

There's something about That Guy

Leigh Hart, aka 'That Guy' of *Sportscafe* fame, talks to BEN CHRISTIE about a container of snails, travelling the world — and ending up in a French jail.

Like many New Zealand television careers it all began with a coked up snail trainer.

Leigh Hart was working in television production at Greenstone Pictures when a frantic Marc Ellis turned up at his flat one evening with a Tupperware container full of snails.

He also had a vacant guest spot on his television show the then *TAB Sportscafe*.

Hart volunteered and borrowed a gripping tracksuit off a flatmate, slapped some flour up his nostrils and went to make his television debut.

It amounted to trying to keep a straight face as he regaled the show's panel with stories of the life of an international snail trainer and the temptations of drugs in South America.

"That Guy" was born and has been a regular feature on the show ever since.

"There was no studio audience then. It was just a couple of camera people, and I was pretending to be this coked up snail trainer from overseas and I had no real reaction except on the night, when Lana (Cocroft) didn't know if it was true or not, just totally going 'what the? Who is he?'"

"I got home and I didn't get any feedback and I'd rather have someone telling me it was total crap than just nothing. But a couple of weeks later they called me up and said it was really good and they'd like to do a follow-up."

Leigh Hart looks in a good place on this sunny Monday evening. Recently married, he's just returned from a whistle-stop tour of Europe for *Sportscafe*.

Hart has also just received the green light for funding for the second series of his skit show *Moon TV*.

The first series was made for almost nothing with his mates and left to languish in an 11.30pm timeslot on TV2.

Usually a graveyard timeslot for any aspiring show trying to attract an audience, *Moon TV* created quite a dedicated and fervent fan base.

"If nothing else the show definitely had a good following. The amount of emails we're still getting now, I mean the show hasn't been on for a year, (we get people) asking where the show is, and when's the new ones coming out. I mean that's the real reward for making a show like that."

He's also quite stunned at how well some people have come to know some of the material.

"People know a lot of the stuff and the jokes better than I do, coming out with lines and you're like 'what the hell is that... oh yeh right!'"

"It's kind of scary how people get involved in a thing, and know it and watch it."

Hart bristles with the energy

which makes him such a force on the small screen, one of the country's most original comedic voices. He's quick to laugh and enjoys spinning a good yarn.

He's finally been given the opportunity to create something from scratch with support from Creative New Zealand and TVNZ in a more viewer-friendly timeslot.

But Hart senses there will be more pressure with more money (though not a great deal of it, he adds) and more time on his hands. He is wary of losing some of the magic of the original series.

"You don't want to suddenly lose that spontaneity, the whole kind of cottage industry feel"

"With the first series we were covering it as efficiently as possible, and it will be great sometimes just to slow down and go 'wouldn't it be cool if the camera could just track a little bit more' and we could just take our time more with some of the shots and stuff. And you don't have that guilt thing going on because you're actually paying your actors."

He begins filming this month and hopes the show will be on screen early next year.

"It'll look a bit better but at the same time that whole energy of filming on the run with a whole lot of mates is really important too. You don't want to suddenly lose that spontaneity, the whole kind of cottage industry feel of it; you don't want it to look like all the other stuff on TV. You want it to have its own flavour but occasionally we'll get a chance to slow down and talk things through and give a bit more direction."

It's been an interesting journey for Hart to this point, rich in experience and a great source for the bizarre characters he creates on screen.

Hart was born in the small West Coast town of Greymouth. His family lived overseas until he was 11, when they returned to New Zealand.

He eventually ended up boarding at Christ's College in Christchurch, a high school based on the traditions of Mother England with pin striped blazers and a strict code of behaviour.

It was a place where his sense of humour really began to flourish, the strict confines of such an establishment providing a goldmine of material.

There was also an enthusiastic English teacher named Joe Bennet, of column-writing fame, who proved a worthy adversary and threw books at him in English class.

"I found school just generally quite funny, the whole thing. A

lot of people hated it and I actually really loved it, especially a school like that.

"It's quite strict, the sort of stricter it was in a way the funnier — the more potential for funny stuff there is — because it's so tense and you're not supposed to say anything."

"It's like a fart in church."

It's his love of making the most of tense and awkward situations that has become a trademark of his humour.

One of his characters in the first series of *Moon TV*, "Chico" the stand up comedian who isn't funny, is vintage Leigh Hart.

With Chico he recreates a horrible experience for both comedian and audience to great effect yet still manages to evoke sympathy for this dreadful comedian.

Chico is hilarious in his inability to be funny but it's his heartfelt belief in his talent that evokes the essential humanity that marks all great comedy.

After leaving school and heading to Canterbury University for a year "because that's what everyone was doing," Hart went overseas to work on the building of the Channel Tunnel. While working there he says he met a lot of "bloody funny people" amongst his Welsh, Irish and English co-workers.

After returning to New Zealand, Hart, his brother Greg and long-time collaborator Matt Johnson decided to give music a real crack. They formed a band and began gigging relentlessly. Comedy, even then, was becoming part of their act.

"We were playing music but we were always taking the piss. There were so many gigs where there would be no one at, like down in the back blocks of the South Island and you've just got to amuse yourself. Four people in the audience and nobody wants you there, and so you talk the whole gig up, kind of thing, and give prizes away to people who don't want them."

