

(from left) Radio
kings Andy Lee
and Hamish Blake.



The odd couple

STORY JOANNE HAWKINS PHOTOGRAPHY CAMERON GRAYSON



Hamish Blake and Andy Lee started their partnership as two mates playing for laughs. Now the radio jocks are taking their caravan of comedy abroad to tickle Europe's funny bones

Way outside Melbourne, next to a sad, old caravan that's seen better days, two dark-haired blokes are running around a farmer's field in cut-off boilersuits. As they brandish their toy swords and shields before collapsing in a fit of giggles, the farmer, watching from the sidelines, shakes his head with a bemused expression.

It may be baffling to the uninitiated farmer, but for Hamish Blake and Andy Lee (best known as Hamish & Andy) this bout of tomfoolery is just another day at the office. And one that would probably make sense to the millions who tune into the weekday radio show that bears their names. The genial pair have made silliness and mischief their stock in trade, and it seems Australia can't get enough.

The *Hamish & Andy* show (on Melbourne's Fox FM and Sydney's 2Day FM, plus 35 other stations across the country) is now the highest-rating program in the nation. In Melbourne, where it started in 2006, the duo's drive-time slot has a 21.3 per cent audience share – 10 points ahead of the nearest rival. Lee, especially, has come a long way since doing "panel operation for the *Kyle and Jackie O Hot 30 Countdown* [in 2003]. I was horrific at that," he laughs.

In a market littered with failed partnerships – think Peter Helliar and Myf Warhurst on Triple M, or Judith Lucy, Kaz Cooke and, er, Peter Helliar on 2Day FM – Blake and Lee's popularity seems unstoppable. Their obvious chemistry helps, yet both are at a loss to explain quite why their show has done so well.

"If it wasn't successful, there's nothing we could do to change it, because we're doing the only show we know how to do," explains Lee. "We're a one-trick pony."

Blake laughs in agreement, adding, "I don't know why it's successful, but I do know how we feel about success, and that's lucky. We're doing something that excites and amuses us. Every day feels like an adventure. We get to live our wildest dreams and, by some bizarre fluke, people are listening."

An easy-listening mix of unscripted banter, larrikin humour and wacky stunts, the show has broad appeal. Previous japes have included broadcasting from a tall ship in a stormy Bass Strait ("It wasn't until we reached the other end that we realised how close we'd come to dying," recalls Blake); spending 50 hours without being able to see (Lee) or hear (Blake); and the party marathon, during which they attended 42 parties in one weekend.

Then there's the now legendary 'Caravan of Courage' trips – two across Australia and one across the US (the accompanying doco aired on Network Ten last September). "We thought,

we've hugged Australia, let's hug America. Turns out, it's harder to hug America, because they are massive," quips Blake.

The pair, both 28, are keen to publicise their next caravan trip to Great Britain and Ireland (hence the *Braveheart*-style props). What they're not so keen on is being styled, preferring to wear the 'caravan suits' they'll sport during their trip. It's only after a bit of cajoling that they agree to be photographed in their own clothes.

It seems posing in labels is one step too serious for the boys, and something they're happier to leave to model Megan Gale, Lee's girlfriend since 2006. For 'Ham' and 'Ando' – as they call themselves – everything is about the "laugh". As Blake explains, "We were brought together by a similar belief that life is quite funny and is there to be laughed at."

Back at Fox FM HQ, interviewing the pair is no easy task as they regularly finish each other's sentences or dissolve into giggles. Best mates on and off-air, they're so close, they're metaphorically joined at the hip. (Which they actually were for a stunt that saw them sewn together for a week.) They reluctantly force themselves to holiday separately – to give them something to talk about when they reunite.



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"Our relationship is very much like a standard relationship," muses Blake. "Like a marriage, where you want to make your partner happy, I come in every day and love making Andy laugh."

The two former private-school boys have been laughing pretty much since they met at Melbourne University in 2001. Blake says he was relieved to find a like-minded soul in Lee. "Everyone was carrying on about how I'd meet the best people at uni, and I spent the first two weeks thinking, well, I haven't met anyone I like. But then I met Ando and his mates, and I thought, ah.... yes, these are the people everyone said I'd meet at uni."

The two bonded over a love of British comedy show *Big Train* and began to toss around their own ideas for sketches. Soon they were wagging class and nipping to the nearby RMIT University to use the radio and TV facilities. "We behaved as though we had jobs in comedy," recalls Blake. "We'd come in each day and talk about sketches we'd thought of and how we'd execute them."

