

View

NOVEMBER 22-28, 2009
SPY
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RED DWARF

Cult comedy team reunited

Survivor: TV

20 turbulent years of TV3

Keeping it in the family with Sacha and Bob McNeil



Cover story

3's company

TV3 celebrates 20 years on air this Friday. Sarah Lang looks back over some turbulent times.

HAS IT really been 20 years? I remember it clearly: at nearly 10 my early-morning TV menu, if not my quota, was about to double. Since that first day of broadcast – punctured with nerves and the buzz of forging TV history – TV3 has grown from an insecure infant into an assured adult. Despite early stumbles, it has climbed out of the red while shucking off that image of a foreign-owned upstart getting up the nose of genteel, homegrown TVNZ. We Kiwis like the underdog, and battling the big boys is part of TV3's identity and appeal.

Today, TV3 is stronger than ever. While there's inevitably the odd programming hiccup, it's well-pitched to 18 to 49-year-olds, with a mix of news, comedy, drama, reality and factual series; imports and local programmes; new shows and old favourites. As it prepares to blow out its birthday candles, we revisit TV3's 20 years with Day-Oners, big names, and its new generation of talent.

Rangitoto Rain-out

"Some very important people got wet," says Mediaworks CEO Brent Impey (then TV3's lawyer) of the launch party, which ferried bad 80s fashion to Rangitoto Island the Saturday night before Monday broadcast. "It poured down on everyone who could make a difference: clients, agencies, suppliers. All the women were in high heels." Not the best omen.

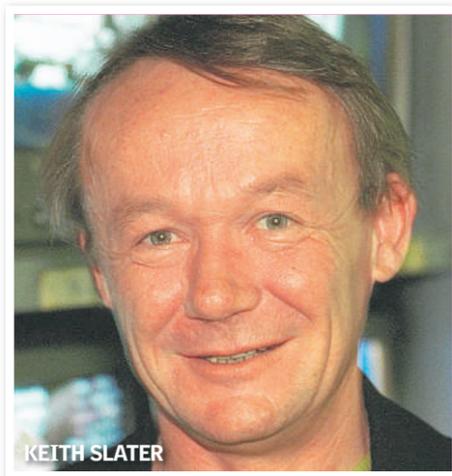
That first day

"The 14-year-old getting a fish out of a dishwasher in TV3's very-first opening credits was me," says actor/director/*Sunrise* host Oliver Driver. Cut to a breakfast-news bulletin fronted by Joanna Paul (now Paul-Robie). "The fact that TV3 was prepared for its first face to be a Maori face was an indescribable high for me as a broadcaster, a woman and a Maori," she says.

After kids' programmes, dating show *Perfect Match* led into the countdown to *3 National News*. Veteran newsreader Philip Sherry delivered a word-perfect bulletin in his



JOANNA PAUL



KEITH SLATER

"TVNZ's boss, Julian Mounter, said his goal was to kill TV3. He bloody near did."

KEITH SLATER

polished, plummy Pommy tones. The only glitch, as legend has it, was the transition to Genevieve Westcott-fronted *A Current Affair* at 6.30pm, when the entire screen was momentarily coloured green. It was a frenetic day for bureau chief Keith Slater. "It was difficult enough getting the first programme to air but then after a few drinks came the sobering realisation that we had to do it all again the next day, and the next."

Jumping ship

"We all felt like rebels," says veteran current-affairs reporter Amanda Millar. "Some of us had been physically frog-marched from TVNZ premises. [Moving to TV3] was seen as treason. "TVNZ rubbed it in at every opportunity, including when you met other reporters on the road," says bureau chief-turned-news-and-

current-affairs head Mark Jennings. He tells tales of TV3 journalists getting up at dawn to drive to remote spots like the West Coast while TVNZ sent a bar-equipped plane. "We'd often give tapes to Ansett flight crews to bring up."

Slater doesn't mince words. "There was never any thought of surrendering to TVNZ. Their boss, Julian Mounter, said his goal was to kill TV3. He bloody near did."

Financial fiascos

It's easy to forget how close TV3 came to vanishing. Between hard-to-come-by financial backing and a revitalised TVNZ's Commonwealth Games coverage, TV3 went into receivership in 1990 after six months on air with \$6.3 million in losses. It had tried to be everything to everyone rather than finding its niche. "After its fabulous glitz-and-glam beginnings, it was just too ambitious," says Millar. "That was the only time it looked like we were going off air" says Impey. But the bank hung in and the network came out of receivership when Government easing of foreign-ownership restrictions let Canadian company CanWest buy in.

Fast forward to 2000 and with a "lost" TV3 plus start-up TV4 bleeding money, Impey was called on as fix-it man in what was dubbed Mission Impossible. Turnaround tactics targeting the 18-49 demographic, included prioritising quality news, cutting \$10 million (without redundancies), killing the most-droptkick reality shows, securing international hits, making quality local shows and relaunching TV4 as music/youth channel C4. It worked, and he's still top dog.