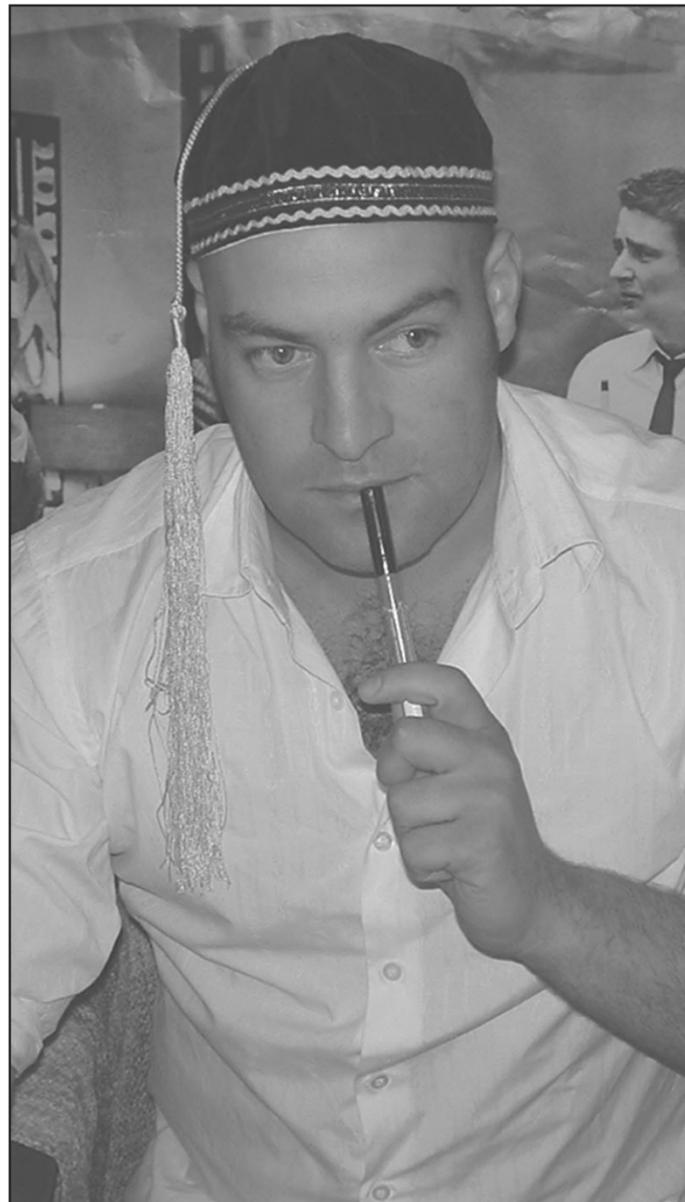
After saving enough money they headed for Europe and began gigging in Scotland and France, finally settling in a ski resort in the French Alps.

"So we based ourselves over there as a band for a few months, skiing during the day and playing nights four or five times a week, which wasn't good for our health but it was a good time. And we played with Jimmy Barnes one night which was a highlight. About a week after that we were arrested and went to jail for 12 days."

As a result of working visa irregularities they were thrown into a prison in Lyon awaiting deportation. After having all their gear and money confiscated they found themselves back in New Zealand, relieved but disappointed. They decided to give music a rest for a while.

Hart enrolled in film and TV school in Christchurch.

"It was of absolutely no use



FUNNY MAN: Leigh Hart got his break thanks to a bunch of snails.

whatsoever, an absolute con. I guess if anything came out of it I thought this was something I wanna do. They were of no help but I thought I could be alright at this and I'd quite like to do it, and learnt if you wanna get into TV you've got to go to Auckland or Wellington. If nothing else it pointed me in the right direction."

While he was studying in Christchurch, Hart was putting together a newspaper called *Moon* — a vehicle for his slightly askew sense of humour. Hart funded it himself as well as being writer and editor.

He shifted to Auckland and tried to get work in the televi-

"He's a genuinely funny person. It's not forced, it's not contrived — he's a born comedian"

sion industry.

He worked all sorts of jobs and spent one summer tarring the roof of the Auckland Museum.

He also almost accidentally landed himself a job in a very different industry.

"I was sending my CV out to every television production company in the phonebook and I ended up getting a job interview at a contact lens factory, thinking it was a TV production company. It was called 'Vision Express' so I thought wow, it must be TV."

He continued to produce *Moon* when he arrived in Auckland, but eventually had to end it as it continued to cost him money. He still has a pile of the newspapers and occasionally uses some of the material for his TV show.

Eventually he landed work for a few weeks at Greenstone Pictures which eventually led to four years of fulltime work.

Then one evening Marc Ellis turned up at his flat with a plastic container full of snails.

Ellis is glad he was able to give him that opportunity.

"His comedy is very unique; to be honest he's a bit bloody wasted in New Zealand."

"He is a genuinely funny person. It's not forced, it's not contrived — he's a born comedian. I mean even though it seems mad, there's a definite method to the madness. A lot of thought goes in to what looks like chaos."

Hart has a lot of ideas for the future.

He's got a couple of feature scripts lying around that need a bit of work. He had set himself the goal of doing one by the end of this year but, as things tend to happen in the industry, it's been pushed back.

"I'm gonna get this series of *Moon* done, and I don't know if I'll do another series to be honest."

"I suppose this is quite an important show I think, but you've got to eventually ask yourself when it's time to get out. Whatever you think you're gaining out of it, maybe your energy would be better spent at some point on a new project totally."

"Eventually you have to make that leap. Maybe it'd be fulltime moon-type projects or maybe it's a movie."

Wherever Hart decides to focus his creative energies, chances are it will be original and unconventional — and he'll be enjoying himself.

"It's all good fun, but that's the key. Keeping it fun and paying the bills."