



(from left) James Rochford, Helen Thorn and Benny Boot all want to establish careers in comedy. The trio all recently performed as part of a radio station's "Comedy God" competition.

# *You must be joking*

Who'd be a stand-up comedian? There are the hecklers to contend with and the jokes that can sink faster than a lead balloon. But as Josephine Brouard discovers, despite the regular humiliations, our comedians really are having the last laugh. Photographed by Nick Scott

**G**reg Fleet remembers a moment in his 18-year stand-up career when he almost threw in the towel. "I was doing a shark-attack routine and the crowd was roaring. Then I noticed a couple crying in the second row. I stopped the crowd mid-guffaws (first mistake!) and asked them if they'd had a shark experience. Second mistake!

"The man said he and his wife had lost their 13-year-old son in a shark attack. Man, when he said that, the room went from hot to ice frigging cold. Seven hundred eyes just looked at me as if to say, 'OK, Funnyman, now make us laugh.' I then said the first thing that came into my head (as we stand-ups do) and that was my third big

mistake. 'Oh, well,' I said, searching desperately for a helpful response, 'maybe the shark's taken your son somewhere better...' I paused for a split second, then said, 'like Hawaii.'"

Not surprisingly, Fleet's night never recovered. "You have to be so cocky to do this job," he muses with hindsight, "and have unbelievable confidence."

You also have to be a little insane. After all, if public speaking is most people's greatest fear, then where on the Richter scale does that put stand-up comedy? Check out the faces backstage at Sydney's Comedy Store one Tuesday night as newcomers James Rochford, Helen Thorn and Benny Boot try out their skills and you'd have to ask yourself, why do these people do it?

Without exception, each and every ashen would-be comic looks on the verge of eating his own vomit. Try and converse with any of these wannabes and you won't elicit a sentence that makes sense. Most of them disappear into the toilets, looking like they'll never return, until you see them later on stage, like rabbits caught in spotlights, attempting (and often succeeding) to make an audience laugh.

Breakfast radio host Judith Lucy, who's come up through the ranks after years of doing stand-up in beery RSL clubs, believes no one should attempt stand-up comedy unless they're driven to do it. "If you don't love doing it, and I mean really love doing it, you won't stick with it. When people



Seasoned comedians (left to right) Kaz Cooke, Peter Helliar, Judith Lucy and Rove McManus are among the most popular comedians in Australia. Successful comedy gods Gina Riley and Jane Turner (below) as Fountain Lakes' foxy morons Kath & Kim, and (bottom) Merrick and Rosso.

Olympics of stand-up comedy, Montreal's Just for Laughs comedy festival. "Sometimes people laugh because they've heard of you. But in Montreal, you have seven minutes to make 3000 strangers laugh. Pull that off and you know you can 'do' funny."

"The minute I start getting cocky about stand-up, that's when a gig bombs on me," notes Fleet ruefully. He remembers opening for Peter Allen once when he was still an edgy and alternative newcomer. "It was like Metallica fronting for Olivia Newton-John; I just died on stage as the elderly women and groovy gay men stared in silence. Management pulled me aside and told me, 'We'll pay you to stop.' I was humiliated, but relieved."

Humiliation notwithstanding, Fleet went back for more. Today he's making a "shitload" of money from a career that spans radio, television, film, voice-overs and corporate events. "I love the variety of work that this job allows you," says the man who's made a living from his personal crises. Drug addiction, relationship break-ups, a bigamist father, personal scams... you name it, Fleet has given most things a comic twist.

"I'll be honest with you," says Fleet. "There isn't a thing that doesn't happen in my life - no matter how black - that I don't think, at the back of my mind, 'One day this will be money-earning funny.'"

So how does one measure success in stand-up? Is it one's own television show, a radio gig, the admiration of one's comic peers or an invitation to one of the overseas festivals at which only the best in the world perform?

Wil Anderson finds the concept of success slippery. "You never see yourself as successful; success tends always to be reflected at you through the eyes of others. I tend to feel only as successful as my last joke."

Fleet agrees. "There's your first paid gig, and you think you've arrived. Then you get your first middle spot; then your first 'headline'. Then it's your first interstate gig, your first invitation to Edinburgh [Festival Fringe], your first panel interview on TV, your first radio or television hosting, and so on," he says. "It just never ends."

