

Ross Noble interview

Kate Wellham

One imagines every day at school for Ross Noble must have been like his anarchic roaming performance at the Latitude festival recently, at which he was the star attraction: an epic conga line chasing him around trying to catch a few words, like some kind of jolly Geordie Jesus.

“I did make people laugh but I made an equal number of people go: ‘You’re a f**king freak,” recalls Noble when asked about his days in short trousers.

As is so often the case, the qualities that have made Ross stand out in stand-up are the same characteristics that unsettled the other kids at school, at a time of life when being noticeable in any way is usually social suicide.

“I used to ride to school on a unicycle and I used to spend my lunchtimes juggling. When I was at school if you didn’t play football that was one thing, but to juggle, you might as well have written ‘I am a cock’ on your face, which I think I also did at one point.”

Leaving school at 15 to join the circus is the kind of career plan that would make most parents sob into a university prospectus, but Noble’s mum and dad took a different approach. “Instead of going: ‘Don’t be silly, you have to get a proper job, you can’t just go off and join the circus, it’s got no future in it,’ they just said ‘brilliant’. I think because my mum and dad are teachers they’ve seen a lot of kids over the years full of potential go on and do great things.”

Kids including, no doubt, Noble’s successful older cousin Mickey Hutton, who has left few entertainment avenues unexplored in the last 20 years as a comedian, actor, musician, writer and TV presenter. When Noble changed his mind about the circus and decided to pursue comedy, it was his cousin who got him his first gig at a local comedy club. At 15, Noble was legally too young to even be in the place, let alone perform there, and had to leave through the kitchens to avoid a scandal. It was a life-changing experience, however, and he has been performing ever since.

Over the intervening 17 years he has travelled both the UK and Australia – where he now lives – perfecting his stand-up, and has appeared on TV and radio shows in both countries. From guesting on *Have I Got News For You* and *Just A Minute* to co-presenting a breakfast show on Australian national radio, his imaginative unscripted wit has consistently and casually stolen the show.

In a climate where the instantaneous achievement of fame is encouraged, viral marketing can sell even the most mundane product, and audiences quickly get bored with new faces, it’s refreshing to note that Noble’s rise has been a gradual, natural process borne of years of hard work. He prefers the freedom of stand-up to TV and radio, he says, and although the potential audiences are smaller, word of mouth has proved a powerful thing. Noble fans, once won, are a loyal lot, the like of which many comedians can only dream of, giving him presents, offering suggestions and indulging in bizarre traditions (for example, Edinburgh front rows leave their shoes on the stage in the interval).

And to those fans, Noble is equally considerate, never giving them the same show twice, and

incorporating them into his act as much as possible, whether by confiscating mobile phones to film himself, leading everyone to a vegan food stall to request sausage rolls, or dedicating an entire show to Southport's lawnmower museum.

Noble in conversation is almost exactly the same as Noble on stage – at great pains to invite you on to his train of thought, which frequently ventures into a bizarre yet strangely familiar world that most of us visit every day when we spend too long daydreaming. This, along with the seemingly endless generation of new material on the spot, is the secret of his appeal.

He is no more of a freak than the rest of us; the main difference between him and you or I is that he'll happily talk for hours about the kind of surreal thoughts we all have that make us feel like freaks daily – and in great detail. The other notable difference is that while we might get the sack for talking that much rubbish, he gets paid to see how silly he can be – from the art of muffin-reading to a pulley system that keeps flaps of meat off your face once you've put them on there, for reasons it would take the recounting of an entire routine to explain.

So who does someone who can apparently find the humour in everything respect in the world of comedy? Bill Bailey, of course. "He used to be in Rubber Bishops," says Noble. "And I remember doing a gig with them in Newcastle. It was me, Andre Vincent and the Rubber Bishops, who were Bill and another guy, and they were great, but he clearly had something.

"Then Bill went out on his own and it was an odd couple of months where he was making that transition from what he had been doing to who he actually was. I saw him at Glastonbury and all of a sudden it was like he'd found his voice."

It's notable that Noble should admire another talent that has taken many years to develop into the state for which it has always seemed destined. The ability to be spontaneous, it seems, takes a long time to master.

"I'm not saying all big name comedians are sh*t – I just think sometimes the comedians that are most successful are just those that are match fit."

Noble's dedication to randomness has paid off and he's made quite an impression on the way.

"Everyone you've ever known, as soon as you make anything of yourself, like the milkman, goes: 'If he hadn't drunk that full cream milk when he was four...'. Less fazed by any success, as we all know, are our dear parents. It must, after all, be difficult to really respect someone's achievements when you've personally potty trained them.

Coming round to school again, his sell-out tours are a far cry from being beaten up by big kids in the playground for dressing as a ninja Turtle. "The indignity – because they're Ninja Turtles, and it's not as if I could fight back in a ninja style. I had to lie there and take it while I was getting kicked in the shell."

Who's had the last laugh? The big kids, of course, because they've probably bought tickets to see him.