Ratings rivalry

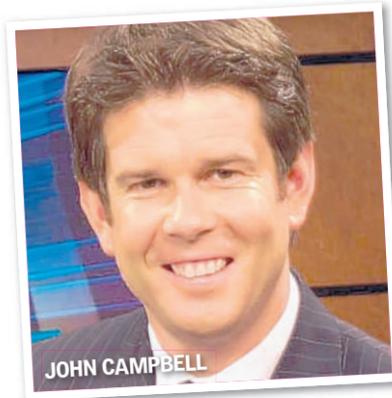
"We were delusional," says Jennings. "[Former news head] Rod Pedersen thought we'd be ahead in the ratings after three months. It took 10 years." Weaning the baby boomers off the news they'd grown up with over on One was a hard ask. So *3 News* unashamedly went after 18-49 year-olds. Investing in and going after stories, pioneering the move from a half-hour to an hour-long bulletin, and adding *Campbell Live* and *Sunrise* alongside stalwart *Nightline* has seen ratings rise and One work harder.

3 News is no longer the bulletin you switch to in the ad breaks.

Nightline newbies

"*Nightline* started in 1990 as a way of saving news jobs, but it was a masterstroke which helped forge TV3's identity," says Jennings. Indeed, late-night news was never the same after the mad-in-a-good-way pairing of Joanna Paul and reported heartbreaker Belinda Todd. Says Paul-Robie: "The beauty was it was two chicks, not the banal banter of a pseudo hubby-wife on-screen combo. Though I did honestly wonder who the hell was watching news that late!"

Plenty of people. Today a less-insane *Nightline*, but still with that offbeat edge, still dominates staid *Tonight* in the ratings.



JOHN CAMPBELL

Anchor me

Despite the long reigns of Carol Hirschfeld and John Campbell, Mike McRoberts and Hilary Barry, many a bottom has warmed the *3 News* swivelly chairs – though there was only one to start with. In the early days, fuddy-duddy-sounding

Philip Sherry was ejected and fresh-faced Paul promoted. There's still the odd bring-back-Sherry call, and yes he's still around, in Tauranga. "I'm only interested in saying very good things about organisations and people," he says, "and I really don't want to talk about TV3."

Next in line was handsomely-paid ex-gameshow host John Hawkesby, who soon jumped ship to TV One, jilting co-anchor-to-be Hirschfeld and dealing a crushing blow to *3 News*. Says Jennings: "That was the only night I've ever lost sleep in this job. I woke up staring at the ceiling." Odds are Hawkesby was soon doing the same. We didn't like nice Richard Long being dumped, TVNZ buckled, Long slipped quietly back and TVNZ eventually paid out more than \$5m compensation to Hawkesby. "Hawkesby's departure was actually a blessing in disguise," says Jennings. Enter the network's Next Big Thing.

The stand-in who stayed

It's hard to imagine TV3 or John Campbell without the other now, but he had to beg for a job there. "No disrespect to TVNZ, but it wasn't the place for a loud, purple, opinionated bugger

Timeline

1984: A group of broadcast bigwigs brainstorm the idea for a third television channel.

1986: TV3's then-lawyer Brent Impey dedicates three years to the legal battle to attain the first private-broadcasting licence.

July 1, 1989: Television is deregulated.

November 27, 1989: After numerous delays to the launch date,

TV3 has its first day on-air.

April 1990: *Nightline* begins.

May 1990: After six months, TV3 goes into receivership with losses of \$63 million but stays on air. Sky TV begins broadcasting in NZ.

August 1990: Iraq's invasion of Kuwait prompts *3 National News* to expand its half-hour bulletin to a full hour, causing *One News* to follow suit.

December 1991: The network comes out of receivership when Government easing of foreign-

ownership restrictions allows Canadian company CanWest to buy into TV3. It gained full ownership in 1997.

1995: Teen show *Ice TV* launches the careers of Jon Bridges, Nathan Rarere and Petra Bagust, while local comedy *Melody Rules* flops.

1996: TV3 turns a record profit of \$25 million.

June 1997: CanWest launches TV3's sister channel TV4.

1998: John Hawkesby jumps ship

to *One News*, where he's soon unceremoniously dumped for predecessor Richard Long. *3 News* pairs Carol Hirschfeld with John Campbell.

February 1999: Tradesmen-busting consumer-affairs show *Target* premieres.

2000: With TV3 and TV4 suffering losses, Canwest's RadioWorks CEO Brent Impey sidesteps to TVWorks and makes sweeping changes.

February 2001: Top-rating crime-show franchise *CSI* starts screening.

