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**OLIVER DOUBLE**

University of Kent

# Not the definitive version: an interview with Ross Noble

**ABSTRACT**

*In this interview, the celebrated improvisational stand-up comedian Ross Noble discusses his early influences, starting his career in the anarchic Newcastle comedy scene of the early 1990s, the gruelling experience of building his career in London, the process of becoming successful, the creative possibilities of the DVD format, and his current working processes.*

**KEYWORDS**

Ross Noble  
stand-up comedy  
improvisation

**1. OPENING NOTES**

Ross Noble is one of the most successful and gifted stand-up comedians of his generation. He has acquired a huge and enthusiastic following, in spite of having relatively little exposure on television. Instead, he has built his audience largely on the strength of his live performance, relentlessly touring with shows like *Sonic Waffle* (2002–03), *Unrealtime* (2003–04), *Noodlemeister* (2004–05), *Randomist* (2005–06), *Fizzy Logic* (2006–07), *Nobleism* (2007), and *Things* (2009). As well as touring thousand-seat theatres, as of 2004 he has released a series of best-selling stand-up DVDs. His comedy is characterized by surreal flights of imagination, and his extraordinary ability to improvise.



*Ross Noble (courtesy of Ross Noble).*

One of the built-in ambiguities in stand-up comedy is the extent of an act's spontaneity. The interactive nature of the form, and the fact that it is performed in the first person, means that prepared material (performed for years or even decades) can come across as if it has just been invented before the audience's very eyes. Most comedians strike a balance between improvisation and prepared material, but where one begins and the other ends is always left unclear. As Tony Allen, who was one of the first alternative comedians, argues:

In reality, of course, very little is spontaneous and it is only the potential for spontaneity that exists. An honest stand-up comedian will admit that the moments of pure improvisation account for less than five per cent of their act.

(Allen 2004: 93)

Noble turns this potential for spontaneity into reality, improvising far more than 5 per cent of his act, and building much of the show from conversations with audience members or occurrences that happen in the performance space, on the stage, or the auditorium. As a *Times* reviewer puts it:

Ross Noble can amble on stage, spot a piece of fluff on the floorboards, a latecomer trying to slip into a seat, an odd-looking chandelier, and

suddenly he's got his first half-hour of material, building a pyramid of observations from any starting point ... More than any other comic playing the big stages, this straggle-haired Geordie seems to risk calamity every night.

(Maxwell 2005)

Something else that marks Noble out is his age. Still only 33 years old, he has been performing stand-up for seventeen years, and has been well known for ten, having been nominated for the Perrier Award in 1999. It is unusual enough that he started working as a stand-up at the remarkably tender age of 15, but the particular set of venues in which he cut his teeth was also far from ordinary. Having grown up in Cramlington, Northumberland, he first began performing in and around Newcastle upon Tyne, in one of the emerging comedy scenes that had started growing in provincial towns by the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This meant that his first experiences of live performance happened in a freewheeling atmosphere where comedians and promoters were discovering how stand-up worked as they went along. Anvil Springstien, one of the leading lights of the Newcastle comedy scene at the time, pointed out that audiences were similarly uninitiated:

Because audiences up here have never really had a history of being able to go out to comedy clubs ... people don't know how to behave in a comedy night, so the standard of heckling has been very strange and different, and no two gigs have ever been the same.

(Double 1994: 257–58)

Springstien also pointed out that, lacking the tighter expectations of the more established London circuit, the Newcastle comedy scene of the early 1990s encouraged more inventive approaches to stand-up: 'There's an awful lot of just standard, straight stand-up [in London], gag, gag, gag, gag. People want to be TV-friendly, so they write their sets towards that, you know, but up here it's a different kettle of fish' (Double 1994: 257–58).

Starting off in such an atmosphere has coloured Noble's whole approach to stand-up. It allowed him to gain an unusual amount of stage experience very quickly, and freed him from the restriction of audience expectation. As a result, he prefers the spontaneous to the highly prepared, the rough edges to slick perfection. More importantly, he is comfortable taking the artistic risks which improvisation entails on a regular basis.

Meeting up again with Noble on 25 August 2009 in Leicester Square to interview him, I was struck by how closely his conversational style resembles his onstage delivery. His sentences are far from linear. He will stop halfway through a clause to rephrase or refine an idea, or go off at a tangent. On stage, he brilliantly exploits this tendency, commenting on his own sentence structure, and conjuring up whole routines based on little more than a slightly odd choice of word or a strange inflection. In conversation, he largely avoids this temptation, but his mercurial thought processes and his propensity to repeat and foreshorten makes transcription rather tricky. If I were to attempt to make whole sentences out of his exact words, his meaning would be in danger of disappearing under a riotous heap of ellipses and parentheses. Instead, I have simplified things in the interests of clarity, whilst trying to represent what he actually said as accurately as possible to give an accurate presentation of his words.