Stints on student radio and Melbourne community TV station Channel 31 followed, before the twosome – then just 21 – were snapped up by the Seven Network to front *The Hamish and Andy Show*. The sketch show, which featured one of the first outings of Chris Lilley's character, Mr G, lasted six episodes before it was axed. "The show deserved to be cut," admits Lee.

"We had no idea what we were doing," agrees Blake. "Nobody at Seven was sacked [for giving us the green light] and they probably should have been."

Meanwhile, the pair had been doing unpaid night shifts at Fox FM and their increased profile on TV led to a Saturday slot, which hit the airwaves just as the TV show was dropped. But radio bosses, impressed by their talents, eventually rewarded them with the eponymous

show that's made their names. The *Hamish & Andy* show has an average of 2.3 million listeners and has won awards including Best On-Air Team and Best Networked Program at the 2009 Australian Commercial Radio Awards.

TV presenter Jules Lund, a friend of Blake's since the age of 15, believes the show's success is down to the pair being able to tap into the nation's collective funny bone. "We all love being in those ridiculous moods with our friends, where you find yourself in fits of laughter over the silliest things. The boys allow us to plug into those sorts of shenanigans every afternoon. >



(from left) Lee and Blake have been mates since university; Blake is dating author Zoë Foster; Lee with girlfriend, model Megan Gale.

"And there's very little they won't do for our amusement, whether it's marrying a rat [Lee], becoming fake dads, or being tattooed by Pink [Blake]. It's a bizarre job, but somebody has to do it and they take a bullet for our entertainment."

The duo has also proved you don't have to be mean or controversial to be a hit. While at pains to diplomatically point out that a lot of people like Kyle and Jackie O's shows (also on Fox and 2Day FM), Lee says he and Blake prefer not to shock.

"That's never where we've felt comfortable playing," he says. "Hamish and I decided a long time ago that we'd never want to say anything we wouldn't say to someone's face."

It's an ethos that certainly adds to their nice-guy image (although a recent survey did vote them the celebrity pair people would most like to run away with for a dirty weekend). "I think sometimes you earn the nickname 'nice guy' by default if you're not an arsehole," qualifies Blake. "I don't think 'nice' means you can't speak your mind or are boring. I'm quite happy to be living life, doing the show and having fun with Ando without needing to upset anyone."

Except perhaps their nearest and dearest. Gale was upset when her goofy other half knocked out his two front teeth in March, during an ice hockey game for the show's Bi Bi Tri Bi-athlon (in which they attempted 24 sports back-to-back).

"Megan has gone through every emotion," Lee admits. "It started with anger towards me, then that anger was redirected towards Hamish. She was a little upset, but she's OK now."

But then Gale, like Blake's ex-girlfriend of over five years, actor Anna Jennings-Edquist (the couple split late last year), has had to accept that her life with Lee is also comic fodder for the pair's show. "Megan is awesome in that regard, as was Anna," says Blake. "She understood that we share them with the rest of the world."

Blake recently revealed he's currently dating Sydney author Zoë Foster, with whom he co-wrote a dating guide, which was released last October. "It's a new relationship, but we're happy and excited to see where it goes," he says. "Although I'm sure the shine has already worn off for Zoë."

So what's next? After the demise of *Rove* – on which they had a regular segment – a return to TV surely beckons, although they seem in no hurry to commit to anything but a few specials. (The hour-long *Hamish and Andy's Caravan of Courage: Great Britain and Ireland* will air mid-June on Network Ten.) Tim Bartley, who produces their TV work, explains, "They want to keep exploring and hope the audience goes with them."

Lee says their radio gig will probably end when their lives change. (Lee lives in an inner-city Melbourne unit, but spends a lot of time in Sydney with Gale; Blake lives in a share-house – "It's like a college frat house," says Lund. "You go there and he's playing PlayStation in his undies.")

"We're fortunate in being able to do this show at a time in our lives when we couldn't be freer," Lee adds. "We can say, 'Let's spend three weeks in a caravan' or 'Let's go to Afghanistan to entertain the troops.' That only happens when you're at a certain age and a certain situation in life. When we start having kids, it will probably sound different and it may not be a show we'd want to do. So we'll weigh that up in the future."

Whatever they do, chances are they'll be doing it together. "I have the best fun when we do stuff together," says Lee.

Blake agrees: "It never feels like home unless I'm doing it with Ando." Boom, tish. **SM**

Caravan of Courage: Great Britain and Ireland airs on Fox FM and 2Day FM from May 31 to June 11. For info, visit www.hamishandandy.com.

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