

BROTHERS BEYOND

It's hard to believe that the Peter Pans of TV are almost 40. As they approach the milestone, **Ant and Dec** talk brave proposals, Botox and beef with Beyoncé

BY
GEMMA
CALVERT



Under an arched ceiling in London's exclusive Mr Chow restaurant, Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly learned the secret to eternal happiness.

The pair sat enthralled by a chef demonstrating the art of hand-pulled Beijing-style noodles, but fellow diner Simon Cowell, 55, who had seen the display umpteen times, was unimpressed. So unimpressed that he declared if his table featured a *Britain's Got Talent*-style buzzer, he would already have pressed it.

"Simon said that he'd decided not to do anything boring any more: 'If I find something boring, I'm just not doing it,'" explains Dec, putting on a posh accent to impersonate the *BGT* boss.

That announcement a few years ago amused the boys at the time, but as they creep towards their 40th



Photographed
exclusively
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John Wright

birthdays (Dec's is in September, Ant's two months later), the penny has finally dropped.

"Now I get it, and that's what we want to do, too - have enormous fun doing what we're doing, but say no to things that are boring," says Dec.

"Like when I was putting the Christmas decorations away," quips Ant. "I thought: 'This is boring. Simon Cowell wouldn't do this.' I'm. Not. Doing. It."

Dec, on cue, collapses into hysterics. Jokes buffer conversation like insulation, keeping everything warm and cosy inside the house of Ant and Dec. But there's gravitas to the point. Because now more than ever, Britain's best-loved entertaining duo are crystal clear about who they are, what they don't want and, more importantly, what they do.

So it's perhaps no coincidence that last November, ahead of their annual pilgrimage to the *I'm A Celebrity!* set in Australia, Dec proposed to his girlfriend, their manager of over 10 years, Ali Astall, 36.

"We went to Hayman Island near the Great Barrier Reef the week before we went down to work. It was our last night there and we went to watch the sunset with a bottle of champagne," says Dec, sharing the details for the first time. "I was fine, up until the moment when my internal voice went: 'Right, this is it, you're going to do it.' Then I felt my heart going and I started shaking."

Did he blub? "Erm, a little. Yeah. It was an emotional moment."

Ali - and the ring, worth a reported £70,000 - arrive an hour into our shoot, and we don't have to look closely to assess Dec's taste in bling. It's gorgeous. And huge. Ali admits she's accidentally bashed it a few times. "I took the ring in my hand luggage and hid it," says Dec. "I kept checking it was still there. But I was that anxious about it, I nearly did it in Heathrow airport. I was like: 'As soon as I get through security, I'm going to do this!'"

Reports that Ant was in the dark about the proposal are codswallop. They know each other's deepest secrets, including things their other halves don't ("just boys' stuff," clarifies Dec), and have been inseparable since auditioning for teen drama *Byker Grove* aged 12.

"I didn't know a lot [about the proposal], but I knew enough," says Ant, confirming he has indeed been recruited as Dec's best man. "I can't bloody wait, me," he says, rubbing his hands together with glee. "I was jumping up and down [when he asked me]. The speech has been written for 10 years..."

While Ant's been with *This Morning* and *Strictly* make-up artist Lisa Armstrong, 38, since 1994 - they married 12 years later - Dec's taken his time to settle. Past girlfriends include actress Clare Buckfield and Sky Sports presenter Georgie Thompson. Dec, who says romance with Ali "just sort of happened", has given Ant carte blanche with the best man's speech.

Ant's eyes glisten mischievously. "There's loads of stuff. We used to share a flat together," he says, referring to their early noughties cohabiting days - the one and only time they didn't always get on. "Give me a subject and I can give you five stories on it."

On first impressions, Ant is the more reserved of the two. The pair arrive promptly at our studio at 9am and Dec launches into chatter about the unsettling effect of last night's full moon on Rocky, his dachshund.

Only after a breakfast of scrambled egg whites and spinach does Ant emerge from his shell, singing along to Alanis Morissette when she comes on the iPod dock and raving about his new Heston Blumenthal potato slicer ("it makes the silkiest potatoes").

By the time we're discussing stag dos, he's on fire. "I've got a carte blanche to do what I want with that, too!"

"Oh god, no!" Dec groans.

"I was dressed as a French maid in McDonald's on my stag do," continues Ant, referring to one of the two bachelor parties Dec arranged. "One was in Latvia - for the culture, of course. Then we did a massive pub crawl when England played Jamaica in their last friendly match before the [2006] World Cup. I was dressed as a Jamaican, and every time England →

COVER STARS



The duo show off their 2015 NTA



Ant with wife Lisa Armstrong



Dec with fiancée Ali Astall

scored, I had to have a massive shot. They won 6-0. It got pretty messy." Close pals Robbie Williams and Jonny Wilkinson turned up at the end. Ant shakes his head regretfully. "I've got no recollection of that." "We also lost the father of the bride," announces Dec. "Yeah, I lost me father-in-law," continues Ant. "And we still haven't found him!" Dec confirms his wedding will happen this year if they can "sort it out, diary-wise... There's no point in hanging around."

We question whether this "seize the day" attitude is in some way born out of losing his 78-year-old father Alphonsus to cancer in August 2011. "First of all, I thought: 'What's the point in all of this when we're all going to end up in a hole in the ground?' But eventually, after you've done that grieving, you come through it and think: 'I'm not messing about, I'm going to grab life by the horns and give it a good go.' We're here for a good time, not a long time," Dec says.

They're certainly having a good time. Elbowed out of *Byker Grove* at 18 (what 18 year olds go to youth clubs?), Ant and Dec became pop stars PJ and Duncan (their character names) before television beckoned again. Their first show on BBC1, *The Ant & Dec Show*, won them a BAFTA for Best Children's Entertainment Show, then a stint on Channel 4 presenting *Ant And Dec Unzipped* followed.

