

# THE TOPP TWINS: UNTOUCHABLE GIRLS

## Quote Bank

**Audience Award Winner -2009 Melbourne International Film Festival**

**Best Feature Film (Under \$1 million) -2009 Qantas Film & Television Awards**

**Best Original Music In A Feature Film - 2009 Qantas Film & Television Awards**

**Cadillac Peoples Choice Award- Documentary – 2009 Toronto International Film Festival**

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**"A docu that has you falling in love with two of the crazier people you've never met "**  
John Anderson-VARIETY

**"If you only see one movie this year about a pair of ebullient yodeling lesbian twin sister farmer songbirds from rural New Zealand, make it The Topp Twins."** Linda Barnard- TORONTO STAR

**" A very special documentary".** Allan Hunter- SCREENDAILY.COM

**"The Topp Twins film is pure fun, with as much poignancy and courage as the films two subjects".** Paul Fischer-MOVIE HOLE

**"...Part documentary, part comedy and all heart, the Topp Twins film is pure fun."**  
Melissa Algaze- DARKHORIZONS.COM

**"...A lovely, joyous celebration of the power of good people and having fun"** Hilary Harper- ABC MELBOURNE.COM

**\*\*\*\* "You'll laugh, you'll cry, you might just yodel...A Topp Effort" NZ HERALD, AUCKLAND**

**\*\*\*\*\* "Funny, poignant, courageous...See it." THE DOMINION POST, WELLINGTON**

**\*\*\*\*1/2 "very funny, very moving... guaranteed to leave the theatre with a spring in your step and a song in your heart" THE PRESS, CHRISTCHURCH**

**\*\*\*\*1/2 "As good as homemade marmalade, this is preservative free cinema...it's all here in a delightful fishbowl " THE STAR CHRISTCHURCH**

**\*\*\*\*\* "See it with: The entire family" OTAGO DAILY TIMES, DUNEDIN**

**\*\*\*\*\* "How often is a film punctuated by laughs and clapping and ends with an ovation? ...it has a deserved 5 star rating. This film is not to be missed" THE WAIKATO TIMES, HAMILTON**

**\*\*\*\*\* "Heart-warming... It's a hilarious musical romp... this film will leave you feeling proud to be a New Zealander" THE NZ WOMEN'S WEEKLY**

**10 out of 10 "Brilliant entertainment, everyone will love it, the best Kiwi film in years" Steve Gray TVNZ Good Morning**

**"remarkable.... funny, moving... this is a lovely film" THE LISTENER**

**\*\*\*\* "A great mix of laughter and heart-felt emotion" FLICKS.CO.NZ**

**"A warm- hearted celebration of...New Zealand national treasures" Andrew Fenton- THE ADVERTISER**

**"Their multi layered story gives the film a power often lacking in showbiz bios" Micheal Bodey-THE AUSTRALIAN**

**\*\*\*\*"An Infectious and affectionate account of two utterly remarkable women" Colin Fraser-MOVIEREVIEW.COM.AU**

**"A remarkably entertaining experience" Andrew L Urban- URBAN CINEFILE**

**"A very enjoyable documentary" Leigh Paatsch-HERALD SUN**

**"An uplifting documentary with a great message, music and laughs" Annette Basile-FILM INK**

**"A well-directed doco enhanced by excellent archival material" Jon Bale-THE BLURB.COM.AU**

**"It's fun to meet new people and The Topp Twins are fantastic company for the 84 mins they are on screen" Beth Wilson- TRESSPASSMAG.COM.AU**

**\*\*\*\*"It's really a very, very enjoyable film. I think people are going to love meeting these two" ABC AT THE MOVIES**

**"The strength of the bond between them enlivens every scene" Sandra Hall-SYDNEY MORNING HERALD**

VARIETY.COM: John Anderson's positive review is posted to this site:  
<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117941053.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>

## The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls (Documentary -- New Zealand)

By JOHN ANDERSON

Read other reviews about this film

A Diva Films production in association with the New Zealand Film Commission, NZ on Air and Sweeney Vestry. (International sales, NZ Film, Wellington, New Zealand.) Produced by Arani Cuthbert. Directed by Leanne Pooley.

**With:** Lynda Topp, Jools Topp, Billy Bragg, Paul Horan, John Clarke.

**A docu that has you falling in love with two of the crazier people you've never met, "The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls" could well add Jools and Lynda Topp to a list that includes spring lamb and "Lord of the Rings" -- that is, gifts from New Zealand to a world that usually doesn't pay it any attention. Specialty distribution, with an emphasis on the gay and expat Kiwi markets, seems a no-brainer for a film that's pure fun, very musical and a can of mixed nuts.**

The Topps defy logic. "On paper," says their comedy-writer friend, Paul Horan, "yodeling lesbian twins don't really work." But for the better part of three decades, the Topp sisters have been gleefully defying accepted wisdom about mainstream entertainment and homophobia, and have become crew-cut demi-goddesses in a country where the national character includes a warped sense of humor.

"We're not comedians," Lynda Topp says. "We're singers who are funny." But their cast of characters -- beery farmers Ken Smythe and Ken Moller in their bad polyester, or the Posh Socialites Prue and Dilly Ramsbottom -- are so fully realized and such a part of New Zealand pop culture that Lynda Topp's disclaimer has to be chalked up to modesty. Someone dubs them "an anarchist variety act," and that's a good description.

Musically, the pair resemble those American pop icons Phil and Don Everly, inasmuch as they sound like one voice harmonizing with itself. During an '80s period in which they wore slicked hair and suits, they actually *looked* like the Everlys. They attain a similar vocal purity only siblings seem able to achieve, which gives their Country-flavored music a keening, aching quality. It makes the Topps a real double threat: Their audience can choke up, or choke with laughter.

Helmer Leanne Pooley tells the sisters' life story -- from their farm-girl days to their work on behalf of Kiwi gay rights; from their '80s appearances at anti-Springbok rallies (protesting the tour of the rugby team from what was then apartheid South Africa) to their relationship with their parents, who dealt with their two daughters' homosexuality (a son is gay, too) with total support. Without belaboring it, Pooley lays the evidence before us and lets us draw our own conclusion: that the indefatigably cheery and witty Topp Twins got that way through love.

Which they spread around, most generously through those comedic characterizations, which both puncture and massage various elements of New Zealand identity, but never without affection. The Topps are shown onstage in various incarnations, but they also re-create their various personae directly for Pooley's camera, which then morphs them back into themselves. What we see are transformations worthy of world-class actresses, which the Topps certainly are, regardless of any denials they might issue -- either as themselves, or as Belle and Bell Gingham, the hilarious Camp Mother and Camp Leader, or the Bowling Ladies.

Production values are top-shelf, notably the sound mix by Terry King, Chris Burt and Stefan Brough, and the lensing by Leon Narbey and Wayne Vinten.