Lucy, Anderson and Fleet have all experienced the impact of television and radio exposure and enjoyed the reflected glow - and income - that it brings. "I was touring for four to five years before I got my first gig on the ABC's *The Late Show*. That was a definite turning point for me; my career began to seriously take off," says Lucy. "You can do it without radio and television, but it's much harder."

Talk to punters rolling up at clubs around the country and

it's clear that the crowds do want 'bang for their buck' - or laughs per minute. They agree with Anderson that when stand-up comedy is bad, it's awful - and when it's good, it's belly-aching terrific. Regular comedygoers have their favourites - big drawcards are Judith Lucy, Jimeoin, Dave Hughes and Merrick and Rosso. For these guys, punters will gladly pay the typical weekend ticket price of \$25 but, yes, they do expect the gags to keep coming.

aren't laughing at your jokes, it's hard not to take it personally," she says.

Lucy doesn't believe there's a stand-up comic alive who doesn't get nervous, it's just a question of degree. "I was doing a fundraiser in Melbourne recently with [fellow comedian] Denise Scott. We looked at each other as the MC announced our names and we saw the fear in each other's eyes. I said to Scottie, 'Do you think this is ever going to improve?' and before she could answer, it was time to step out on stage."

Many stand-up comedians admit they get nervous. *Rove Live* regular Peter Helliar says his bum typically "explodes" before a gig, meanwhile Fleet, who's made guest appearances on everything from *Good News Week* to *The Fat* and co-hosted breakfast radio with Wendy Harmer, says pretending not to be nervous, when you are, is just dishonest. "For the audience, it's as distressing as seeing a car crash."

Popular radio and television personality Wil Anderson (and *sunday magazine* columnist) believes doing stand-up is like a joke-by-joke career application. People can roar at your jokes your entire career or most of your set, he points out, but when they stop laughing... it's a potential career killer. Jitters notwithstanding, Anderson says the bigger the audience, the better.

He was one of only two Australian stand-up comedians invited to perform this year at the

**"YOU HAVE TO BE SO COCKY TO DO THIS JOB AND HAVE UNBELIEVABLE CONFIDENCE"**



Anderson reckons that to put oneself under such constant pressure, there probably is a stand-up comedy "gene" and it's got something to do with being possessed by a need to make people laugh. He personally doesn't find it easy filling 15 hours of breakfast radio a week with laughs – a feat he's achieved for the past five years – but where else, he quips, "can you go to work, drink beers and meet girls?"

"People crack up when blokes are funny, but they tend to think funny women are 'smart-arses'. I don't know why this is so, but it is," says Fleet. "The situation is improving, but stand-ups like Wendy Harmer and Judith Lucy remain something of a rarity."

Whatever their sex, those who have segued stand-up careers into lucrative gigs as radio jocks or television guests still opt to do stand-up whenever possible. No other medium allows for the spontaneity or immediacy of audience reaction; it's the ultimate reality check.

Says Lucy: "One of the best things about stand-up is the total control you have (unlike radio, television, corporate bashes or voiceover work). No one can tell you what to say, and no one can make you workshop it so that it suits a wider audience."

And that has its pros and cons. On tour recently, one of Lucy's gags was met with a less than rapturous response and she noticed immediately. "Thanks for workshoping that one with me," she quipped, quick as a flying fish. By the next night, the gag had been dropped.

While comedians don't want to talk about how much money they make – "it ruins our street cred" – the truth is television and radio networks are

waiting to pounce on talent with their handsome chequebooks. A radio contract can run into a million dollars a year – or more, as it did in the case of Wendy Harmer – while the spin-off of corporate event work can garner a "name" as much as \$20,000 for one night's work.

Never before has there been such a rash of comics in the media as there is currently. Comedians – the list stretching from Roy and HG to Kath & Kim – are as ubiquitous on telly as the reality TV stars stand-up comedians love to bag.

"Home renovation shows?" asks Fleet rhetorically during one of his live routines.

"A bunch of people come round to your house while you're not there, decide your house is shit and that they are going to fix it, do a bit of carpentry and then expect you, on your return, to say 'thank you Mr Male Stripper, thank you very much.'" Fleet's face is all mock despair. "C'mon!" Comics agree: when you're in comedy, everything is potential material. Like everyone sticks their leg out of the doona when they're overheating at

night; like Red Rooster is always empty, yet staff still expect you to take a ticket before being served; like mums always find the missing sock, that they're so good at finding things, Aussie mums should be sent to locate Osama Bin Laden.

