

Chris wears: Diesel bomber jacket; G-Star T-shirt. (opposite) Armani Exchange hooded jacket; Helsinki Bear shirt; his own jeans; Stray trucker cap from Roger David.

CLASS CLOWN

SETTING HIS LATEST TV SERIES, *SUMMER HEIGHTS HIGH*, IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL, CHRIS LILLEY IS HOPING TO BUILD ON THE SUCCESS OF *WE CAN BE HEROES*. AND, YES, THE 'HIDEOUS' JAMIE IS BACK

STORY JOANNE HAWKINS
PHOTOGRAPHY CAMERON GRAYSON

Chris Lilley admits his new life as one of Australia's most promising television stars can sometimes be a little bizarre. While the actor/writer/comedian has been approached in the street ever since he started to appear on TV, these days his admirers include filmstars and Australian icons.

Take this incident from a couple of months back. There he was, putting in some laps at the St Kilda Sea Baths in Melbourne, when he was approached by a dark-haired woman who looked vaguely familiar. It was Rachel Griffiths, briefly visiting from her home in Los Angeles. "I've never met her before in my life," Lilley recalls, "but she just swam up to me and said, 'Chris, I love your show.' I was like, 'OK, thanks.' It was kind of weird to be shaking hands under the water and swimming with a moviestar. It was bizarre, but really cool."

Then there was Kylie Minogue. "She sent me a letter about a month ago saying she'd just seen my show and loved it. Not that I'm not a big fan of hers, but she's such an icon in this country, so that's cool."

The constant attention – from celebrities and ordinary punters alike – is something the softly spoken 32-year-old's had to get used to ever since his show, *We Can Be Heroes*, became a hit for ABC TV when it aired in 2005. The hilarious tale of five fictional nominees for the title of Australian of the Year – including spoilt schoolgirl Ja'mie King and aspiring actor Ricky Wong – led to a slew of awards for Lilley, including two Logies and a prestigious Rose D'Or (Golden Rose) in 2006, an international TV award that was won the previous year by *Little Britain's* Matt Lucas and David Walliams.

When we finally manage to find an hour in Lilley's busy schedule to have a chat, he doesn't look like a man enjoying his success, but rather one who's up against a tight deadline to complete the follow-up to *Heroes*, called *Summer Heights High*. He has a nasty cough and his skin has the grey pallor of a man who's spent far too many hours in an editing suite, lovingly fashioning "hours and hours and hours" of footage into eight half-hour episodes that will hopefully be as successful as his previous project.

As the name suggests, *Summer Heights High* is another mockumentary series, this time set in a suburban public high school (it was filmed at Melbourne's Brighton Secondary College). And Lilley, the show's creator/writer/main actor, admits to feeling excited about how it's turning out. "I love it," he enthuses. "When you're shooting, you don't know what you're going to get, and it's kind of weird and a bit stressful, but editing it has been so much fun. I'm really happy with it." *Summer Heights High* revolves around the self-obsessed drama teacher Mr G, who choreographed the entire *Xanadu* soundtrack for his ninth birthday party. Without giving too much away, the series follows the trials and tribulations that go into putting on the school's production of *Mr G: The Musical - An Arena Spectacular*.

(And fans of Ja'mie, the appalling schoolgirl who collected Sudanese sponsor children like shoes in *Heroes*, will be pleased to know that she's back for a second helping as an exchange student. "She's pretty hideous," laughs Lilley).

Mr G is one of Lilley's earliest characters, first seeing the light of day when his creator did stand-up

while studying music at Sydney's Macquarie University. He came to the attention of mainstream audiences when Lilley joined the ensemble cast of the Seven Network's *Big Bite* sketch show in 2003, his "big break" as he now describes it. "It was so huge. I wish I could go back to feeling that excited about something. They flew me down to Melbourne and set me up here. It was such an exciting thing because I was just this guy who'd been prancing around in a pub trying to entertain eight people."

But Mr G almost didn't make it onto TV. "I didn't think Seven would want him. A friend of mine was going to follow me around with a handycam at a school to make this fake documentary thing about Mr G. But I was really reluctant. The night before, I called him and said, 'I can't do it. I have nothing to say. I'm not funny.' But my friend talked me into it."

"I took it into Channel Seven and left a tape on this guy's desk with a note saying, 'This is really crap, it's a character idea but you probably won't want it.'"

Luckily, someone saw through Lilley's appalling sales job. And while *Big Bite* lasted only one series, the popularity of the deluded Mr G and Lilley's other character, Extreme Darren, led the ABC to pick up on him. A meeting followed, as did *We Can Be Heroes*.

"When I look back on it now, it's amazing the ABC had such faith in me. Some of the themes in the show were full-on, and I'd never played girls on television

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before, so I was very lucky," he says. "I'm not sure what made them take a chance on me. I've never asked them – I'm too scared to find out. Maybe it was just a fluke; maybe no one else had gone in to see them that day. It was certainly unusual. All they had to go on was a show-reel of about five sketches I'd done and they trusted me for some reason."