**SCREENDAILY.COM:** Allan Hunter's positive review is posted to this site:  
<http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-topp-twins-untouchable-girls/5006277.article>

**It takes a very special documentary to deny Michael Moore a top festival prize but to see *The Topp Twins* is to fall in love with it.**

Leanne Polley's celebration of the life and times of Kiwi icons Lynda and Jools Topp is such a joyous crowd pleaser that you can easily understand why it won the first People's Choice documentary award at the Toronto Film Festival, ahead of Moore's much admired *Capitalism: A Love Story*. It is a film which leaves the wider audience brimming with admiration for the twins and baffled as to why they have not been on the radar before, despite some amazing achievements. The Toronto prize, excellent word of mouth and critical support should be enough to attract international theatrical distribution for what has already become New Zealand's highest grossing documentary. Returns could be on a par with *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up And Sing*.

Lynda and Jool Topp almost sound too bizarre to be anything other than fictional characters, but they are very real and very human. Born in rural New Zealand, the twin sisters began their professional career busking, attracting crowds with an infectious mixture of yodelling, country and western music and boisterous comic asides.

The documentary is structured around a contemporary concert which recalls highlights from a lengthy career, including their international tours and a popular television series featuring their comic creations like Ken and Ken and Camp Mother and Camp Leader. British viewers are bound to see an affinity with comedy duo French and Saunders, although the twins suggest: " " We're not comedians. We're just singers who are funny."

Pooley has a great natural subject in the twins but also a fascinating array of archive material from newsreels, early concerts and television appearances. She has also assembled a wide range of expert testimony from the girls' parents to Billy Bragg, Maori activist Mereana Pitman and former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark.

The more Pooley reveals, the more astonishing the girls' lives appear, as we learn of their wholehearted commitment to campaigning against apartheid and for nuclear disarmament, Maori rights and gay rights. Both of the twins are lesbian and Clark asserts that their popularity was a strong factor in steering a successful homosexual reform bill through the New Zealand Parliament.

In many ways *The Topp Twins* is an exemplary assemblage of archive footage, interviews and talking heads which constantly deepens and enriches our understanding of the sisters and what they have achieved. Pooley gradually allows us to know them a little better, and when we later follow Jool's fight with breast cancer it has a considerable emotional impact.

A compact running time works in the film's favour but Pooley's strongest asset is the twins. They are naturally funny and entertaining people with an appetite for life that is irresistible. They have succeeded by being honest about who they are and refusing to change or compromise to conform to other people's expectations or prejudices. As one promoter notes: "On paper they should be commercial death, but they always deliver." *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* should ensure a vast increase in their devoted followers.



Reviewer:

Hilary Harper

Director/Producer/Editor:

Director - Leanne Pooley

Country of origin:

New Zealand



Posted 5 August, 2009 16:22:00

The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls

ABC Melbourne.com

The word 'irrepressible' was probably invented for the Topp Twins, this wonderful singing, laughing, entertaining duo from New Zealand.

Born on a farm, the girls grew up very grounded, and very close to each other, and discovered they were lesbians when they realised they were a lot like other lesbians they knew - 'well, I guess we must be lesbians too!'

There's a refreshing openness about Linda and Jools, and this documentary is like that too - it seeks to show how their relaxed attitude to life is the key to their ongoing success.

Starting out busking in their home town of Huntly in the 80s (complete with mullets and flannelette shirts), the twins have ended up touring the world with their shows.

Combining great harmonies with songs that are funny, catchy and political, they manage to engage people from all backgrounds in the same audience.

It's very inclusive comedy (though, as Jools points out, 'we're not comedians, we're just singers who are funny').

They also helped play a part in the social justice struggles of the 80s, 90s and 2000s in New Zealand and internationally, including the apartheid struggle.

Interviews from luminaries such as Mark Trevorrow, Billy Bragg and John Clarke help flesh out this wonderful portrait.

It's not all been sunshine and roses, and the documentary slowly widens to include their family (who are a hoot) and their partners, and the difficult times they've had.

But for the main this is a lovely, joyous celebration of the power of good people having fun and helping others laugh in a complex world.

## Toronto Review: "Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls"

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- [email to a friend](#)
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By Melissa Algaze Sunday September 13th 2009 05:50AM



"The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls" is having its North American Premiere at this year's festival. This wildly entertaining documentary recently won the Audience Award at the Melbourne International Film Festival and won Best Feature Film (under 1 million dollar budget) at the Qantas New Zealand Film and TV Awards 2009.

"The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls" is the first time that the irrepressible Kiwi entertainment double act, Jools and Lynda Topp's extraordinary personal story has been told. The film offers a revealing look into the lives of the World's only comedic, country singing, dancing, and yodelling lesbian twin sisters.

Described by musician Billy Bragg as an "anarchist variety act," Jools and Lynda came of age performing on the streets of Auckland during the heady days of the political protest marches in the early 80s, and quickly joined the forefront of progressive social change campaigning for a Nuclear-Free New Zealand, Maori Land Rights, a halt to the 1981 Springbok Tour, and Homosexual Law.

Their amazing story is hilariously and tenderly revealed through requisite interviews with the twins themselves, performance, and personal archival footage, home movies, in addition to interviews with family members, New Zealand political figures, fellow musicians, and comedians.

Director Leanne Pooley creates something extremely unique by featuring special interviews with some of the Topp's infamous comedy alter-egos, which are uproarious even if you aren't familiar with some of the Twins most popular creations. Pooley's access to the twins appears completely unfettered allowing us to share in the unique talents of these groundbreaking entertainers as their careers evolved from street performers to wildly popular concert musicians.

While so many festival films tend to deal with somber subject matters, *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* is virtually the antithesis. Part concert film, part documentary, part comedy and all heart, the Topp Twins film is pure fun, with as much poignancy and courage as the films two subjects.

**FLICKS.CO.NZ:** Item on the film winning the People's Choice Winner at the festival is posted this site:

<http://www.flicks.co.nz/news/>

## ***'Topp Twins' People's Choice Winner At Toronto Film Fest***

20th Sep 2009

By Ed, Flicks.co.nz

Leanne Pooley's documentary **The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls** has won the People's Choice award for Best Documentary at the Toronto Film Festival.

This is the first year Toronto's had an audience award for documentaries and, in no small feat, **Topp Twins** beat out Michael Moore's new documentary **Capitalism: A Love Story**. Previous People's Choice winners include **Slumdog Millionaire**, **Tsotsi**, **Whale Rider**, **Hotel Rwanda** and **American Beauty**. The People's Choice for best feature film this year went to American drama **Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire** (more on the film here).

We reported this week that the two other Kiwi films at Toronto had received a hostile reception, but Leanne Pooley's **Topp Twins** received standing ovations and a critical thumbs up. The festival described the film as "fun, disarming and musically provocative". Variety, the major US industry paper, said "A documentary that has you falling in love with two of the crazier people you've never met... could well add Jools and Lynda Topp to a list that includes spring lamb and **Lord of the Rings** - that is, gifts from New Zealand to a world that usually doesn't pay it any attention" (read the full Variety review here). Gee thanks.

Of course, this is nothing we didn't already know – the film has been well loved here, become NZ's highest grossing documentary ever and was praised across the board by NZ's critics (see the Flicks.co.nz review, plus other press reviews here).