1. See Double (1994) for a detailed account of the provincial scene at this time.

2. Billy Connolly, Jasper Carrott and Max Boyce were the three most prominent stand-up comedians to emerge from the British folk music scene in the 1960s and 1970s.
3. Bev Bevan (1944-) was the drummer with British rock bands The Move and Electric Light Orchestra.
4. 'The Magic Roundabout' was an early stand-up routine by Jasper Carrott, in which he parodied the animated children's series of the same name by incongruously adding sexual content into it. A recording of the routine was included as the B-side to Carrott's single 'Funky Moped', and its notoriety and popularity was said to have accounted for the success of this record, which reached number five in the UK pop charts in 1975.
5. The Wow Show was a group of performers on the early alternative comedy circuit, made up of Mark Arden, Lee Cornes, Mark Elliot and Stephen Frost.

## 2. THE INTERVIEW

*Who were your early influences?*

Up until I started, I used to listen to Connolly and Carrott and Max Boyce,<sup>2</sup> and who else did I have on CD? Just like the sort of people that you'd see on the telly all the time, you know. You know, obviously TVs and albums were the only way of sort of seeing people. And obviously all of those shows where comics were on, like the *Just for Laughs* thing, and there was that show *Paramount City* – things like that, you know. Yeah, so it wasn't until I started watching stuff like that – I then actually started reading about comedy.

*So with people like Carrott and Connolly, what was it about them that you got into?*

The obvious thing was the nature of what they did. The creativity of it, you know, I think that was the thing – the fact that they were being funny in a specific way to them. Rather than in that interchangeable way. And that came across, you know. Because when I was a kid, I used to really like Lenny Henry, you know. Because it was the sort of thing where he was on telly a lot, and you think, 'Oh, he's funny'. Then what I started to like more and more about those guys, certainly Connolly, was the fact that even though they were mainstream, they seemed like they had a kind of an attitude to them. They sort of felt authentic, even Carrott, kind of. Back in the day there was a sort of an edge to him, you know, you got the feeling that he wasn't like a shiny-suited bloke. And stuff like *Sweet and Sour Labrador* (Carrott 1986) and *Little Zit on the Side* (Carrott 1979), those books of his routines – you know, like, there were some of those which obviously weren't on TV, about him and Bev Bevan<sup>3</sup> and all that. You sort of read those and there was something kind of a bit rock and roll about him, you know. On TV he came across as sort of like a dad from Birmingham, but then you listened to 'The Magic Roundabout'.<sup>4</sup>

And I think that was the thing that appealed to me about it, it was establishment, but at the same time it wasn't like middle of the road shit, you know. Which even the Comic Strip, you know those sort of Comic Strip lot, it was almost like they were these kind of edgy wild characters – they were edgy and wild *compared* to blokes in dicky bow ties doing chicken-in-a-basket clubs. Whereas actually, and I've got to be careful what I say, but a lot of them, or certainly the ones that made it, were kind of a bit middle of the road, you know. Whereas the real ones like Keith Allen and the guys from, like, the Wow Show<sup>5</sup> and all that sort of stuff, they had that sort of edge to them.

*You were also influenced by the American improvisational comedian Jonathan Winters. How did you come across his work?*

From looking more towards America, you know. I mean basically like from reading about the American scene, and the amount of people who said he was influential on them, you know. And then, specifically Robin Williams going on about him, Robin Williams and Bill Cosby. I saw interviews with them where they were going, 'This guy's the man', you know. And that made me go, 'I should probably have a look at him!' [laughs]

*What was the north-east comedy scene like when you first started performing?*

Well there were sort of two camps up there. There was Chirpy Chappies Comedy Café, which even saying it now sounds like something that somebody

would make up for a bad film about stand-up, you know. Chirpy Chappies was run by Dave Johns, who at the time, because there was already a Dave Johns in Equity, was calling himself Ben E Cauthen, which is the weirdest stage name.

