

Rolling in the isles

Little Britain has become a comedy icon. Matt Lucas and David Walliams talk about its modest beginnings – and performing the live show to almost one million people

BY BRUCE DESSAU

Little Britain isn't just a comedy programme – it's a phenomenon. From its humble start on radio in the UK in 2001, the sketch show has spawned three hit TV series, three million DVD sales, three Bafta awards, countless catchphrases and a range of merchandise that includes talking character dolls, greetings cards and nightwear.

It has transformed its creators, David Walliams, 35, and Matt Lucas, 32, into wealthy household names. Walliams now features in UK tabloid stories about his love life almost as often as he does the TV listings, and when Lucas, who is gay, married his partner Kevin McGee in December 2006, guests at the lavish reception included Sir Elton John and Courtney Love.

The road to fame has been long and



Mad, bad and popular: Matt Lucas (left) and David Walliams

winding, however. Lucas and Walliams first met in 1990 at the UK's National Youth Theatre. Lucas is a business consultant's son, Walliams is the son of a transport engineer. A shared love of cult comedy show *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* forged their friendship and soon they started writing and performing comedy together.

Their first show, *Sir Bernard Chumley and Friends*, went to the Edinburgh Festival in 1995 and toured Britain in 1997. Lucas's talents were spotted by his heroes Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer; in the late 1990s he gained cult recognition on their BBC game show *Shooting Stars*. Walliams, meanwhile, had a number of small TV appearances.

They teamed up again for *Rock Profiles*, a series of spoof documentaries about rock stars (including Elton John). Then characters such as Dafydd, "the only gay in the village", delinquent Vicky Pollard, and carer Lou and his not-really-disabled charge Andy began to take shape.

Reader's Digest caught up with the duo for an interview before their record 35-night stint at London's 3700-seat Hammersmith Apollo last year, part of a UK *Little Britain* tour that sold more than 800,000 tickets. While their characters may go around vomiting, insulting fat people and committing petty crime, Walliams and Lucas in person are charming and happy to chat about the tour and their future plans.

RD: You've played more than 140 shows in the past year and face another 70 more. Is touring fun or exhausting?

Lucas: It has been gruelling, but it helps that we get on very well. We're very close because we've shared a lot of strange experiences in the past few years – mad things like the fact that we now need security guards.

Walliams: Matt and me maybe have one drink [after a show]. We have to protect our voices. But being onstage isn't boring. We have fun every night – we have to or the show wouldn't work.

RD: How does the live performance differ from the TV programme?

Walliams: Each sketch is different every time. There's a lot of improvisation, particularly when things go wrong or we forget our lines.

Lucas: Some of our smaller characters become bigger onstage. Des Kay, the former children's TV entertainer who now works in a hardware superstore, had only a tiny part in the TV series but he comes into his own on tour because he gets audience members onstage to help him perform magic tricks.

RD: Matt, you make a grand entrance as Andy, who has escaped from his wheelchair and is swinging above the stage on a wire. Was that scary?

Lucas: Crossing the road is frightening to me, but up there I never felt



Delinquent Vicky Pollard (left); the two "rubbish transvestites", Emily and Florence; and onstage as Andy and Lou

scared. People bought their tickets a year in advance and we wanted to give them something spectacular. The real feats are the costume changes – me trying to get from mail-order bride Ting Tong's miniskirt into Vicky Pollard's skin-tight tracksuit in 25 seconds.

RD: Do you have favourite characters?

Walliams: I like anyone in dresses. I love playing Carol, the "computer says

no" woman, because she is so inactive. After running around for the rest of the show, it gives me a chance of a sit-down. I also like Lou because there's pathos there. Emily Howard, the rubbish transvestite, is fun but there's no depth. I'd like to let her go at some point, but Lou I'd be happy playing in 20 years.

Lucas: As Fat Fighter Marjorie Dawes, I can interact with the audience, tease people in the front row. For me, that's when the show really comes alive.

RD: You've been performing since your teens. Did you always want to become comedians?

Walliams: I got a laugh when I was in a play aged ten and it made me feel important. From then on, I'd do things like getting teachers onstage during assemblies and putting custard pies in their faces. Making people laugh gave me pleasure, so I always thought, *Let's see where this one leads me.*

Lucas: I'd record *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* on a cassette player and learn the routines, but I didn't dare dream of doing anything like stand-up because of the way I looked. (Lucas went bald with shock, aged six, after being hit by a car.) Then I met David and he started doing spots at comedy clubs. It gave me confidence that there was someone I knew working on the stand-up circuit.