The Twins and director Leanne Pooley were in Canada for the festival. Lynda Topp told Newstalk ZB that to win was "a dream come true". She said Canadian audiences had found the pair refreshing and they'd won them over by just being themselves. Hear hear.

MOVIELINE.COM: Stu Van Airsdale's coverage is posted to this site:  
<http://www.movieline.com/2009/09/are-the-topp-twins-this-years-anvil.php>

## Is *The Topp Twins* This Year's *Anvil*?

WRITTEN BY S.T. VANAIRSDALE | 16 SEP 2009, 8:00 AM | COMMENT

The Topp Twins are more than just New Zealand's most famous yodeling, protesting, joke-cracking lesbian-sister musical export. They're now the subjects of their own oddly fascinating documentary at the Toronto Film Festival. Appropriately enough titled *The Topp Twins*, director Leanne Pooley's doc profiles the irrepressible Lynda and Jools Topp from their bucolic Kiwi upbringings to their development of a populist blend of folk, protest and comic songwriting that made them worldwide cult sensations. Or maybe "cult" is misrepresenting things — especially when their immensely popular street performances require their own laws on the books in Auckland.

"Even though they were just busking on the street, they got famous," Pooley told the crowd following Tuesday's *Topp Twins* screening at TIFF. "They actually got arrested. They would go out every Friday night and play on Queen Street. And they created such a traffic jam that they were arrested for causing a public disturbance or something. They defended themselves, of course, and won. There's a bylaw in New Zealand that says any time the Topp Twins are busking, they must contact the police, who will then accompany them."

That wasn't all the trouble they got into, much of which followed some act of civil disobedience against apartheid, nuclear proliferation, environmental abuse, tribal matters at home and, naturally, gay and lesbian rights. Pooley briskly chronicles these milestones and more, paying special attention to how the sisters developed the many alter egos who help their act transcend camp, novelty and gimmickry. (Their Ken & Ken characters are popular among an unusually catholic constituency of straights and gays across class and culture.) The music won't dazzle everybody, but skeptics said the same thing about *Anvil*, and look where the heavy-metal combo's documentary took *them* over the last year and a half.

Speaking of *Anvil*, another segment of the film briefly addressed the seismic event that is a Topp Twins fight, yet was a little short on details. Always one for a good yodeling-twin-fight anecdote, I asked Pooley for the dirt.

"I never saw them actually fight," she said. "But they could be pretty stroppy."

Stroppy! Were they ever that way with Pooley?

*"The very first time they ever came to see a rough cut, Lynda showed up in the edit suite with a gun. A big, giant rifle."*

"Oh, yeah!" she replied. "The very first time they ever came to see a rough cut, Lynda showed up in the edit suite with a gun. A big, giant rifle. I was really nervous, anyway, because the most nervous moment for a documentary filmmaker is actually showing something. That's the most terrifying screening of all, and she came in with this giant rifle. I said, 'Lynda, I think you're going to like this movie.' Of course, she had been hunting, and basically it's illegal to leave a gun in the car. So she just brought it in." See? Beat that, *Anvil*.



# Nothing much could top this

**NOW SHOWING**



**matt lawrey**

**Topp Twins:  
Untouchable Girls. (M)**  
**★★★★ (out of five)**

When was the last time you were at a movie and the credits rolled and people clapped?

It happened to me on Sunday night at a screening of *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls*.

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who are fans of the *Topp Twins* and people who are fans of the *Topp Twins* but just don't know it yet.

I didn't realise I was a fan until seeing them at the Nelson A&P Show a few years back.

They were hilarious and

the way they worked the crowd was magic.

In fact, that afternoon's entertainment goes down as one of my top three New Zealand comedy experiences ever along with *The Front Lawn* and *Flight of the Conchords*.

A documentary about the lives and times of the Waikato's favourite yodelling lesbian twins, Jools and Lynda Topp, *Untouchable Girls* is funny, moving and enlightening.

Looking at them smiling from the pages of women's magazines, it's easy to forget that they were on the frontlines of some of the most important and controversial issues New

Zealand has seen over the last 40 years.

From Bastion Point and The Springbok Tour to banning the bomb and the decriminalisation of homosexuality, Lynda and Jools were there and had a song at the ready.

Directed by Leanne Pooley, *Untouchable Girls* deftly mixes biography, social history, politics and entertainment in a way that will make you laugh, think, tap your toe and more than likely shed a tear or two.

Fantastic footage and clippings from the archives are mixed with appearances by their numerous characters, frank chats

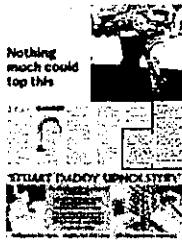
about their lives, a recent performance and contributions by everyone from their brilliant parents to John Clarke and Helen Clark.

The effect is a bit like being at a relaxed party with the guests of honour performing on stage.

It's a uniquely and proudly New Zealand party, too.

People don't get much more Kiwi than the Toppes and if you don't come away from their film feeling good about being a New Zealander then you should emigrate immediately.

*Untouchable Girls* would also make incredibly using



viewing for anyone new to these shaky isles with an interest in the character of the place and what it's been through in the last few decades.

The film also highlights what fantastic singers and songwriters the twins are.

At 82 minutes it's not one of those docs that outstays its welcome.

In fact, if anything it's a little short.

I would have liked to have learnt more about their adventures overseas and why they haven't pursued greater commercial

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glory.

I would have also been keen to hear a bit about their views on New Zealand society today and the political environment.

In *Untouchable Girls* we learn about their roles in the gay rights movement of the 1980s but how do they feel about the fact John Key voted against the Civil Union Bill?

But more than anything, I would like to have seen more of Ken and Ken.

**Bottom line:** You've just got to see it.





Untouchable Girls – Topp Twins The Movie

# A Topp effort by twins

By BRENDAN OCONNOR  
Movie Review

Architects and their admirers often talk of a sense of place.

An ideal where a building is in harmony with its surroundings. An indefinable factor in which the design, purpose and placement of the building dovetails perfectly into its environment.

The Topp Twins have a sense of place in New Zealand.

Their story is as much about our identity as the traditional bloke stereotypes of what it means to be a Kiwi, i.e. the jaw jutting rugby playing black singleted V.C. winning No.8 fixer-upper. This mythical creature is the antithesis of the Topp Twins take on life in N.Z. Raised out the back of Huntly in a traditional farming way of life they burst onto the N.Z. entertainment scene in the 70's with what English singer Billy Bragg described as an anarchistic variety act.

While the New Romantics were angsting about love, big hair and shoulder pads Jools and Lynda Topp were singing of injustice in its many forms. They became inextricably linked with the protest movements such as gay rights, a nuclear free N.Z., Bastion Point and the '81 Springbok tour.

This film documents not only the twin's story but also some of the major events in our recent history. The rights we now take for granted were the result of a passion and commitment for change, a passion not often seen on the streets these days.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the Topp Twins remain so popular with such a broad cross-section of society is the fact they never lectured or hectored their

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audience into following a particular point of view; they get their point of view across subversively as one commentator noted, by using that most traditional and conservative form of music – country.