But anyway, so it was Dave Johns and he ran the Comedy Café and there were a few acts who were sort of good enough in his eyes to play, to be support acts there. And they were Mike Milligan, John Fothergill, Anvil Springstien, and Paul Sneddon (who was billed as Vladimir McTavish). They were sort of the main support acts, and he used to bring the acts up from London. He had headliners like Jo Brand, and Mark Lamarr, Mark Steel and people like that. And then on the other side of that was a 'comedy collective' (which is very *of the time*) a comedy collective called Near the Knuckle – who ran a club called the Crack Club. Anvil Springstien was in that, but then there was also Tony Mendoza, there was Steffen Peddie, the Big Fun Club (who were like a double act), and who else did you have in that? Oh, you had a double act called Scarborough and Thick, and for years I never got that that was a play on Morecambe and Wise. It's like 'Scarboro' instead of 'Morecambe', 'Thick' instead of 'Wise'. But what was funny about that was they would introduce themselves as Scarborough and Thick, he was Eric Scarborough, and he was Little Ernie Thick [laughs]. The younger guy must've been like in his early twenties, probably about 21, 22, but the two of them had met when they both worked in a factory, or an engineering place. The older one had sort of given up his job as an engineer, gone into teaching, and so you basically had an older guy, and then Little Ernie Thick, who worked in this factory, but he had a kind of punk sensibility. He was into punk and would play the guitar – so he was obviously like a punk with a day job. And they'd do the sort of double act stuff, and it can be revealed now, Little Ernie Thick then went solo and used his real name, and that's Gavin Webster.<sup>6</sup>

And all the Near the Knuckle gigs were basically rooms in pubs, because at that point, the only purpose-built comedy was the Comedy Store in London – but then outside of London, that was around that time the Glee Club opened.<sup>7</sup> Yeah I think it might have been end of 1993 possibly when the Glee Club opened, and that was the first proper comedy club outside of London where it was like, 'OK, we've got a dance floor afterwards, and proper seats' rather than such-and-such a club at this venue. So anywhere that had a decent function room we'd start a comedy club there. Some of them lasted and then some of them you'd do a couple of weeks and they'd just go, you know. But all of those acts were unlike, say, London, where already by the early 1990s there'd been ten years of stuff.

There wasn't the idea of people going to comedy clubs, and we used to frequently get people, you know, older people, you'd be doing your stuff and they'd go, 'Tell us a joke. You haven't got any jokes mate.' And all the time you'd sort of get asked – it was always the same thing – it's like, 'Do you tell jokes, or are you alternative?' But it meant that we were doing a lot of different gigs, you know, like one night we did a working men's club, and the next night was a function room, and then it might be a bit of a festival, you know, Stockton Festival, and there'd be like a marquee. It was very new and it was in effect what had happened in London ten years earlier.<sup>8</sup>

*Do you think that because you came out of this nascent scene, and that you started at such a young age, that it affected your comedy style as it developed?*

Yeah, definitely. Because there was so few acts up there, it was one of those things where, I think I got a compèring gig, it might've been like my third

6. Now a well-known name on the national comedy circuit.
7. In Birmingham.
8. When alternative comedy was starting off with the opening of the Comedy Store, the founding of Tony Allen's Alternative Cabaret group, etc.

9. A well-known competition for new stand-up comedians, established in 1988, which takes place at the Edinburgh Fringe.

gig or something. And like in London to get a job compèreing you'd certainly have to be an absolute bulletproof sort of act, possibly even a headline act, in order for them to go, 'Oh we'll trust him.' But when there are only a handful of people, you know, we used to start clubs up, and I'd compère. And I also used to compère at the university, I'd do Newcastle University one week and Sunderland University the next, for when the acts would come up from London, and I got myself a gig as the regular host. I also used to compère down at the Comedy Shack in York.

But because of that, the idea of doing five minutes and honing it to get another gig, and honing it to try and get another gig in London, that was completely alien to me. My whole thing was, I've got to compère a show next week, there was the same audience the week before, so it was just the idea of new material, and sometimes doing quite a long time onstage. That meant that by the time I'd got to London, I got loads of work doing TV warm-ups, just because of that conversational thing of just having that high turnover of material. And then it went from sort of trying to have a high turnover in terms of writing jokes to just going on and going, 'I've just got to be funny and entertain these people.'

*So what was it like when you first moved down to London?*

It was bizarre from the point of view that I went from earning money, you know, doing the gig and then getting paid, and feeling like it was my job – well, it was my job – to all of a sudden (and rightly so with hindsight), you know, basically being forced to become an open spot. Sort of almost starting again and having to do five-minute, ten-minute slots. Some of the open spot nights were like a competition, you know. There was a competition down at one of the clubs, and it was like they had heats, and you came back for the final; I won the heat and then I was beaten in the final by this guy. At the time I would quite like to have won, you know, because it would've speeded things along. And the guy who won, I'm sure now he's not doing it any more, and I'm sure he sits there and goes, 'You know, I once beat Noble in a comedy competition,' and I think brilliant, I love the idea that his mates go, 'Yeah, course you did!' you know what I mean?

