

# Polite conversation, according to **SIMON AMSTELL** should never be broadcast

WE'RE AT A FASHIONABLE venue in East London where Simon Amstell is presenting an advertising awards bash. It's hard to see how his no-bullshit style will wash with a bunch of people whose job it is to trick people into swallowing bullshit but, as he assures me, he's doing it purely for the money and I need not write about it. As he fiddles with a carefully laid spoon on the top table, I wonder to myself what he will wear for the 'do'. The thought of this dirty-sneakered indie-kid in a dickie-bow alarms me.

He's dressed as you'd expect, in low-slung jeans perched on barely-there hips, green T-shirt poking out from under navy sweater. There are turquoise laces in his pumps. The uniform of the boy who got too famous to become a student (he's still only 26). He speaks in a singsong voice, constantly bursting with giggles and has a tendency to repeat questions back like a camp Louis Theroux, asking, "What's the right answer?" and "Am I the worst interviewee you've ever had?"

Amstell landed his first presenting job at the age of 18 on Nickelodeon ("before they sacked me for being sarcastic") and is now best-known as one half of the indomitable Saturday morning *Popworld* duo. With co-conspirator Miquita Oliver, Amstell takes the world's finest pop stars and reduces them to mush – and, in the case of Britney Spears, to tears. Innovative features have included 'Lemar From Afar', with the hapless soul star being interviewed across a car park via a megaphone, and regular interviews by Richard The Popworld Horse and Timothy The Popworld Melon. Amstell's own finest moments include asking Blazing Squad if they were doing anything for The Jews at their Christmas festival, offering a very confused Gwen Stefani some cheese and asking notorious homophobic Beanie Man on a date.

The format has worked well for the last five years, attracting the respect of people such as John Peel and Neil Tennant. There are people who consider him the most exciting young talent on TV. The show's success is down to his no-nonsense approach to the pop world,

Interview by  
HAZEL DAVIS

which I discover is largely because he has virtually no interest in music. He's heard of neither Fairground Attraction nor Fall Out Boy and the last CD he bought was of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. Amstell's voice has translated well to radio and he filled in for Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant on XFM last year. Now, just as his star is in the ascendant, he's quitting *Popworld* to pursue his stand-up career.

**Are you worried people will suggest you're getting comedy gigs on the back of your TV success?**

Who said that? You're the first person who's ever said it! I haven't had that much TV success. Most of the gigs I do are just normal gigs and often ten out of 100 people will know who I am. I started when I was 14 anyway. I was at a Saturday morning drama school and at the annual show the tap-dancers had to change into their ballet shoes and they needed something to be going on in front of the curtain so I did it. I did some stuff about Cilla Black and *Surprise, Surprise* not being very surprising. It pains me to even think about what nonsense I must have trotted out. But I sort of did one gig a year until I was 18 then stopped 'cos I was at *Nickelodeon* and I thought I'd hit the big time.

**And now you have, you're giving it up.**

I'm giving up *Popworld* because we've done it for five years and there's no more jokes about Daniel Bedingfield. Once you've got to a point where there's a melon on screen talking to A Ha you have to jump ship. Our replacements have been announced though. Alex Zane is 'the male' and hopefully Kelly Osbourne is 'the female' if *Heat*'s rumours are to be believed.

**Interesting that you said 'the male' and 'the female'. Why is it so many shows use that format of Funny Man and Giggly Woman?**

In our case it's less to do with gender and more to do with the fact that Miquita drinks a lot. I come from a comedy background so I end up doing more writing, that's all. Miquita and I are contractually 'an equal duo', but she also does T4 and I do nothing else except for stand-up so I put all my energies into being funny. It's not only that there's a male/female dynamic, it's also that T4 clearly has a policy of having a skinny white male and a mixed race/black girl.

**But can women really be successful and funny?**

Yes! Some of my favourite stand-ups are women – Roseanne, Joan Rivers, Sandra Bernhard. Often they make more interesting comics. I asked Catherine Tate this when I did *Comic Relief* with her and she said she didn't think women were that funny. But then most male stand-ups aren't funny. Most comedy subjects have been done anyway. Male and female comedy isn't that different. Most of it's not that good.

**You've got your knockers though, haven't you. One of the nastiest reviews I've read called you "an irritating nob-head and one of the most unfunny aesthetically offensive people on TV".**

Oh, I find them deeply upsetting. There's one that says, "He's as funny as a baby with AIDS". I guess they meant it as an insult but, if you think about it, a baby with AIDS is funnier than a baby without because tragedy plus time equals comedy. If you've got a perfectly healthy baby, there's no humour there. A baby with AIDS, that's a funny thing.

**Is it difficult to enjoy life when you're as cynical as you are?**

If you're not cynical about things then you become part of the mainstream world and what's the point of that? But I'm not a nasty person. I really like the naive of youth and that's something I'm going to miss when I leave *Popworld*.

**But you're horrible to your guests!**

I'm not horrible to McFly! I love McFly! The horribleness is always quite targeted. There's a reason for hating Girls Aloud and Westlife, you know; Girls Aloud don't like us. Cheryl Tweedy beat up a woman in a toilet so to not mention that would be a disgrace. We never warmed to them because we felt that any success they had was nothing to do with them and it was just so transparent. They just got put in some nice clothes, given some personalities, some songs and the Sugababes' dance moves. What on earth were we supposed to talk about? They came in with an attitude right from the beginning. And Westlife are boring old men with no souls. They're really arrogant and they think they're really important. I can't believe we're retiring before Westlife. They just won't go away will they?

With his *Popworld* partner Miquita Oliver: "When I made Britney cry it was because I suggested she's been a bit mad recently."