"Even when you're not consciously looking for material, you're getting ideas," says Anderson. "I've always got a notebook with me; I'm forever scribbling on my hands and arms, like Guy Pearce in *Memento*. When you're in comedy, the grass peeking out from a crack of concrete has potential."

The essence of comedy, the pros concur, is

noticing what everyone else notices – but with a twist – and expressing it in the public arena so that audiences experience an unexpected frisson of recognition. Third World starvation, colonic irrigation, hair care for "down there"... absolutely nothing in stand-up comedy is sacred.

And stand-up comedians, quite often, are profane. Wil Anderson says he takes his cue from one of his comic heroes, Billy Connolly, to not live life "being beige". "I want to wander around stage for three hours like Connolly does and then do it again the next night for another three hours... but with completely new material," says Anderson, his voice reverential.

Anderson met his comic "god" a couple of years back when he was touring the UK. "I asked Billy if doing comedy got any easier and if, by now, he knew with any greater certainty what was funny and what wasn't. Billy said he didn't have a clue! It made me realise that in comedy, as in life, it's a case of 'the more you know, the more you realise you don't know'."

Anderson also raves about his *Glass House* colleague, comedian Dave Hughes, who is rated by many of his peers as the "hottest" stand-up in Australia right now. "When someone tries something new or takes risks, you're just full of admiration for them," explains Lucy.

Ironically, Hughes doesn't host his own television show (yet) but, tellingly, the drier-than-a-Kalahari-saltpan comic always draws the biggest crowds at the annual Melbourne International Comedy Festival, which is still the country's Mecca for stand-up comedians.

In fact, being the festival's biggest drawcard may well be the one outward symbol of success to which stand-up comics aspire. Television and radio gigs may come and go, but in the end, what matters is how many people will pay for

**"WHEN THE AUDIENCE ISN'T LAUGHING... IT'S HARD NOT TO TAKE IT PERSONALLY"**

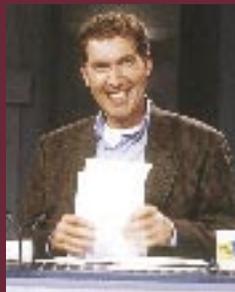
## A LAUGH A MINUTE...

Never before has Australia's media been so saturated with comedy – most of it from those who cut their teeth in stand-up. We salute some of the best, both past and present.



### MARY-ANNE FAHEY

Long before Jane Turner and Gina Riley were cavorting as Fountain Lakes' most famous mother and daughter, teenager Kylie Mole was introducing the word "bogan" to the Australian lexicon. She was everyone's *Comedy Company* favourite and as ubiquitous and popular in the late-1980s as *Kath & Kim* are today. More recently Kylie's creator, has adapted Morris Gleitzman's hilarious book, *Water Wings*, for the theatre.



### STEVE VIZARD

Lawyer-turned-comedian Steve Vizard won the 1991 Gold Logie in honour of his hundreds of appearances as presenter and performer of *Fast Forward* and *Tonight Live with Steve Vizard*. Working with Magda Szubanski, Jane Turner and Gina Riley, Vizard was the Rove of the late 1980s and early '90s, interviewing celebrities with a humorous touch. Today he heads his own film and TV production company.



### WENDY HARMER

She was the queen of Sydney's airwaves for over a decade on 2DayFM and reigned in Melbourne before that as the best-loved and funniest stand-up comedian of them all. She hosted the ABC's *The Big Gig* for three years and has written several books. Harmer is currently touring Europe with her husband and children, and no doubt will return to host another media event in her typically mordant style.



### PAUL McDERMOTT

McDermott started on the road to comic stardom in the early 1980s when he joined Richard Fidler and Tim Ferguson in a performance group, who all went on to form the Doug Anthony All Stars. McDermott then hosted the ABC's *Good News Week* and subsequently hosted breakfast on Triple J. Today, the versatile performer is injecting comic pizzazz on the ABC's wildly popular dance show, *Strictly Dancing*.



### DAVE HUGHES

The Melbourne comedian is at the height of his popularity right now, with an award-winning Melbourne breakfast-radio shift, regular TV gigs on the ABC's *The Glass House* and panellist on Network Ten's footy panel show, *Before the Game*, (originally called *After the Game*). Funnyman Hughes also performs hundreds of stand-up shows a year. "Being well-known definitely makes you better looking," says the comic other comics love to love.