*When was it that you actually moved down to London?*

It was sort of early '95. But it was an odd thing that happened, because I was doing like these open-mike nights and all the rest of it, and from doing those, started getting people going, 'Oh, he's quite good, this bloke.' But then my first agent, he was sort of scouting around looking for acts. He ran a comedy club down at Southend, and his mate, who he used to be in a band with, won *So You Think You're Funny*<sup>9</sup> and so he went, 'I'll manage you.' So he set himself up as a manager, then he went out scouting for acts. So he saw me at one of these things and basically went, 'Can I get you some gigs?' And then that's what opened the floodgates for the equivalent of what I'd been doing in Newcastle but down here.

He was based in Essex, so a lot of these gigs were working in nightclubs in Essex, you know. I got a gig once where they launched Fosters Ice and the gig was I had to turn up to pubs, with these promotions people, and I had to host the night – and what it was, they had a big block of ice with bottle tops inside. And they would give punters hammers, and they had thirty seconds to hammer at the ice as hard as they could with these hammers, and then if they

got the bottle top out they won a free Fosters Ice or a T-shirt – it said what the prize was on the bottom of the bottle top. I was in these pubs in Essex with these real sort of like chavs hammering blocks of ice.

Yeah, so it was that sort of stuff, you know. One of the first warm-ups that I did was one for a thing called *Gail's Campus Capers*, and it was like a game show around universities with a page three girl.

And a thing called *Who's Sorry Now?* which was for Living TV and it was about couples, people who'd had grievances, and then at the end the audience would decide their punishment – they'd spin a wheel and they would come up with what they had to do. Which actually worked out quite well because I ended up in the show, I went on there as a fake contestant. Like the day before, the people pulled out and they said, 'Well we've got no one for tomorrow's show, can you go into the audience and see if you can find somebody that's had a grievance?' Anyway, so no one wanted to do it and I went, 'Well I'll just do it, and pretend,' and I went, 'Does anyone else want to?' and this girl put her hand up, she went, 'I'm a drama student, I'll pretend to be your girlfriend if you want.'

So we went on there and we filmed this show. I'm sitting there dressed in green and I'm going, 'I'm obsessed with the colour green,' and the audience members were going, 'Why are you?' It was the height of Jerry Springer, you know, so it's like people were just going, 'What is it about the colour green that you love?' and I went, 'Because green is Jesus's colour.' And this woman goes, 'How is it Jesus's colour?' and I went, 'Well, because you know he used to hang around with the fishermen, and the sea's green.' And this woman went like, 'The sea's blue' and I went, 'Not at night' [laughs]. And it went out on telly!

So it was all of that, you know. And then I got a gig doing the warm-up for GMTV, as their warm-up man in Spain for six weeks, as part of *Fun in the Sun*. So every morning, I'd go down to the beach, and have three hours entertaining holiday makers, and then for about ten minutes of that three hours, Mr Motivator would make them dance, and then off we'd go, you know.

*I can see how that experience of playing horrible gigs would give you a lot of good stage experience, but it could also really coarsen you artistically. It could just make you slam out anything that works, but it didn't. You were actually a much more surreal and creative comedian. How did you sustain your creativity during this time?*

Well, because I was trying all the time to balance the two, you know. Because at that time I was firmly under the impression that if people didn't go with what I was trying to do, it was because I wasn't being funny enough! It wasn't, it was because I was being a dickhead! That's not fair, when you're on a beach in Spain at six o'clock in the morning and people have just come out of their local nightclub, you know. I knew what I wanted to be doing, and that was me on the way there. So all the time there was that balancing act, because I never wanted to just be self-indulgent. My thing was I thought I wanna be able to go on and entertain *any* crowd. There comes a point where you sort of actually sort of go, 'I don't wanna entertain these people.' But if they came to the gig they'll be entertained, you know, it's that.

