

Words PETER BARRETT • Photo RICH HARDCastle

Like everyone, we had no idea what was coming. Last time I spoke to comedian and presenter Adam Hills, in February 2020, he was stepping out of a London cab, excited about returning home to Yarraville to see his wife and two young daughters, while putting the finishing touches on his new stand-up show about to hit the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

Hills joked about living in Crouch End, a north-London suburb best known for 1990s Bob Dylan sightings and providing the setting for a Stephen King horror story. He talked about his showbiz neighbours, including three Doctors Who: David Tennant, Peter Capaldi and the latest regeneration, Jodie Whittaker, whom he got to know at their daughters' dance class.

He talked about Brexit, the UK's protracted, hand-wringing departure from the European Union, and how politically polarised people had

beloved ABC music quiz show *Spicks and Specks*, which returns to screens on April 18.

Recorded in September, in the darkest days of the Melbourne lockdown, the episodes reflect a time in our city's life that many of us are still processing.

There was no live audience and, due to travel restrictions, regular team captains Myf Warhurst and Alan Brough were joined by Melbourne-based musicians and comedians only. The first time a band (The Teskey Brothers, Hills thinks it was) played live in the studio for a rehearsal was emotional for everybody, he says.

"Everyone had tears in their eyes. I'm choking up talking about it now. Because we realised that none of us had seen live music for six, eight months. And, these [musicians] hadn't been out of the house in that long. And, I mean, I don't know how they rehearsed because they weren't able to get into a room together."

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Later this year, Hills is heading back to London where he will likely cover the Tokyo Paralympics. He'll also be busy as an official ambassador for the Rugby League World Cup, which kicks off in October (Hills, who was born without a right foot and wears a prosthesis, has been a long-time, passionate player with the Warrington Wolves in the English Physical Disability Rugby League).

He is labouring on the third draft of his first children's book, a story about a couple of teenage rock-star detectives, inspired by the career dreams of one of his daughters. "I'm so clueless about writing a book that I think that's why I've got so much work to do on draft three. I think I sent in draft one and they went, 'Oh, my God, this guy doesn't know what he's doing!' Basically, there's a nice story there that needs some serious polishing."

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become. He talked about the ill-timed television commercial he did with Kylie Minogue spruiking Australia to the Brits that was pulled on Boxing Day as 19 million hectares of the country burned in unprecedented wildfire.

But then the pandemic hit. The comedy festival was cancelled, and the world turned upside down. "I was incredibly lucky," says Hills, now. Speaking to me by phone just a few days away from completing two weeks in Melbourne hotel quarantine, he explains how he was able to record the season finale of his long-running, late-night comedy television show *The Last Leg* before things took a turn for the worse. "I flew out on March 21 and London went into lockdown on March 23. I got out just in time."

Hills spent seven months at home, enduring most of the Melbourne lockdown and recording five episodes of *The Last Leg* live from his garage.

"I ended up having to stay up all night on a Friday and rehearse at three in the morning until 5am, and then do the show from seven. It kind of killed me."

Before returning to London in October, though, Hills was able to record 10 episodes as host of the

In fact, each time the show had live music on set was special, says Hills. "You could feel the hair stand up, or the goosebumps. Live music is such an emotional and visceral and physical thing that you kind of forget about it. You battle on without it. I hope that comes across on screen, because people will watch it in April and the world's kind of gone back to some semi-normal. But if you are watching, just imagine that every musician was in the middle of a really strict Melbourne lockdown, and was just so happy to be out of the house and performing."

To make up for a lack of interstate and international guests the producers looked locally for talent, which Hills says turned out to be a boon for the show.

"We kind of were going through a period in Melbourne and in Australia, and we still are, of really strong Indigenous talent. So, we ended up with people like Mitch Tambo, Isaiah Firebrace, Alice Skye and Scott Darlow all making appearances and it felt like a real moment. And that's what's so great about *Spicks and Specks*: just showing off new music to Australia. And, to be able

Back in Melbourne, comedy's "Mr Nice Guy" is relishing returning to the comedy festival stage with his stand-up show *Shoes Half Full*. He's also mindful that the pandemic has affected comedians disproportionately, noting that those who were established like himself almost welcomed a year off from touring and the opportunity to spend more time with family.

"But for the-up-and-comers, the people who are just finding their feet, they're the ones that have really struggled over the last year," he says. "So, I would say, more than ever, if [you're] going to the comedy festival, take a chance on an up-and-comer. Because you're not just giving them 20 bucks in the hope that they're going to be funny. It's almost like a back payment for what they've just gone through for the past 12 months." ●

SHOES HALF FULL Adam Hills' stand-up show is on at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival until April 18. *Spicks and Specks* returns to ABC Television on the same day.

● comedyfestival.com.au