Their gentle albeit deadly accurate satire is also showcased in this film with cameos from Camp Mother and Camp Leader, The Ladies of the Pakuranga Bowling Club, socialites Prue and Dilly, the Two Kens and the slightly unsettling Gingham sisters. These characters have never worked better now the twins have also reached middle-age.

The New Zealand comedy scene is littered with mediocre and just plain awful cast-offs, so it's refreshing to see two naturally gifted, perceptive entertainers going from strength to strength.

Indicative of their universal appeal is footage of a tour of provincial towns they undertook in a tractor drawn gypsy caravan. Local halls were filled to overflowing at each venue with rural folk eager to be entertained by two women whose lifestyles, beliefs and values were in reality probably diametrically opposed to the majority of their audience.

Perhaps the answer to this puzzle is the Topp Twin's honesty.

They are talented, funny and above all honest. They long ago laid their cards on the table, never shied away from standing up for their beliefs and didn't belittle others.

We like that in our heroes. This film is a warm and fitting tribute to two women and their sense of place in the Kiwi psyche.



# Topp entertainment from hilarious duo

## MOVIE REVIEW

By MATT LAWREY

When was the last time you were at a movie and the credits rolled and people clapped?

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There are two kinds of people in this world: people who are fans of the Topp Twins and people who are fans of the Topp Twins but just don't know it yet. I didn't realise I was a fan until seeing them at the Nelson A&P Show a few years back.

They were hilarious and the way they worked the crowd was magic. In fact, that afternoon's entertainment goes down as one of my top three New Zealand comedy experiences ever, along with The Front Lawn and Flight of the Conchords.

A documentary about the lives and times of the Waikato's favourite yodelling lesbian twins, Jools and Lynda Topp, *Untouchable Girls* is funny, moving and enlightening.

Looking at them smiling from the pages of women's magazines, it's easy to forget that they were once on the front lines of some of the most important and controversial issues New Zealand has seen over the last 40 years.

From Bastion Point and the Springbok tour, to banning the bomb and the decriminalisation of homosexuality, Lynda and Jools were there and had a song at the ready.

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will make you laugh, think, tap your toe and more than likely shed a tear or two. Fantastic footage and clippings from the archives is mixed with appearances by their numerous characters, frank chats about their lives, a recent performance and contributions by everyone from their brilliant parents to John Clarke and Helen Clark.

The effect is a bit like being at a relaxed party with the guests of honour performing on stage. It's a uniquely and proudly New Zealand party, too. People don't get much more Kiwi than the Topps and if you don't come away from their film feeling good about being a New Zealander then you should emigrate immediately.

*Untouchable Girls* would also make useful viewing for anyone new to these shaky isles with an interest in the character of the place and what it's been through in the last few decades. The film also highlights what fantastic singers and songwriters the twins

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## BOTTOM LINE

You've just got to see it. ★★★★★ (out of five)

are.

At 82 minutes it's not one of those docs that outstays its welcome. In fact, if anything it's a little short. I would have liked to have learnt more about their adventures overseas and why they haven't pursued greater commercial glory. I would have also been keen to hear a bit about their views on New Zealand society today and the political environment.

We learn about their roles in the gay rights movement of the 1980s but how do they feel about the fact John Key voted against the Civil Union Bill? But more than anything, I would like to have seen more of Ken and Ken.



Great tackle: The Topp Twins' Ken and Ken in action





## A Topp tale of controversy and comedy

### MOVIE REVIEW

By MATT LAWREY

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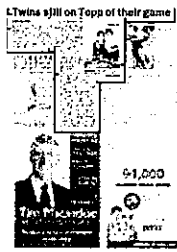
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Topp 7

# Twins still on Topp of their game

By NICK SILVESTER

In 1981 Lynda and Jools Topp, the Topp Twins, were protesting at Rugby Park in Hamilton against the Springbok tour.

Because of the anger that surrounded the protests they never thought they would be allowed into Rugby Park again, but a few years later they were back as the pre-game entertainment. It shows how much these comedic, country singing, dancing and yodelling lesbian twin sisters have been

embraced in this country, and now their story is being told in a documentary, out in theatres this week, called The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls.

The film had its premier at Skycity Cinemas in Auckland and it was the first time the Topp Twins had seen the finished film. "We waited until the premier to see the film to see

if we could get a bit of a buzz off it, it was pretty exciting," says Lynda.

"It was quite emotional, just the fact that the curtain rolled up and there we were on the big screen, it was quite humbling, somebody made a story about us and 600 people came to watch it and seemed to like it."

The film has already made more than \$1 million at the New Zealand box office and broke records for best opening day and best opening weekend of a New Zealand documentary.

It chronicles the Topp Twins' history from their humble upbringing on a Waikato farm to the present day, but director Leanne Pooley says it is "not just a story of talented individuals but a story that traversed the history and tenacity of an entire nation".

The film chronicles the twins' life from singing to the cows on their father's Huntly farm to busking in the streets of Auckland, performing at the Rugby World Cup and London's West End stage and through to their 1990s TV show and on. However because of the twins'



**TOPP FILM:** The Topp Twins film has broken records for a New Zealand documentary. Photo: SUPPLIED





**THE KENS:** The Topp Twins' alter egos perform the pre-match entertainment at Waikato Stadium. Photo: WAIKATO TIMES

after our anti-Springbok stage when Ken and Ken came along, for them to ask us to be the pre-show entertainment we felt we had come full circle . . . We were never trying to stop rugby in 1981 we were trying to stop apartheid – so it was really great when Ken and Ken got to run down that field,” says Lynda

“New Zealanders are very good at forgiving, they’ll forgive you, they may not forget but they’ll forgive you,” says Jools.

The twins say their social conscience developed early and credit their parents because of their inclusive, non-

heavy involvement in campaigning for social change on issues like a nuclear free NZ, Maori land rights, a halt to the 1981 Springbok tour and homosexual law reform, the film also deals with half a century of New Zealand’s cultural change and the forging of our national identity.

The pair call the film “their love letter to New Zealand”. “We have come a long way since the 70s, there were massive changes in the country, so it’s not just our story because a lot of people out there can relate to those stories as well,” says Jools.

The protests against the Springbok Tour is something many Hamiltonians will remember well, including the twins who are big rugby fans and dedicated Waikato supporters.

“We have actually been on the sacred ground here at Waikato stadium on two occasions, one for the Springboks when we were saying they shouldn’t be playing rugby and then a few years later as Ken and Ken for the pre-game show of the NPC final,” says Lynda.

“We are darling rugby fans but we thought at the time that we should be freeing Nelson Mandela,” says Jools.

“We were the enemy for a little while . . . But later on

judgmental upbringing.

“Mum and Dad instilled in us this whole thing of you could do anything, there were no gender roles in the family, it didn’t matter if you were a girl or a boy you could always give it a go. We were allowed to milk the cows and help out on the farm and our brother used to do the gardening.”

According to the twins this thinking developed early and carried on throughout their lives. Lynda can remember sitting with an Indian girl on the school bus because she got a hard time from other children. “We always just had a really strong understanding of injustice. There was this little Indian girl on the bus and some of the kids were horrible to her . . . Jools and I would sit with her and look after her on the way home.”