*It is them coming to you rather than you coming to them. You see a crowd and you say, 'Well you're this sort of crowd so I'll do this sort of set to you.' In a way that's the wrong decision. You've got to try and make them come into your comic world.*

Exactly. I got a gig once doing the warm-up for the Radio 1 Roadshow. I was probably 19 at the time, you know, and I was onstage in front of 8000 people in a park, and it was that thing of like, 'All right. How's this gonna work?' you know. But I knew at the time – and I sort of sound like a lifestyle coach here – the way I lived my life at the time was as if I was in a montage in a film, you know. It was that thing of like, 'Oh I'm on a beach. Now I'm in a club.' And I looked at it from that point of view. And it didn't matter how shitty it got.

I had this one warm-up gig: I used to hate doing it. Every Wednesday I used to just go, 'Fucking hell, here we go again.' A horrible time, and everyone on the staff was horrible to me. And you probably won't be surprised, it was a Sky 1 chat show fronted by Richard Littlejohn. Yeah. *Richard Littlejohn Live and Unleashed*. And I would turn up there. I'll give you an idea of the guests, one week it was Barbara Windsor and Mad Frankie Fraser! [laughs] And I was standing there going, 'Why am I doing this?' And six dwarves dressed as security guards walked past me. In the end I couldn't give a shit what the show was, I'd just turn up and like as soon as I was needed I just walked on. And I was like, 'Why are these dwarves dressed as security guards?' Richard Littlejohn goes, 'Ladies and gentlemen, tonight on the show, the Half Monty.' And it was just after *The Full Monty*, and they basically were these dwarf strippers, they went out and did 'You Can Leave your Hat on'. And then, I was stood there backstage as they walked off. So there wasn't even seven of them, these six naked dwarves just walked past me, 'All right', 'All right, that were a good one', 'N'ight, son.' Past they went, you know, these naked dwarves.

And I think if I ever write my autobiography, the warm-up years, what this woman said to me will be the chapter heading. I was in the green room and there was like a platter of sandwiches, and of course I was the first one into the green room 'cos everyone else was getting their make-up off and everything. There was like a selection of sandwiches and I picked out the prawn sandwiches, four prawn sandwiches. I put them on this plate. The secretary, right, not even one of the producers, the secretary came across, took them off my plate, slotted them back into the platter and said, 'Don't eat the prawn ones, you're only the warm-up.' [laughs]

*So how did it get from that to the point where it was actually starting to work and you were able to do things much more on your own terms? Obviously the Perrier nomination in '99 would have been a big thing.*

It was funny because that was definitely a tipping point but it was a weird one, that. I think I was a little bit resentful of that at the time because the momentum had already started. The ball was rolling, and it was happening anyway – and the Perrier thing, it was almost like they rubber-stamped it just as it was going out the door, you know.

I went up to Edinburgh in '96. '96 was the year where I didn't take any time off, I went a bit mental in '96 'cos I was pretty much onstage more than I was off, like. I took seven days off in '96, so it was just like non-stop gigs. It got to the point where I would finish a gig and I'd pretty much stay up all night and then go to bed in the daytime. I just lived this life of, you know, just gig to gig, sleeping on people's floors and all the rest of it. I went up to Edinburgh and did like a package show with a few others.

In '97, I didn't go to Edinburgh but decided to leave it a year and then come back in '98 and do my first solo show. But then around that sort of time, around sort of '98, '99, I started to notice that when I was playing clubs,

and especially when I was compèring places, I noticed I'd start to get a bit of a following from people coming back to the clubs, you know. So '99, I went up and did Edinburgh, Perrier, and then that's when all of a sudden it was like the papers started writing about it and, you know, that's when it sort of publicity-wise spread a little bit.

So I went to comedy clubs on nights when there wasn't a club on, so like say they did a Wednesday night, I'd be there on a Thursday or a Sunday and play the same venues but go, 'This is just me on,' you know. And '99 also, that's when I first went over to Oz, as well. So I quickly realized that if I did festivals, and then instead of just doing circuits gigs I would do gigs that were in circuit venues but I'd take them over, and in effect do a tour, you know. Link them up and advertise it as a tour, you know. So I did that, and then the next year, you know, the venues that had been a handful of people, now they were full, you know. And then went back to Edinburgh and moved up into sort of small theatres and arts centres. And then what started to happen, through word of mouth, because I wasn't just an act on the bill, people were going, 'Oh, you should see this bloke.' Rather than trying to jump straight from the clubs into the 1000-seaters, which is what a lot of people were trying to do, they just thought, 'I'll get on telly and then fwhhoom! I'm straight in there.' I just started building like that, and the 100 became 200 and then 200 became 400. Then I would do two nights in a 400 or 500-seater, and then when it got to that point, that's when I went, 'Right, now it's time to do 1000.' Then before I knew where I was, it was the sort of thing where I'd managed to get into the touring theatre circuit without having to be a TV name, you know.



