were drunk. Eventually it was time to ask them about their houses, which are two doors down from each other in a private mews in Chiswick, west London. This was a bit like how the Beatles lived in *Help!*, but that was a movie. Morecambe and Wise didn't live together except in sketches; even Bob and Terry lived in different parts of

town. When they shared a flat in the early days, and went on holidays together, people assumed they were gay, but this is not the case: they have seven- and nine-year relationships with women - a singer and an actress. But they live alone in their houses, which are still only two doors away no matter where you stand in the street. So what on earth were they thinking?

Dec: 'I knew a new development in Chiswick that was being built. There were two or three houses unsold, and when I went along to look at one of them I asked Ant to come along for his opinion.'

Ant: 'I had a look at one. I went in. I loved it. Then we both said, "No, we can't do this - it's ridiculous."'

Dec: 'It was a lovely sunny day, and there was a pub a few hundred yards away, and we sat by the river and had a drink and talked about how we both loved the houses, but couldn't move into the same street. But then we thought, "Well, we're best mates, we socialise together, so what's the point of living at separate ends of town and spending a fortune on cab fares?" And that was it. We knew that people would find this a very bizarre arrangement.'

They now make a point of trying not to go on holiday together. 'It would be too much for some people,' Ant reasons. 'It would get them thinking that we couldn't bear to be apart.'