Creating the film has been a walk down memory lane for the pair and some of the footage unearthed was a surprise.

“There’s a lot of different shots of us with different styles of mullets,” says Jools.

“I think everybody in the 80s at sometime had some kind of mullet,” jokes Lynda, who says she is growing one as a tribute to the film.

■ **The Topp Twins: Untouchable girls** is showing at Skycity Cinemas Centreplace and Victoria Cinemas.



READERS' FILM REVIEWS

# YOU can be a movie reviewer

## Star ratings

- ★★★★ Exceptional
- ★★★ Excellent
- ★★ Well worth a look
- ★ Watchable
- Bad

★★★★

**The Boat That Rocked**  
Reviewer: S.Wilkinson

IN THE 1960s, a new kind of music exploded over the airwaves of the world in much the same way as Impressionist painting had exploded into the traditional art world.

In the UK, the staid BBC dealt with this raucous new upstart by ignoring it. The response was Pirate radio and the new music blasted out from a ship in the North Sea – the boat that rocked. The times they were a-changing and these DJs were broadcasting 24 hours a day, playing all the music that the BBC wouldn't. They had fun and fun is what this movie is – sheer exuberance and good music.

Apart from a couple of verbal expressions not actually in use then, the movie does a fair job of capturing the spirit of the times. Don't expect anything deep and meaningful – apart from a nod to the Establishment attempting to crush the pirates, this movie's entire purpose is fun. This is a lighthearted look back at times that helped shape the present.

Send us your review of any movie screening at cinemas around the city. We'll publish a selection of reviews and give a free double movie pass to those whose reviews appear on this page. Email your review of up to 150 words to [starsubs@starcantebury.co.nz](mailto:starsubs@starcantebury.co.nz). Give the movie star a rating out of five – five for outstanding and one for abysmal. And don't forget to include your name, address and daytime phone number on the email.

**Note:** We are not able to publish all reviews submitted.

**Remember:** A good review tells us what you think of the movie, rather than telling the story.

★★★★

**Untouchable Girls**  
Reviewer: Peter Barons

JOOLS AND Lynda Topp star in this doco-comedy about two remarkable Kiwis. This would have to be the movie of the year so far.

Leanne Pooley directs this wonderful movie. There are too many highlights to mention any that really stand out. Anyway, revealing any of these would spoil the surprise of seeing for yourself.

Some personal reminiscences are good chuckle-material. And some great people are interviewed, including the Topp parents.

The Topp twins are good role models for the gay community. And their infectious humour gives us a laugh a minute.

For a thoroughly good outing to the movies, go and see *Untouchable Girls*. You are bound to want to go and see this marvellous movie again!

★★★★

**Revolutionary Road**  
Reviewer: Lisa Imbruglia

MY SON and I were looking for a movie with action, adventure and a clean story.

We found it in this film.

With a good pace to it, this film has a great amount of special effects, fast driving, the "Rock", bad guys and weaponry that will inspire even the most bored teenager.

There are also buckets of humour that mix in quite well with the energy of the film.

No deep thinking is required for this film; just sit back and be entertained.

I, for one, hope that there is a number two made at some stage, as I enjoyed this film immensely.

With one more week of school holidays to go, I could think of nothing better than going to see this movie again.

Friday, 1 May 2009, p. 6

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Page 1 of 1

Clip ID:51796GIH2009043026003

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## Topp Twins biopic breaks records for Kiwi documentary success

A FILM about a couple of gay Kiwi musicians who put their own unique spin on country music, under the name of the wonderful New Zealanders, has broken more than just hearts. It has also broken the box office record for the most successful Kiwi documentary ever, with a box office of more than \$1 million.

Umi Topp and Gail also produced the film, which is a love story of sorts. New Zealand's most beloved twins and is both hilarious and touching. The Topp Twins are well known as comedy characters, as activists and as entertainers, but this story of Jools and Gail's lives has never been told. This movie is a celebration of their lives and work, as well as a metaphor for how far New Zealand has come as a nation.

Umi Topp said the film is a love story of sorts. "We are proud to be a part of a film that takes an intimate look at the lives of two of our most beloved Kiwis."

Thursday, 30 April 2009, p. 26



### Cinema Scene

## The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls

*The Topp Twins*: irrepressible Kiwi Topp's extraordinary *Untouchable Girls* is entertainment double personal story has the first time that the act, Jools and Lynda been told.

The film offers a revealing look into the lives of the world's only comedic, country singing, dancing, and yodelling twin sisters.

As well as rarely seen archive footage and home movies, the film features a series of special interviews with some of the Topp's infamous comedy alter-egos including candid chats with the two Kens, Camp Mother and Camp Leader, the Bowling Ladies and the Posh Socialite sisters, Prue and Dilly.

It's a big story.

It's not just the story of two sisters, but also of 50 years of New Zealand history.

Half a century of cultural changes and the foundation of a national identity.

Part concept film, part biopic, part historical record, part comedy, the Twins share their journey from 'coming out' to Jools' recent brush with breast cancer with much laughter, honesty and wisdom.

It is a film about two truly unique New Zealanders which ends up saying as much about us as it does about them.

Thursday, 23 April 2009, p. 26



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**CRITIC CHOICE**

**Untouchable Girls (M)**

★★★★<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

■ *Untouchable Girls* is the very funny, very moving story of two extraordinary Kiwis. This documentary about the lives of New Zealand's favourite yodelling, lesbian twins, fools and Lynda Topp, covers everything from their idyllic rural childhood to their political activism to fighting cancer. The Topp parents, who seem to be top parents, are among the good and the great interviewed. The ex-pat Kiwi satirist formerly known as Fred Dagg, John Clarke, says admiringly: "They're prepared to do anything - they're relatively shameless."



Topp Twins: take a harky.

Their eagerness to get involved in causes they believed in saw the twins active in various historic events, including the Springbok tour protests, Bastion Point, homosexual law reform and the nuclear debate. Particularly moving and intimate is the footage shot by Lynda of 'fools' battle with breast cancer. Remember to take a hankie, but you're guaranteed to leave the theatre with a spring in your step and a song in your heart. MA

**Let The Right One In**

(R16)★★★★<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

■ Twelve-year-old Oskar (Kare Hedebrant) is having a hard time at school. Left to his own devices, he has become obsessed with a series of bizarre local murders and with plotting revenge on his tormentors. He attracts the attention of Eli (Lina Leandersson), a pale, lank-haired girl who has recently moved in next door with an older man. She doesn't talk much but emboldens Oskar to stand up to his attackers. The pair's friendship grows and, as a sign of his respect, Oskar suggests they form a blood bond. But Eli's reaction isn't what he expected. This vampire movie is an unnerving, understated journey. Like *Nightwatch* and *The Orphanage* before it, *Right One* proves that Europe is currently the home of fantasy and horror. (Subtitled.) JC



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Page 1 of 1

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**Milk (M) ★★★★★**

Is Sean Penn's Harvey Milk better than Mickey Rourke's Randy the Ram? The Academy thought so, and Penn is the number one reason to see *Milk*. But it's quite some story, too.