*Ross Noble (courtesy of Ross Noble).*

*You must've been the first person to do that since Eddie Izzard.*

Probably, yeah. Yeah, I would say so. And also the West End as well, like in 2003, you know, I booked a West End theatre, the Vaudeville, I'd done the Soho Theatre in London, and then moved into the Vaudeville and did two weeks there. Then the next year came back and did two weeks, then I did three weeks at the Garrick, and then I went and did four weeks at the Apollo. And then on top of that, I started to release the DVDs, which then had the thing of people who'd seen me on DVD but hadn't seen me live, you know.

*I find the success of the stand-up comedy DVD really interesting, because on the face of it, stand-up is such a live medium that the idea of recording of it seems paradoxical in a way. Why do you think it works as a medium?*

Well I think the bottom line is something's better than nothing. There's an interesting statistic that 40 per cent of all DVDs are sold at the very end of the year – from the middle of November to December. So they've replaced socks as the thing you get your dad, you know. There you go: DVDs are the new socks. And so that's half of it. And then the other half thing is that you probably get more laughs-per-minute on a stand-up DVD than you would in a comedy film, you know. It's a different thing, the laughs are much more blatant – the laughs in a comedy film are probably more subtle. Another part of it is the souvenir aspect of people going and seeing a tour, they have a great night, same as people buying an album from bands and so on.

But for me, the thing that I always found weird for my act personally was the idea of DVD – or any recording – being the definitive version. So mine are sort of like live albums, rather than some comics release a DVD and it's like a studio album. They do the absolute definitive version. They record two nights and cut them together. You know, they hone the thing down on tour so that it's incredibly tight. Whereas the benefit of DVD over VHS is the fact that you can have a couple of discs in there and you can pack so much stuff on there with all the extras and everything. I think the wrong way for me to do it would be to go, 'I'll try and do a definitive version of the show, and then that's what people see.'

We film them and we don't cut anything out, I leave it in warts and all, you know. *Randomist* is more of a box set than just a single DVD, you know, it's a compilation rather than just a one-off. And I think that I'm probably the first person to really try and make the DVD a thing in itself. Basically what you normally get is a show and the chapter points on it if you're lucky, you know. Whereas hopefully I think what'll happen is, as a new generation of comics come through, they'll look at the DVD and go, 'Actually this is like an album, you know, it should be packed full of stuff.'

It's bizarre because probably one of the most unlikely people to do a similar thing is Jimmy Carr, you know. Somebody who is so tight – what he does is probably the tightest show you'll see – has heaps of extras and does really unusual things with his extras, you know. When my DVD comes out, it's the sort of thing where people know that they can watch the main show, there'll be a documentary on there, there'll be a bit of bonus stuff. It's gonna keep them busy for ages, you know. They don't just have to watch the same show over again, there's different ones.

*In order to produce your DVDs, with all the extras, you must have to document your work carefully.*

Yeah, yeah, we film pretty much every show.

*You used to minidisc-record your shows as well, because you also put out two CDs early on.*

10. Two audio CDs, released in 2001 and 2003, that were sold via Noble's website.

That's right, those *Official Bootlegs*, yeah.<sup>10</sup>

*Do you think the desire to document is just to do with the possibility of commercial release, or because your stuff is unique every time?*

The latter. I did find it quite hard for a while, I was finding it quite hard to sort of deal with the fact that I'd come off after a great show that had some great stuff in it and just go, 'That's gone.' And still there's not enough room on a DVD to put everything on.

*So you've got an extraordinary archive somewhere with all of your recordings.*

Yeah, just every show basically.

*If you've got so much stuff, presumably cataloguing is going to become an issue. How do you know what you've got?*

When we were doing the TV series that I've just made, where we knew we were going to have to use something from lots of the shows, my tour manager sits there every night and writes down what I'm doing. So I can cross reference that and then find the tape. And then if we're doing an extra and we go, 'Oh we need that bit,' usually I can sort of go, 'Well I think I did, in *that* gig.' We just sort of spool it through and try and find it. It's all very haphazard. Even with a TV show, there's two or three things that I went, 'Oh, and we need to put that in,' we just can't find it. We know it happened at some point on the tour but we just don't know where it is on the tape!