July 10 2002: John Campbell's interview with then-PM Helen Clark about the release of allegedly genetically-modified cornseed in New Zealand sees the debacle dubbed "Corngate".

October 2003: TV4 is relaunched as music/youth channel C4, immediately making a profit.

July 2004: Newly formed Canwest MediaWorks NZ lists on the New Zealand Stock Exchange, selling 30 per cent of shares to the public.

September 22 2004: Enter award-

like me.” He tells an amusing tale of TV3 refusing to hire him, capitulating only after he proved, by fax, he’d been offered a TVNZ job.

“I was the accidental newsreader. The stand-in who stayed.”

After Hawkesby’s demise, a surprised Campbell got a call one Saturday, asking him to rewatch the news with Hirschfeld until they found a replacement.

“I was pouring drinks as we went to air and my hand was shaking like a leaf,” says Jennings. “I thought ‘if this doesn’t work, I’m finished.’” But it did. “They made a virtue out of necessity with us,” says Campbell. The “dream team” fronted for seven years and a tradition of journalists as newsreaders began.

But after seven years, Campbell was “frustrated with the subjugation of my personality. I do carry my opinions strongly, I do wear my heart on my sleeve, and quite the reverse is required of a newsreader. I now research my own interviews, write my intros, do my own stories, and I just thought ‘come on, use me like this’.”

He got his chance in 2005 when *Holmes* closed up shop, handing TV3 an opportunity to launch *Campbell Live*. One soon countered with *Close Up* in an ongoing current affairs war. *Close Up*’s in the lead, but last month *Campbell Live* took the Auckland 18-49 yellow jersey. But is the show getting fluff? “Sometimes we’re not as high-minded as I’d like, but we don’t pander to lowest-common-denominator lynch-mob attitudes,” he says.

Corngate

“I’ve tried to always be two-eyed, generous and to leave people at least as well as I found them, except when they were shits,” says Campbell. Being such a nice guy doesn’t stop him asking the hard questions, including of then-Prime Minister Helen Clark in 2002 about the New Zealand release of alleged genetically modified cornseed. “I got arseholes over Corngate. There’s things I’ve buggered up for which I’ll cheerfully fall on my sword, but I totally stand by Corngate. However, good journalism is effective journalism and that all got lost in a whirling dervish of ‘little creep’ comments from her.”

Local lovin’

Importing the hugely-successful *CSI* franchise from 2001 was a turning point for the channel. Through supply agreements with the likes of Twentieth Century Fox, the channel bought a string of international hits *Downunder*, including cult shows *House*, *Bones* and *Underbelly*, as well as popular reality TV like *America’s Next Top Model*, *Survivor* and *Project Runway*. But no buy-ins could fill the role of getting New Zealanders on air.

TV3’s road is littered with local flops. “*Dreams Comes True*: pretty stink. *The World’s Greatest Commercials*: also stink. *Sing Like A*

Superstar: super stink,” remembers longtime 3 presenter Petra Bagust of her duds.

High hopes for comedies like *The Last Laugh*, *Issues* and *Letter to Blanche* were dashed. And remember the cringeworthy *Melody Rules*? Some say it’s why protagonist Belinda Todd left for America.

“Local programming is risky,” admits Impey. But the risks started paying off. Think six-year music show *Ice TV*, *Skitz*, *The Strip*, *The Deep End*, *Downsize Me*, *New Zealand’s Next Top Model*. Plus current-affairs shows *60 Minutes* (briefly replaced by *20/20*), *Inside NZ*, and “news you can use”: 11-season-and-counting *Target*, *Money Man*, *What’s Really In Our Food*.

But the jewel in TV3’s crown is undoubtedly *Outrageous Fortune*. With no inkling it was set to become NZ’s longest-running and most-awarded drama, TV3 introduced the criminal Wests to us in 2005. “So many times in New Zealand we’ve made the mistake of trying to rehash some formula on its

10th incarnation in America or Australia, because there’s always been that nervousness about creating our own stuff,” says Robyn Malcolm, who plays matriarch Cheryl West. Despite TV3’s patchy record with local drama, like much-hyped then scrapped *Cover Story*, it kept sticking its neck out. “TV3 were prepared to take a chance, really championed it, put it in a prime spot.”

Funnybones

TV3 finally “got” what makes New Zealanders funny with South Auckland-set animated series *bro’Town*. Watching the first episode in 2004, says star/co-creator Oscar Kightley, was “unexplainably awesome. It was like a dream.”

TV3 struck comic gold again with last year’s new comedy *The Jaquie Brown Diaries*, in which Brown portrayed a fictional version of her former self: an insecure, light-relief current affairs reporter. As a local show and news-and-comedy hybrid, the critical and commercial success represents what TV3 is best at and shows it’s not afraid to poke fun at itself (and at *Campbell Live*).