— Mark Orton



**The Topp Twins (PG) ★★★★★**

The pair look back on the past 30-odd years in an attempt to explain to us and themselves how a pair of yodalling lesbian twins become beloved comic icons in New Zealand.

— Christine Powley



**The Boat That Rocked (M) ★★**

See, there is this group of guys on a boat playing cool music and the Government wants to shut them down.

— Christine Powley

Saturday, 25 April 2009, p. 51



**The Reader (R16) ★★**

Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet) has a dark past in this tale of love between a curious teen and an experienced woman.

— Mark Orton

November 19, 2009



The Topp twins: Winning people over is what they do.

Photo: *Supplied*

Advertisement

### **TOPP TWINS: UNTOUCHABLE GIRLS**

(PG)

★★★

(84 minutes)

Selected cinemas.

**Jake Wilson** Reviewer

THERE are times when no one seems more alien than your nearest neighbours. I took a while to get my head around the idea of Jools and Linda Topp, twin lesbian country singers from the New Zealand heartland, who harmonise like the Everly Brothers and bounce off each other in improvised cross-talk routines.

Politically active on many fronts, they've been out of the closet — both with long-term partners — since the early 1980s, when they made their names busking and playing student union gigs.

They're seen as national treasures at home and have gained a substantial following abroad. The famous fans who pay tribute in Leanne Pooley's jolly documentary range from radical English troubadour Billy Bragg to former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark.

For an Australian equivalent, you'd have to combine the bolshiness of, say, Robyn Archer with the mainstream appeal of Kath & Kim.

The uninitiated may have the sense of being excluded from an "in" family joke. But the Topp Twins won me over; winning people over is what they do. Judging by what we hear and see, the basis of the Topps' appeal is a lack of pretension or irony. Well into middle age,

they retain the innocent air of a couple of knockabout farm girls with a love of dressing up and being silly.

The comedy writer Paul Horan affectionately describes them as the "least professional" people he's worked with. If that's an illusion, it's one that Pooley makes no effort to undermine.

When they pretend to be society matrons or blokes from down the pub, they don't disappear into the characters, the way Barry Humphries disappears into Edna Everage.

Behind the masks they remain their boisterous selves, and seem to be having at least as much fun as the audience.

## Doubling over

Article from: **The Advertiser**

ANDREW FENTON

November 25, 2009 11:33pm

**IT'S doubtful that Michael Moore ever expected *Capitalism: A Love Story* would get pipped at the post for the Toronto Film Festival's audience award by a low-budget New Zealand documentary about twin lesbian comedic country singers.**

But that's what happened.

"I bet Michael Moore was googling like hell: Who are the Topp Twins?" laughs the friendly and resolutely down-to-earth Jools Topp from her farm near Auckland, shortly before going out to ride her horse.

"When it came out in print it said: the audience award won by The Topp Twins: *Untouchable Girls*, and runner-up Michael Moore. You know, the man has won so many documentary awards I thought they should have just said who won, rather than who was runner-up, because it might have seemed like a slap in the face to him."

Considering they're two of the most genial folk you're likely to talk to, the Topp Twins have almost as much of a history in radical politics as Moore. They helped win the fight to make homosexuality legal in NZ, they protested on the field against the South African rugby tour during the apartheid days and they stood shoulder to shoulder with Maoris in the fight for land rights.

But unlike Moore, the Topp Twins are never strident, never try to shove their politics down anyone's throat and always keep a sense of humour and perspective. (Lefty folk star Billy Bragg describes them as an "anarchist variety act".)

"If you look at the bottom line, it's about respect," says Jools. "If you want people to acknowledge you have political views, you're not going to get respect just by yelling someone down. We're bigger than that hopefully."

She says the Topp Twins' approach is down to some good guidance from their Topp mum.

"There's no hatred there," she says. "There might be things we dislike but our mum set us down very early on in our junior years down on the farm and I remember her very vividly saying: 'you can dislike but you can never ever hate'. And maybe that stuck in our heads for a long time."

Untouchable Girls isn't really about politics though. It's a warm-hearted celebration of the now middle-aged twins, who went from buskers to activists to comedy singers and along the way became New Zealand national treasures.

Lynda Topp explains their first big break came through busking in the early 1980s each Friday in Auckland. The crowds grew from a handful to a couple of hundred, spurred by their crazy antics such as heading into any nearby shop and "borrowing" clothes to put on during the middle of a song.

One evening a young constable decided to break it up, but the crowd reacted badly. The ensuing commotion caused more people to come over, the crowd became larger and more police cars were called. "The crowd got ugly and started throwing money at the policeman and it got more and more silly from there," Lynda says.

The pair spent a night in the cells. Their arrest became front page news, setting the scene for their continuing dominance of NZ comedy.

"We sent a thank you note to the police because the publicity was worth thousands!" she says.

The pair were acquitted and a by-law was created which is still in effect today, that the Topp Twins must be accompanied by two police officers whenever they busk.

Lynda says their comedy isn't so much about one-line gags but good-natured improvisation, characters and songs. In the film they explain they are not comedians: "We're singers who are funny."

"From the early days the music was the driving force in what we did," says Lynda. "It's a combination of things that make the Topp Twins: we're not just comedians, we're singers, songwriters, actors and comedians."

The pair have also developed a very inclusive brand of comedy that isn't at anyone else's expense.

"Our comedy is very character-based and accessible to New Zealand and Australian audiences because it seems everybody knows somebody like Camp Mother and Camp Leader or Ken and Ken. It's not about jokes, it's about what that character would do and people seem to find it funny."

Often it's not very scripted either, and a considerable proportion of each live show is made up on the spot.

"There's a huge amount of spontaneity in our live show and now a lot of people come to see the 35 per cent of spontaneity - they want that little bit of an edge," Jools says.

## THE TOPP TWINS: UNTOUCHABLE GIRLS

Rated: PG

Released: Today

## Film review - The Topp Twins : Untouchable Girls

- Leigh Paatsch
- From: *Herald Sun*
- November 25, 2009 2:51PM

**The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls (PG) Director: Leanne Pooley (Haunting Douglas) Starring: Jools Topp, Linda Topp, Helen Clarke, Billy Bragg, John Clarke Rating: \*\*\* Two of a one of a kind**

"We are not comedians. We are singers who are funny."

That's the story of veteran performing duo The Topp Twins, and they're sticking to it.

Sisters Linda and Jools Topp are regarded as national treasures in their homeland of New Zealand, where this very enjoyable documentary recently became the highest-grossing non-fiction film ever.

Director Leanne Pooley has structured this film beautifully, tracking her subjects' colourful journey from a small farm to the big time via a special concert for family and friends.

The Topp Twins hold court from the stage in cracking form, regaling the crowd with choice anecdotes and tall tales from three action-packed decades in the spotlight.