When you're putting together a DVD, and certainly the TV show, we filmed all the offstage stuff, and filmed all the onstage stuff, and then it was about mixing between the two, you know, taking all those different elements and weaving them into a thing. And again, that's not the way that people make TV programmes. They decide what they're gonna make. They plan it out. They then do the bits that they've planned. And then they edit it the way they thought about it beforehand. They don't go, 'Right, we're gonna make a TV series. It's gonna have elements of this and elements of that. Let's just turn the camera on and see what comes out of my mouth. And then take all those things and try and build something at the end.' Because if you've got a good editor, like Pete Callow who I work with, you know, we sort of created this TV series in the way that you might create like a documentary film. But without necessarily knowing what the documentary's about, you know.

When I put the DVDs together, it's much the same. An extra on the new one is a short interview where I talk about stuff that people put on the stage and then we show little clips of that. The commentary is basically me sitting in a room with the thing playing in the background, just talking. Just a stream of consciousness, like the same as if I was onstage but with no feedback. So it's probably a chance to see what the show would be if there was no sound-ing board from the audience. Just me talking. Literally just sitting there just talking to myself, you know. And there's bits of it which are laugh-out-loud funny, you know, because I keep one eye on the engineer, and there are bits where he's holding his sides laughing. And then there are other bits that are just really, really boring, you know. I would say out of the two hours of commentary there's probably a good half an hour in there that – if you actually

11. A film of this routine can be seen on Noble (2005). An audio recording of a different performance of the same routine can also be heard on Noble (2003).
12. See Noble (2006).
13. Because of his improvisational approach, even Noble's prepared material is constantly changing and evolving. So by the time he came back from touring Australia, the whole show had evolved to the point where it was completely different from the previous UK tour. For more on this, see Double 2005: 241.

edited out the shitty bits – that's actually really funny laugh-out-loud stuff, you know. So that in itself kind of creates a new thing, you know. It creates a new show if you like. It's a different type of show.

*When you put a DVD out there, sometimes routines capture the audience's imagination and they take on a life beyond you with people quoting them to each other. Your 'Muffins' routine is a good example.<sup>11</sup> Have you been aware of this?*

Yeah, like people, kids actually, sort of shout stuff at me. That's weird. Sometimes just a daft thing that you've said. The most obvious one, I actually talked about it on the last tour, was when I broke my wrist and the ambulance men turned up, one of them said, 'Do your Stephen Hawking impersonation.' And my wrist was broken, I was in agony, I had to have an operation and pins in my arm and everything, and the first thing they said was like, 'Great, can you do your Stephen Hawking impersonation?' I was like, 'I just need painkillers,' you know. But I was at a Starbucks and I was looking at the muffins, just 'cos I wanted a muffin, and I looked up and the guy just went, 'Are you Ross Noble?' and I went, 'Yeah,' and he just walked off into the kitchen.

The thing that I love the most, and the reason I love this so much is that I was like this with things myself, is when people say to me, 'Me and my mates, when we're hanging around, always say ...' and it could be something like the thing about the owl, tucking in the owl, you know, like 'Can you tuck me in?'<sup>12</sup> You know, like when you like get teenagers and stuff, going, 'We always go, "Can you tuck me in?"'

*Moving on to your live work, different comics work in different ways in terms of preparing for a show, but given that so much of what you do is in the moment, how do you prepare for it?*

Well, there was one show where there was no preparation at all. There was one show where literally the tour was booked, started on the first night and I had no jokes. [laughs] Just went, 'All right, here we go! Yeah! Um ...'

I used to just do it where I'd tour Australia, come back and start again, you know.<sup>13</sup> And then the past couple of years, I'd go up to Scotland, and I'd go up to the Highlands and Islands. It's less about sort of coming up with a show, and more about just getting up to match fitness, you know. Just mentally – well, physically as well as mentally – just being in that headspace. 'Cos even with, like, improv, it's not necessarily about the speed of the invention, it's about the application of it. And pace as well. When you get on tour, there's a thing of feeling the energy of an audience – not so much if it's going badly but if it's going well – there's a skill in it. If you haven't done a gig in a while, like at the start of a tour, there's a danger that you're just hammering through it, and you do a bit too long maybe in the first half, rather than realizing that you've got to pace yourself over the show. And it's about that, you know, you can sort of tire an audience out. The pace, if you like, that's just as important a skill – a muscle – to exercise as anything else.

And of late, what I've been doing is, I'll take time off over the sort of December, January time; but there's a little music venue that used to be an old abattoir. Fairly small room, there's like a bar out the front; then there's a room out the back. Because it was an abattoir it's got a sloping floor. It's got all tatty old sofas and dining chairs and stuff. You'll have probably about 100 people in and I'll do that every Sunday, while I'm off, even though I'm on holiday.