RD: Who were your comedy influences?

Walliams: Obviously we're in the same

tradition as camp characters from the 1970s like Dick Emery's Clarence and Mr Hargreaves from *Are You Being Served?* But comedians always choose dead people to answer this question. I also learnt a lot about timing and joke construction from Rowan Atkinson and Monty Python. And Matt and I love Ricky Gervais, *The League of Gentlemen* and Catherine Tate.

Lucas: When I first saw *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* in 1990, I felt as if it was all written for me. It was like, *How did you know that would make me laugh?* That was my big turning point.

RD: You were in a lot of shows before you struck gold with *Little Britain*. Were you surprised by its success?

Lucas: I was totally shocked. For the first eight years of working with David, we were just jobbing comics. We did a series for BBC2 in 1999 called *Sir Bernard's Stately Homes*, but it wasn't good enough and we thought our moment had passed. When we first started doing *Little Britain*, we thought it was too rude for TV. I was amazed to get on [digital-only channel] BBC3, amazed to be recommissioned and amazed to go to BBC1.

Walliams: The timing was lucky. *The Fast Show* and *The League of Gentlemen* had finished, so viewers were ready for something new. We got the packaging right: the music, the title, Tom Baker's narration. And the media helped. Whenever they write about single mums or teenage criminals, they use a picture of Vicky Pollard. You can't legislate for publicity like that.

RD: Characters such as Mrs Emery, an incontinent old lady, and Harvey, a grown man who is still breast-feeding, have led to accusations of bad taste.

Lucas: The accusations are right. Our defence is that the sketches are funny. **Walliams:** We were criticised as if there is a list of things that can't be portrayed in comedy. To me, that list doesn't exist. I went to a hospice in Wales and there were a lot of young boys who were dying of a muscular wasting disease but were dressed as Andy. For them, life is comic and tragic and he's someone they can relate to. They don't get offended – other people do on their behalf.

RD: Do you worry that you'll fall out of favour?

Walliams: This is the time people particularly want to come and see *Little Britain* live and buy the DVDs. In five years' time, we accept that something else will have come along.

Lucas: The third series had more viewers than ever, but wasn't well received by the critics, so I think people are looking for the next big thing already. I'm waiting for Catherine Tate's next move. It'll be good for someone else to experience what we have and it'll give us a chance to do something different.

RD: In the past, you've found success both as a double act and individually. David, you recently swam the English Channel for Sport Relief. Do you have any other solo projects coming up?

Walliams: I'm in a new adventure film

called *Stardust*, starring Robert De Niro and Michelle Pfeiffer. I play the ghost of a prince who burnt to death, so I appear in a singed nightshirt.

Lucas: The BBC has filmed *The Wind in the Willows* for Christmas and I play Mr Toad. It's a real thrill and not like anything I've done before. My mum's friends have been telling her how nice it will be seeing me in something other than *Little Britain*, the inference being that this will be more respectable.

RD: You've recently signed a new three-year deal with the BBC, so what is the future for *Little Britain*?

Walliams: [We've done] a Christmas

special, but there are no plans for another series at the moment.

Lucas: We'll definitely do more with some of the characters – possibly a film. But the transition to the big screen is difficult. It's better to make a good TV show than a bad film.

At the end of the day, John Cleese is remembered for *Fawlty Towers* and Ricky Gervais for *The Office*, so you don't need to make hit films to endure.

There are waxworks of Lou and Andy in Madame Tussauds. We'll know it's the end when they melt them down. My model could probably be used for all three of the *Beverly Sisters*.

GRAVE ERROR

A colleague was busy one morning with two funerals to conduct, the first for a Mary and the other for an Edna. To save time, he used the "find and replace" function on his computer to change all mentions of Mary to Edna in the order of service.

The second funeral proceeded smoothly until the recital of the apostles' creed, which now read: "I believe in Jesus Christ, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Edna".

PHIL WIEDEMANN, Kyogle, NSW

A sign outside our local church: "Be prepared for your funeral. Thursday, 7pm."

KARLA GOTHAM



In the small town where my friend grew up, a funeral parlour took over an abandoned supermarket. Everything was gutted except for the billboard where the supermarket had posted its weekly specials.

So now, said my friend, "You no longer have to read the obituaries. You just drive by and see who they've got."

BILL FORTENBERRY