Start of sidebar. [Skip to end of sidebar.](#)

### Related Coverage

- [Snapshot of some fun Kiwis](#) *The Australian*, 27 Nov 2009
- [Doubling over](#) *Adelaide Now*, 25 Nov 2009
- [Hilarious turns in the family business](#) *The Australian*, 25 Nov 2009
- [Take you to the Topp](#) *Herald Sun*, 19 Nov 2009
- [Cricket, Oct 4](#) *Courier Mail*, 3 Oct 2009

End of sidebar. [Return to start of sidebar.](#)

In case you are not aware, Linda and Jools are proudly out-there lesbians.

Nothing too sensational about that in today's society, I know. Nevertheless, the Topp Twins must have seemed like they were from another planet when they first broke onto the Kiwi scene in the late 1970s.

Factor in their fierce dedication to a wide array of political causes over the years, and the magnitude of the Topps' sustained success in the NZ mainstream becomes all the more remarkable.

Breaking up all the talk and the talking heads (former NZ PM Helen Clarke, singer Billy Bragg and satirist John Clarke are among the many who drop in to approve knowingly) is a series of vignettes featuring the many comic characters developed by the Topps.

These exaggerated caricatures work amazingly well in the live environment, especially when the twins jump off the stage and start wreaking havoc with members of the crowd.

Lovers of pure harmonic uplift will also find the Topps' lively vocal performances to be a sound for sore ears.

## Film Review - The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls

Submitted by Beth Wilson on November 25, 2009 – 11:46 pm

“Sometimes, getting people to laugh is the most political thing you can do”

Jools Topp



A really good documentary reveals something or someone you never really knew before. *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* gives an insight into the women behind New Zealand comedy/musical double act, **Jools and Linda Topp**. Marketed as yodelling lesbians twins with a penchant for country music and dressing up, they don't sound like your average comedy act, but isn't it nice to have a little variety.

Using the structure of one of their autobiographical gigs, the documentary follows the **Topp Twins'** evolution as comedians and political activists, with older footage and talking head interviews woven into the cinematic fabric. Directed by **Leanne Poole** the documentary shows how the sisters' sense of fun as well as sense of justice has developed their comedy.



Labelled as New Zealand's 'finest artistic export since lamb cutlets', the twins have had a strong political role. Actively campaigning for Maori land rights, against nuclear testings, for Gay rights and against the Springboks tour to New Zealand during Apartheid. The sisters have sung about and taken part in protests and rallies for decades.

"It's so subversive when you think about it! Of all the forms to choose Country & Western is the most redneck, the most gender specific of all popular culture. To use that as a way of pushing forward gay rights it's so subversive. But they're not taking the mickey, that's the key thing. That's who they are" **Billy Bragg** discussing **The Topp Twins**

Fame and fortune don't appear to be the guiding factor for the likeable comedians. Yes they have done the TV shows and the overseas festivals, but they seem happiest at country fairs in their homeland. With traces of *Kath and Kim* and a talent for music (their songs sung in Maori are beautiful) as well as comedy, the sisters have worked hard to have the longevity they've achieved.

This documentary is not really about their success or development as performers, it is about the joy of discovering something you love doing and have a good time whilst you're doing it, something a lot of us struggle to find. It's fun to meet new people and **The Topp Twins** are fantastic company for the 84 mins they are on screen; showing themselves to be funny, satirical, clever, bold, political and compassionate.

*The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* is released nationally in Australia on the 26<sup>th</sup> November

Director: Leanne Poole

Featuring: Jools & Linda Poole, Billy Bragg, John Clarke, Mereana Pitman, Helen Clark

## TOPP TWINS: UNTOUCHABLE GIRLS

### SYNOPSIS:

**Celebrating their half-century this year (2009), the Topp Twins have attained a unique status in New Zealand culture. This doco summarises the lives of the world's only comedic, country singing, dancing and yodeling lesbian twin sisters. From rural backwaters to busking on the streets of Auckland, to performances at the Rugby World Cup and London's West End stage, their appeal seems limitless. From support act to Split Enz, Billy Bragg, and Midnight Oil to headlining their own hugely successful tours in Australia, Canada, the USA and Britain, they do their own 'thang'. The twins have morphed from radical activists into Kiwi 'national treasures' and 'cultural ambassadors'.**

### Review by Andrew L. Urban:

Down to earth and with blue sky optimism, Jules and Linda Topp present one of those amazing true stories that make biographical docos so engaging. It's all so much stranger than fiction. Born in a small New Zealand community, the lesbian Topp twins came out to their conservative parents Jean and Peter Topp quite early and after the initial shock, the parents just accepted it. And that was before the gay rights movement's successes. Irrepressible and fun loving, the girls easily attracted audiences and built a following that continues to grow.

Director Leanne Pooley and editor Tom Woodhouse have put together a well paced and satisfyingly complete picture of the girls and their lives. They don't have careers; it's what they do and who they are. There is nothing manufactured or superficial about their work, which seamlessly dovetails into their lives, along with their respective partners. There is plenty of their music, recorded live on stages around the world (but mostly New Zealand) and it's intercut with interviews not only with the Topp family but others, notably comedian and writer John Clarke, whose astute observations are a welcome addition to our own perceptions.

The film covers a lot of ground as the Topps take to the streets against Apartheid, nuclear weapons, supporting gay rights and civil liberties - and they also take their activism onto the stage. But this is done with such a positive tone it's totally unobjectionable, yet palpably sincere.

When their special, strongly united world is threatened by Jools' cancer, the filmmakers take us into the downs as Linda provides extensive emotional support during the tough times. Having seen the effects of the illness adds poignancy to Jools' request once back on stage that Linda sing - at every performance for the rest of their lives - her favourite song, My Pinto Pony and I.

For those like me who discover Jools and Linda through this film, it's a remarkably entertaining experience; for those who know them, it's a chance to go deeper into their lives and their amazing bond. And I'm not alone in my praise: the film won the first People's Choice documentary award at the Toronto Film Festival, ahead of Moore's much admired Capitalism: A Love Story.



## THE TOPP TWINS

★★★

The Topp Twins have been described as the world's only comedic country singing, dancing and yodelling lesbian twin sisters; and they're probably right. Cultural ambassadors for their native New Zealand, Jools and Linda Topp marked their 50th birthday in reflection – Leanne Pooley was there to catch it all.

**The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls** is an infectious and affectionate account of two utterly remarkable women who, despite tours of Britain, the US and Australia, have not strayed far from their farming roots. They seem happiest driving a tractor to perform at a country show for fifty people. It's this homespun earthiness that forms the kernel around which Pooley works. She dives deep into the archives, cataloguing ballsy busking on the streets of Auckland to headlining shows alongside Crowded House and Billy Bragg with several of their subversive alter egos. "An anarchist variety act" as John Clarke remarked. "We were watching two very, very naughty girls."

He was referring to a long history of political and social campaigning forged on the relative hot-bed of New Zealand's pre-consumerist 1980's. As Pooley reveals, the twins were commentators on their own activism, and while they may no longer join sit-ins at Bastion Point they are no less relevant. Social satire sees to that. Untouchable girls? Undoubtedly. Just ask their Mum and Dad.

// COLIN FRASER

## Hilarious turns in the family business

- Michael Bodey
- From: *The Australian*
- November 26, 2009 12:00AM

**THE term "big in New Zealand" doesn't quite strike awe into the hearts of Australians.**

Comedy duo the Topp Twins are very big in New Zealand. And they have a historical and political connection with their country that no comedian in Australia matches.