I host the show and just get a few comics in. It's just out of Melbourne, and it's the sort of thing where we don't advertise it. People who know where it is can come along, but you have to get there really early to get in. You know, it's one of those things where then I could start a tour and it's like the one tour's just continued.

*You mentioned getting into the headspace, and it seems to me that having watched you live and also on DVD, it's not just about invention, but it's also about being aware of which things to go for, if you know what I mean – which particular word, which combination of ideas to really develop and really exploit and run with and build. To me, that does seem to be an attitude of mind as much as anything else. It's almost as if you have the ability to have that frame of mind that everybody has every now and again, that one little golden moment, where you're suddenly being really funny and inventive, but it just lasts a second and then it's gone. But with you, it is two hours every night. So that must be an interesting thing to experience on a regular basis.*

You know, I'm not into drugs, but I can come offstage having had a great gig where everyone has thought it's great, and sort of go, 'Yeah. Not so much.' Like, an audience could be in hysterical laughter for the whole show and give me a standing ovation at the end, but that's only part of it. But yeah, even when it's only all right, you know, it's still as much fun probably if not more fun for me than it is for the audience, you know. And it's a weird one because it's not, say, like a drug where anyone can take it and feel that feeling, you know. It's really quite a sort of intoxicating thing, you know.

*I totally agree with you that the best comedy isn't just about making people laugh, it's about something else – but what is that for you?*

It's lots of different things, you know. It's about – if I was getting really sort of analytical about it – physical precision. From doing it onstage, I can fall over on a hard floor and not hurt myself. It happened while I was in Toronto, I fell, but it's one of those things where as I fell, you do the sort of parachute roll thing, you can land on your back, but as you go down you can land on those bits there [indicates back of upper arms] and you absorb it, but it looks like you've fallen flat. I fell on the floor but it was too realistic. There was a moment like where they all went, 'Fuck, he's genuinely fallen over.' I was waiting for the audience, as I was falling I went, 'As soon as my body hits the floor ...' It's like a bang is the cue for laughter. You know, there is, like, triggers for things. Right, bang. And as I hit the floor, I went bang, and it was like – beat – that's when it should have been. And the audience went, 'Huurr.' I realized – like they laughed – but there should have been a laugh and a round of applause. It was too realistic. So that takes the edge off it, you know, the show's now only a 99.

It's all those little elements as well of when you play around, when you say something sarcastic that people don't realize it's sarcasm, that can take the edge off it, you know. You know, when you do something like, when an audience doesn't realize you're joking about something. And even though the audience are applauding and standing and going, 'Hooray!' and in their heads they're going, 'Oh, it couldn't get better, that show,' in your head you're going, 'It's only 64, that,' you see what I mean? But that's good, because it means when you get one that's up there, you go, 'Fair enough,' you know.

### 3. CLOSING THOUGHTS

A number of interesting contradictions emerge during the course of the interview. Noble's early experiences in the Newcastle comedy scene of the early 1990s have led him to prefer the rough and authentic to the slick and packaged, yet he clearly puts great amount of thought and effort into his work. His DVDs are commercial products, but he has applied his intelligence and creativity to explore the potential of this comparatively new medium, and in doing so has found a way of documenting his work which is every bit as effective as the documentation produced by any avant-garde theatre company or live artist. He rightly shuns the idea of there being a definitive version of his shows, instead presenting the film of one main performance alongside footage from many other shows.

He understands that there is more to stand-up comedy than just getting laughs, and these extra elements are necessary for him to be fully satisfied by his performances. Working as a compère and a TV warm-up man has led him to understand the necessary contradiction in stand-up between following his own humour and artistic ambitions and pleasing the audience. Without the audience as a sounding board, his DVD commentaries have 'shitty bits' that are 'really, really boring' alongside the moments that are 'laugh-out-loud funny'. However, in his live work, by collaborating and interacting with the audience, he improvises surreal trains of thought, enacted with such physical precision that what he does is as much art as entertainment.

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Following a career as a comedian and comedy promoter in the 1980s and 1990s, Oliver Double now works as a Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Kent. He is the author of *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (Methuen, 1997) and

*Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (Methuen, 2005). He has also written chapters and articles on comedy, cabaret, Variety theatre and punk. His stand-up comedy DVD *Saint Pancreas*, produced as part of a practice-as-research project, is available from the University of Kent website.

Contact: Eliot College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NS.  
E-mail: o.j.double@kent.ac.uk

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## **Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance**

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Louise Peacock is Lecturer in Drama at the University of Hull.