Their 17-year love affair with ITV kicked off in 1998 with a deal hosting Saturday-morning music show *SM:TV Live* alongside Cat Deeley, and today, any show they front for the channel turns to gold. The fact that they've won Entertainment Presenter at the National Television Awards a record 14 years on the bounce says it all.

Later this month, they replace James Corden as hosts of the Brit Awards - a notoriously tough gig they first attempted back in 2001.

"When we first did it, that's what we were really uptight about: 'Could we handle it? What if it went wrong?'" says Dec. "This time, we're like: 'What's the worst that can happen?'"

What indeed? They've already bounced back from the biggest test of their careers in 2007 when *Saturday Night Takeaway*, which they executive-produce, was the centre of a phone-in competition scandal. ITV was fined £3million by UK media regulator Ofcom and the boys described the time as "the worst in our lives".

Today, they're worth a reported £60million each, earning £6million each year. Most recently, they're said to have pocketed £1million a pop after selling the rights to *Saturday Night Takeaway* to American channel NBC for 10 shows. Oscars host and former *Doogie Howser, M.D.* star Neil Patrick Harris, 41, will present it, and Ant and Dec will travel to New York to executive-produce.

It's fairy-tale stuff compared to the boys' modest beginnings in Newcastle. Dec, the youngest of seven children, grew up on a council estate a mile away from where Ant was raised by his single mum Christine.

These days, home for both of them is Chiswick, west London, where

Co

1975 Anthony David McPartlin and Declan Joseph Oliver Donnelly are born in Newcastle upon Tyne.
1989 Aged 13 join BBC children's drama *Byker Grove*
1993 Sign a record contract. Over four years, they notch up 14 Top 20 hits.
1998 Set up Ant & Dec Productions. Present *SM:TV Live* and *CD:UK*
2007 Present *Britain's Got Talent*
2015 Win the Entertainment Presenter NTA for the 14th year.

BEHIND THE SHOOT



"Who's taller?" Still Ant. Sorry, Dec



Yes, Ant, you look very suave



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they live in near-identical properties on the same street. Apart from flash holidays - Ant spent six days in South Africa with Lisa over New Year and says he pays "a lot of money" for escapes - their lives aren't flamboyant.

"We know the value of things, especially money, family, trust and honesty. We're from a very working-class area of Newcastle and that stays with you," Ant says.

We point out that they both have flash cars, but Dec interjects: "I had a Ferrari California for a year. It was black with yellow centre caps, black windows... My dream car. But I sold it. Parking and driving in London was ridiculous. I've got a Fiat 500 now. I love it."

Ant, however, hasn't followed suit. "I've still got my Aston Martin. I curbed the wheels in McDonald's drive-through the other day. I was absolutely gutted. Serves me right for being flash in McDonald's."

If fortune favoured the kind, then Ant and Dec would have been millionaires without a single mega-bucks television contract. They're easily the sweetest, most friendly and down-to-earth members of the celebrity world. Manners are their forte, and rudeness doesn't wash - even if you're an A-lister.

"You get that when Beyoncé comes to do a show and you've got to get out of the corridor because 'Miss Knowles is coming,'" recalls Dec.

Ant is faux-incandescent. "Yeah, we got forced out of our own corridor when she was on *Saturday Night Takeaway*. 'Clear the corridor, sir!'

"Er, it's my show!" He pauses. "I still cleared the corridor. He was massive."

Talk of the latest series of *Britain's Got Talent* and the nationwide auditions tour leads to chat about judges Simon, Amanda Holden, 43, David Walliams, 43, and Alesha Dixon, 36.

"They're always on a health kick, those judges," reports Ant. The lads, for the record, are not. They love a pint down their local and Minstrels are their sugar kick of choice on the *BGT* set. As for Botox - which Simon Cowell bought Dermot O'Leary, 41, vouchers for recently - neither have succumbed.

"I have facials every now and again, but I don't think I could have needles," says Dec, before being interrupted by Ant: "Hey, let's not rule it out. We're only 40."

What about Dec's "has he/hasn't he?" hair transplant? His thatch is looking distinctly thicker than a few years ago. "I took some advice about it and I took steps - different shampoos, treatments and ways of treating my hair - but I didn't have a hair transplant," he clarifies.

"Louis Walsh accused me of having one [Dec puts on a strong Irish accent]: 'You did, I know the surgeon!'"

Ant adds with a laugh: "Louis doesn't know where he is half the time though, does he? Bless him."

According to Ant, the only topics that divide the boys' opinions are "football and who Newcastle United should play or buy." Dec is also passionate about politics, not least when watching his favourite show, BBC1's *Question Time*, which prompts the boys to consider the laws they would pass if they were in power.

"I would make shower curtains illegal," says Ant. "They're horrible aren't they? They stick to you and when you go into hotels they've always got that little bit of mildew around the edge. I'm not a fan. Ban them!"

Dec's idea is more pragmatic. "I would definitely let everybody have half a day off work on a Friday, that nice two-and-a-half-day weekend."

Which begs the question - how on earth will they celebrate their 40th birthdays? "When we were 30, we had a big joint birthday party in October, right in the middle of our birthdays, so we'll do that again," says Ant.

"We thought it might be fun to host a p**s-up in a brewery," adds Dec. "Just to see if we can actually do it."

Even Simon Cowell would be impressed by that. Because one thing's for sure - with Ant and Dec, nothing is ever boring. **F**

● *Saturday Night Takeaway* is back on Saturday February 21, ITV. Watch *The Brit Awards 2015* live on Wednesday February 25, 8pm, ITV.