Their faith was rewarded – *We Can Be Heroes* went on to become the ABC's top-selling DVD in 2005 and has been sold internationally to countries including the UK and the US, where it's called *The Nominees*.

Lilley says there were a few "second-album nerves" when he began to think about a follow-up to *Heroes*. "At first, I did have a few worries," he admits, pulling his grey-peaked woollen hat even further down over his face. "I quickly realised the worst thing I could do was to think about what would make everyone else happy. I just blocked it all out and started again."

Lilley's research for *Summer Heights High* involved a year of visiting schools in Melbourne and Sydney. "I wanted to get the feel of what's happening in schools today to make sure the show was current and accurate, so I wasn't just doing something based on what I remembered from school," he explains.

Armed with a camera, Lilley sat in the back of classrooms and interviewed countless students and teachers. "People love talking about themselves," he grins. "A lot of people were willing to spill their guts about everything, all the staff scandals and stuff."

So have things changed that much since Lilley >





Chris wears: In Memory Of sweat top from General Pants; RDX shirt from Roger David; his own jeans and trainers. (below) Lilley as Ja'mie King and (bottom) Ricky Wong.

It's still going on in our minds, although we're both more busy now and I'm kind of doing it for real with *Summer Heights High*."

His family haven't always understood his passion for performing, but they didn't stop him following his dream. "I have to be careful when I talk about my family because it always gets reported as 'Chris' family weren't supportive' and that wasn't the case. They didn't really get it but they completely wanted me to do well and be happy with what I was doing."

Lilley's pharmacist dad never managed to see his son's success with *Heroes*, because he died while Lilley was at university. "I would have loved him to see it," he says. "But the rest of my family saw it and loved it. They all think it's based on them. My mum is convinced she really is Pat Mullins, and my sister thinks Ja'mie is her – which I wouldn't be claiming if I were her," he laughs.

"Actually, my sister is a high-school teacher and she's very concerned that she's told me a few stories that I've used in *Summer Heights High*."

Now firmly ensconced in Melbourne ("I like it and I have a girlfriend here, which is a pretty good reason to stay"), the Sydney-raised Lilley currently doesn't have much spare time to enjoy his success. And he says he hasn't earned pots of money from the success of *Heroes*. "Everyone thinks that. They're always saying, 'Why don't you buy a new car?' But just being able to survive and be paid to make this kind of stuff is cool to me."

Yet fortune as well as fame may not be too far away. Since *Heroes* (or rather *The Nominees*) aired in the US, Lilley has acquired an agent there and has been over to Los Angeles to "meet people".

"My agent said, 'We have to get you in a movie,' and there are all these crazy scripts that they send over. It's such a different world over there and they hype everything up, but I think it would be a really cool experience to see how it all works."

That said, Lilley isn't about to turn his back on Australia and the kind of work that has made him famous. Says Waters, "When you have a successful show, there are so many opportunities to become a celebrity, but that's not important to him. People have asked Chris to do various things, but he's clear

was a student? "It wasn't that different, to be honest. Teenagers still think they're better than anyone, and that everyone has it wrong apart from them, but I love that about them."

Producer Laura Waters, who's worked with Lilley on both *Heroes* and *Summer Heights High*, says his best ideas come from observing people. "He's an amazing sponge of everything around him, of people and popular culture. He notices tiny characteristics about people and retains them for later.

"He's an incredibly gifted person who just has the most original view of different worlds and characters. I think he feels incredibly lucky to be able to play with the gifts he has."

Lilley's own schooldays were a mixed bag. "I enjoyed school, but I wasn't very good at the academic side of things," he remembers. "I didn't like being told what to do, so I wouldn't have been the easiest student. I just didn't like doing the work.

"I was very interested in art, music and drama, though. If we ever had to do a talk at school, I'd get

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up and do a funny one. I did lots of impersonations of teachers, and often they'd give me good marks. I think they were so bored with the talks that they'd give me the marks for keeping them entertained."

As the youngest child of four – Lilley has two older brothers and a sister – he says he started performing from an early age to get noticed. "I was certainly a massive show-off within the family and I think they were quite entertained by me. I had a lot of positive feedback from them.

"I've always done my own thing," Lilley adds. "When I was at school, my friend [Andrew] and I used to make up characters for these little pretend soap operas that we'd do. It occupied a lot of time at primary school through to high school and beyond.

about what's right and what's wrong. The important thing is that he gets to make people laugh and play out these brilliant characters. The audience is always the most important thing for him."

Lilley agrees. "I know I'll always want to come back and do my own thing because you're never going to love something that someone else has written as much as something you write for yourself. That overrides money and fame and all of that stuff. It's kind of silly, but what drives me is that I can play a schoolgirl and have someone at home thinking it's cool. That's all that matters." **SM**

Summer Heights High screens on ABC TV from Wednesday, September 5, at 9.30pm.