But does Campbell mind being satirised by a former reporter in a Friday time slot

after his show? “There’s no point minding about it. Jaquie’s a brilliant talent and having her on *Campbell Live* was like having an older child home from uni during the holidays. She was always going to go back and get drunk with her mates.”

Talent incubator

“We don’t straitjacket people,” says Jennings, “and we’re not afraid to move them around.” Bleeding new talent as well as holding on to old heads, TV3 lets people invent or reinvent themselves. “I’m grateful TV3 was brave enough to let me present,” says Samantha Hayes. “I sometimes pull out tapes from a couple of years

ago and cringe.” No middle management means space to make the job your own, says Campbell. “And they don’t micro-manage,” says *Sunrise*’s Driver. “When they give you that amount of trust you think ‘I better not screw it up’.”

While *Sunrise* ratings are yet to wipe the smirk off Paul Henry’s face, they’re looking up and Driver and Carly Flynn are looking very comfy on the couch. “Permanently jetlagged” Flynn switched from *Nightline* to start *Sunrise* in 2007.

“It was scary as hell, but I wanted to take a risk and be a pioneering TV3-er. Because that’s what TV3’s known for.”



In the news

Bob McNeil and daughter Sacha are making reporting the news a family affair at TV3.

FORGET JOHN and Kate Hawkesby: Sacha and Bob McNeil are New Zealand’s new media family dynasty. Father and daughter are colleagues at TV3, where reporter/presenter Sacha, 34, who’s currently on maternity leave with baby Isla before returning in January, reads the *Sunrise* news and covers some *3News* weekend shifts.

Meanwhile Bob, who’s been breaking stories since November 27, 1987, is one of 20 “Day-Oners” still with (or back with) TV3. He’s also one of few reporters whose name Kiwis know. “At 14, it was pretty exciting watching Dad on TV for the first time, but we had to watch TV3 all the time,” remembers Sacha. “The other kids all watched TVNZ.”

Did they ever switch channels on the sly? “Not when the news was on!” says Sacha. “Probably, when I wasn’t looking,” laughs Bob. Sacha soon became a familiar face at TV3. “I did work experience and followed people around.” Recalls Bob: “She was always asking questions.”

While drawn to TV journalism, Sacha wanted to make it on her own, and avoided any notions

of nepotism by cutting her teeth at TVNZ, but that didn’t stop her asking Bob for advice. What did he think when she got a job with the opposition? “I thought, ‘she’ll learn a lot and, hopefully, sometime she will come across’.”

And she did, in August 2007. Says news-and-current-affairs boss Jennings: “I think he felt it was good she was at TVNZ and not in his shadow, but one day when he’d heard I’d spoken to Sacha he said ‘I think the time’s right’.”

“By the time I got to TV3 I wasn’t just Bob’s daughter any more,” says Sacha. But they found they quite liked working across the newsroom. “We seem to get on pretty well. We always have,” says Bob.

So why stay 20 years? “In those early years there was so much camaraderie, being the underdog. Despite the best efforts of TVNZ, which threw everything at us, we stuck to it. We had a few rough times but the support we had for each other ... I’ve never struck anything like that.”

And if members of the third generation, maybe little Isla, want to don a *3News* vest, that’s just fine by Grandad.

winning animated comedy *bro’Town*.

July 2005: Hit local drama *Outrageous Fortune* premieres.

March 2005: With Carol and John stepping sideways to launch current affairs show *Campbell Live*, Hilary Barry and Mike McRoberts take over as *3News* anchors.

November 2005: TV3 announces record profits and ratings climb.

June 2007: Australasian private-equity group Ironbridge Capital buys CanWest’s controlling shares

in MediaWorks, forcing other shareholders to sell. Parent company MediaWorks NZ is de-listed from the stock exchange.

September 2007: TV3 scores a coup with exclusive coverage of the Rugby World Cup.

October 2007: Early-morning news show *Sunrise* launches.

July 2008: TV-satirising comedy *The Jaquie Brown Diaries* premieres.

October 2008: Outspoken actor-director Oliver Driver joins

Sunrise; the Broadcasting Standards Authority orders presenter John Campbell to announce his staged interview with the Waiouru medal thief was misleading.

March 2009: After much hype and speculation, *New Zealand’s Next Top Model* premieres and rates through the roof. TV3 Plus 1 launches on Freeview, showing TV3’s schedule on

a one-hour-delayed basis.

August 2009: TV3 revives the old *Telethon*, with *The Big Night In*, raising more than \$2 million for charity. *Campbell Live* executive producer Carol Hirschfeld leaves to join Maori Television.

September 2009: With TV3 on

board Telecom’s XT Mobile Network, customers can watch TV3 shows free on their mobiles (until November 30).

October 2009: TV3 reveals 2010 season highlights.

November 27 2009: TV3 turns 20.