

## Five Go Mad on TV

In a country being gradually closed down by an accountant's government, London stays conspicuously on the up-and-up. While the "For Sale" and "To Let" signs go up and stay up in Northern centres, property values in the dirty old city soar, things happen and space is at a premium. Anything could happen, and it could be right now ...

But there's an ironic edge to any term like "city of opportunity." Certainly, there are dozens of paths with AA signs reading *sic itur ad astra*, but the gates are narrow and there's a mob clamouring outside each one. For this reason we get popstars more dedicated to their own success than their pop — the difference between a baseline standard of living and (just the other side of the line) "making it" is massive.

The Comic Strip people are not rich, but — office in Soho, artistic freedom — they can be said to have "made it". In New Zealand they're known for the odd one-off Comic

Strip episode that TVNZ has designed to show, like *Bad News Tour* and the *Famous Five* spoofs. More particularly, four — Adrian Edmondson, Rik Mayall and Nigel Planer and fringe member Alexei Sayle — are loved from the almost inevitably successful *The Young Ones*, a TV comedy breakout of a like unseen since Monty Python tumbled across the screen. Now they've just made their first feature film, *Supergrass*, which has even turned a small profit from its UK box office.

Six years ago they were doing comedy in a Soho club that hosted strip shows every other night of the week. It was called the Comedy Store and Alexei Sayle presided as MC, sounding a gong if he decided the audience was giving the thumbs down to some hapless joker who had taken the stage in return for a free drink and his entrance fee back. One night the only person who actually paid to get in duly got his free drink and his money back.

But the venue gradually gained popularity (it still exists today in a similar form) and when TV chat-show hosts Clive James and Janet Street Porter paid a visit, there was still more publicity.

One of the regulars, Peter Richardson, who was to become the Comic Strip producer, perceived the time was right for a move on. He chose the six best acts and moved to the Raymond Revue Bar (another, classier, sometime strip club). The new show became trendy — Jack Nicholson and Mick and Bianca Jagger were among those to pass through the door in 1981-82, and the Comic Strip shared the stage with the likes of a fledgling Pamela Stephenson.

After UK and Australian tours in

1982, a deal was struck for a series of short comedy films with the new private TV channel Channel 4. In a situation not dissimilar to that which has seen locals Funny Business offered a show by TVNZ, the BBC got a little nervous about the new competition and an idea Rik Mayall had had for a while became *The Young Ones*.

*The Young Ones* was a huge popular success, but it always had a limited lifespan and it finished more than two years ago after two series (which NZ viewers saw end-on-end last year). But the Comic Strip gathered more talent about itself and has made 14 half-hour TV films, and hour-long one called *The Bullshitters* (a spoof of *The Professionals*), and has just begun on a new series of hour-long films. There's also, as mentioned, *Supergrass*.

The series have included a number of part-timers like Sayle and Robbie Coltrane and even the regulars (including Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, who also write as a team) don't appear in everything and tend to have their own projects on the go at various times.

This much is evident in the Comic Strip office, as Rose the receptionist works through a swath of phone calls, trying to co-ordinate everyone for rehearsals, meetings, interviews ... current project is a sequel to *Bad News Tour*. It might almost be an ordinary business office, were it not for the garb (jeans, sweatshirts, sports shoes, unfussy haircuts) and the attitude (the friendly, prodding way that people involved in the biz of wit and articulacy generally talk to each other). A rather funny business indeed ...

RB

## Adrian Edmondson: Back to Normal Vyv of 'The Young Ones'

'Supergrass': another mindblowing adventure for Adrian Edmondson.



Adrian Edmondson is writing a book for the Christmas market. It's called *How To Be A Complete Bastard*.

"I just seem to play bastards all the time," he muses. "So it seemed like a good idea."

Bastards or wimps ...

"Yeah — nothing in between."

The real-life Ade is nothing at all like the inspired bit of nihilism he created for Vyvyan in *The Young Ones*. Blond, bespectacled and spreading slightly around the middle, he does not even look capable of shouting and banging his head against walls. He's the quietly articulate type, prone to having a little laugh if he says something that tickles his fancy. Not very metal.

"They offered me the chance to do a Vyvyan book and I said I'd rather do this one because I want to kill him off. It was a shame really to do that single with Cliff Richard because it brought him out again. He's such a strong character — he seems to be all I get interviewed about. And it must be honestly three or four years since we made the last episode. I think Vyvyan's great but I don't want to get stuck. The others seem to quite like doing theirs ..."

Vyvyan was a character based on Adrian Dangerous, Ade's half of a duo with Rik Mayall called the Dangerous Brothers that still resurfaces occasionally. The pair teamed up at university 10 years ago and still tend to write together. The Brothers are no longer a live comic entity, however, and he says he doesn't miss live work much — he's much more interested in learning about making films.

The two disciplines come together for a sequel to the original *Bad News Tour* film, which goes into production very soon. Edmondson has written in an appearance on stage at the Castle Donington rock festival, where the band will play live.

"For the Castle Donington thing we're having to come up with about half an hour of songs and comedy to keep the punters happy — we only need about 10 minutes for filming. And that's the sort of thing we'd like to get into as a group, an act, because it's very good fun and they're such good jokes in that sort of area."

It becomes clear that

Adrian Edmondson has a keen appreciation of jokes, especially "good jokes", be they visual or verbal. But has the approach to TV comedy changed since, say, the first *Bad News*?

"I suppose it must have done but I can't see how. We've always been very arrogant in dealing with TV companies, so it never really bothers us!"

As original TV comedy, *The Young Ones* and Comic Strip were immediately lined up against Monty Python's *Flying Circus*:

"Yeah, it's obvious — it's just because it was young and different, as the Pythons were when they first came out. I don't think we're anything like them. But I like the Pythons, I grew up with them, I thought they were brilliant."

Their's was a comedy of ideas, where *The Young Ones* was a lot more based on people, a comedy observation.

"Yeah. The Pythons' main joke was about middle class people, and our main joke was about ... everybody. They were definitely all about suits — or gumbies. We had an advantage in that we started comparatively young, so we were able to play younger people."

Do you get the freedom you want working in TV?

"Yes, I think so. We write what we want to write and we usually seem to get it made. Only on one occasion have we had one stopped, because it was considered too libellous. It was called *Back to Normal With Eddie Monsoon*. We made a follow-up to it which was called *Eddie Monsoon: A Life*. But the first one was slightly more vulgar ... (giggles)"

How about individual jokes or lines?

"We only get troubled with rude words really. But there's no real need for them — they're quite nice."

### Bottoms

Do you ever find yourself having to strike a balance between more adventurous

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