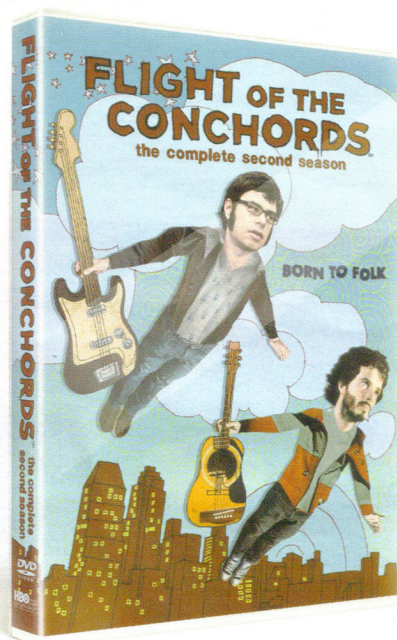


FF

DVD / MUSIC

Flying High

Inside E talks sheep with Flight of the Conchords, the most famous duo to come out of New Zealand since Frodo and Sam.



Accounting for the Conchords' meteoric success in North America are a hit TV series, sold-out live shows across the continent and a Grammy for Best Comedy Album.

Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie never set out to be comedians. After meeting at university in Wellington in 1998, they joined forces to brush up on their guitar and songwriting skills. "As soon as we started writing songs, they tended to be on the weirder side," admits McKenzie, whose endearingly bed-head hair adds several inches to his already tall frame. "We're not even really fans of comedy music."

After a few years playing festivals and pursuing movie roles (Clement in *Eagle vs Shark* and McKenzie in the first *Lord of the Rings* chapter), the boys landed their own series in 2004 on BBC Radio. The show was an underground hit. And word travelled fast to the US.

After taping a special for HBO's standup comedy series *One Night Stand* in 2005, Clement and McKenzie landed a deal with HBO to create a TV show that followed the fictionalized ups and downs of a naïve New Zealand comedy band trying to make it in New York City. The pilot was a smash success in 2007, and the first season aired to rave reviews. The second season aired in the spring on HBO Canada.

Clement and McKenzie are the stars, the executive producers and, along with James Bobin (director and cowriter of *Da Ali G Show*), the scriptwriters. So what are they? Singers? Comedians? Actors? "When I go through customs," says McKenzie, "I put down 'writer' because if you put down 'comedian' they'll ask you for a joke."

"Or they'll search you," quips Clement, in his unmistakable baritone. The boys finish each other's sentences like an old, happily married couple – making it easy to see why their professional partnership has lasted for over a decade.

"But we've all got differences in what we find funny," says Clement, who admits that the sheep jokes (like 'WOOLcome to New Zealand') are mostly Bobin's. "James finds New Zealand funny in a Kazakhstan sort of way," chuckles McKenzie. "He's trying to paint New Zealand as a vintage colony."

While the show is fiction, many of the plotlines are based on personal experiences, as are the New Zealand stereotypes that Clement and McKenzie have helped exaggerate with their deadpan, self-deprecating comedy. A wonderful example of this art-imitating-life inspiration can be found in the second-season episode entitled *New Zealand Town*. The Prime Minister of New Zealand invites a famous and extraordinarily woolly sheep named Gary to act as a national ambassador at a consulate event. Sounds ridiculous? The plot is loosely based on a real story that made headlines in New Zealand in 2004.

"There was once a very famous sheep in New Zealand whose name was Shrek," laughs Clement. "They found this sheep in a cave," adds McKenzie, "and it was a giant because the wool just kept on growing. It hadn't been shorn for years. It became a celebrity sheep and they flew it to Wellington to meet the prime minister."

While several episodes in season two are devoid of New Zealand-related gags and centre around more universal themes (McKenzie trying to sell his body to pay the bills and Clement's hopeless attempts to pick up girls), the biggest laughs usually come from the Kiwi humour, something the boys have grown to accept.

"We tried not to promote New Zealand sheep," says McKenzie. "We resisted in the first series," adds Clement, "but I guess we were out of ideas for the second."

A DVD of the Conchords' second season will hit August 4. – *Emily Saso*