We have similar comic legends - in this instance Barry Humphries' Dame Edna Everage and Gina Riley and Jane Turner's Kath & Kim come to mind - who have transcended comedy but neither they nor any others have found such an empathetic place in the nation's psyche as the two lesbians from a Waikato dairy farm.

Their hokey humour is now finding favour globally in the documentary *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls*. The film has been a smash in NZ, earning \$NZ2 million (\$1.6m) in a country one-fifth the size of Australia, yet their story translates offshore, as the film has won audience awards at film festivals, including Melbourne and, most spectacularly, the audience prize at Toronto.

The duo, Jools and Lynda, have just finished a NZ tour celebrating 100 years of the Topp Twins (they've both turned 50). It was the fastest selling tour they've done. Their popularity is growing in a market that should be well over them by now.

"That's right but the thing is we're New Zealanders and New Zealanders are slightly different from the rest of the world," Jools Topp cackles.

Like Humphries, the Topp Twins have characters who have worked their way into the hearts of New Zealanders, including the unreconstructed men Ken and Ken, and Camp Mother and Camp Leader.

Jools says New Zealanders love the characters so much, "we've almost got them believing the characters are real. People have their favourites and we can pull those characters out of the bag any time we want and click into anything we're doing."

The pair also have a country-inspired repertoire of comic ditties and yodels they have developed since their early days busking.

Jools humbly accepts that in their almost three decades of performance "we've become a part of the New Zealand psyche, I suppose."

She says they had no intention to be entertainers.

"That's probably why we've done so well," she says.

Their desire was to take over the family farm just like any other local kids.

Events took them on a different path, although they keep returning to the farm. They were active participants in land rights, anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid protests of the 1970s and 80s, endearing themselves to a liberal nation.

Their multi-layered story gives *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* a power often lacking in showbiz bios.

Their manager suggested they write a film, although the one now in the drawer is a narrative film incorporating all their characters. The documentary was a second thought when they were convinced their phenomenon might make a sturdy study.

"Really, I suppose in some ways it was a great way to show the politics of our generation that was so much a part of our lives. It would be silly not to try to put something like that together," Jools says.

Canadian director Leanne Pooley saw the development of their entertainment and the political story running parallel. The result is partly about NZ's coming of age as well.

"Most people would say those two different scenarios are not going to jell and it would be hard to make something that was slightly political and entertaining at the same time, but it worked brilliantly," Jools says.

The sisters used a celebratory concert in which they could wheel out characters and recollections as a focus for historical clips and interviews with the Toppes, their characters and admirers, including arguably NZ's greatest comic, John Clarke.

"We needed a vehicle or home base, otherwise we felt it would be too scattered," Jools says. "It grounds everybody. It was like an airport; we could take off from that airport any time we wanted and go to different places.

"So many documentaries tend to get serious and maybe they have to but ours didn't need to be," she adds.

"Ours needed to have every aspect: it needed laughter and entertainment and politics and the odd bit of sadness along the way. It all needed to be in, otherwise it wasn't the whole story."

And the sisters are comfortable with what's on screen, warts and all.

"Yep, that's who we are," Jools says.

"You can't make anything up. That's the same when we do a live show, we walk out on stage and whatever happens, that's the show. We have a motto in life: Never go back."

## A Topp act

**D**irected by Leanne Pooley, this warm-hearted film about the Topp Twins is rollicking fun largely due to the unbridled the two cowgirls who became New Zealand's leading comic musical act. Jools and Lynda Topp are the world's only yode twin comedians. The documentary covers milestones in their extraordinary career. 'We're not comedians, we're singers funny'; and very funny they are.

With a passing affinity for our own irrepressible Dame Edna and those suburban survivors Kath and Kim, the Topp Twin own brand of country and western music while creating satirical characters of the Barry Humphries ilk.

Unique in their political activism, they busked in the streets during the political upheavals of the early 80's, joining the social change for such causes as Nuclear Free NZ, the Springbok tour of 1981, Maori land rights, and homosexual law r

Trying to sell their singing & dancing act in the early days must have been tough. Yodeling lesbian twins were not high list. Proving they had something different to offer, the Topp Twins defied logic and went on to become the biggest news Zealand since the woollen sock. Of course, their pleasant voices helped. They do country and western with considerable somehow being accepted in circles where once they might have been considered offensive. The Topp Twins are embrac of people because they enjoy life and celebrate it.

The story unfolds through their recent concert, recalling career highlights with flashbacks to early days on the farm, bus corners, and successful overseas tours including Australia. Among the best scenes are those in which the twins perform characterisations; a menagerie of Belle and Bell, Camp Mother and Camp Leader, Prue and Dilly, the Bowling Ladies, and Kens. Posh Prue and Dilly come from the same school as those snob shopgirls in Kath and Kim. During interviews, the t egos dissolve back to themselves to make an interesting comparison.

Interspersed are comments from friends who affected their careers, including mum and dad discussing the shock of the coming out. John Clarke is just one of the show biz personalities to talk about the twins' special appeal. Whilst the mood upbeat and funny, it's suddenly sobering when Jools discovers she has breast cancer.

Leanne Pooley, an ex BBC filmmaker, is sympathetic to the subjects providing the ideal framework for their zany type c vocals; creating a well-directed doco enhanced by excellent archival material. Sound and camerwork are first rate. Adm be equally attractive on TV, being well suited to that format. However it works on the big screen as viewing with a rece helps its appeal - a bubbly night at the cinema. Let's leave the final word to John Clarke: 'There are worse things to do'

**John Bale**

Film Ink 26.11.09

# Topp Twins Untouchable Girls (Film)

by Annette Basile | November 23, 2009 19:36 | Edited November 23, 2009 19:37

Rating: PG

Running Time: 84

Country: New Zealand

Cast: Jools Topp, Linda Topp

Distributor: Rialto

Film Worth: \$12.50

Release Date: November 26, 2009

An uplifting documentary, with a great message, music and laughs.



"On paper, they should be commercial death," says comedy writer Paul Horan in this documentary about The Topp Twins. But as the film shows, these comedic, yodelling, left-leaning lesbian identical twin sisters are adored by all - even conservative folks.

The twins - New Zealanders Lynda and Jools Topp, now in their early fifties - had an idyllic upbringing on a dairy farm in Waikato, on NZ's North Island. From teenage buskers to the stars of their own TV show, this film chronologically traces their lives using current interviews and archival footage.

It's an interesting journey which, on one level, works as a potted history of political activism in NZ. But it's also about gay and lesbian pride. An interview where the twins' mum and dad discuss the siblings' coming out is unintentionally hilarious, although Mr. and Mrs. Topp emerge as accepting parents and good eggs.

Other interviewees include New Zealand's ex-PM Helen Clark, Australian comic John Clarke, and British musician Billy Bragg, who describes The Topp Twins as an "anarchist variety act."

The Topps see themselves as singers that are funny as opposed to comics that sing, and here lies the secret to their brilliance - gorgeous harmonies that, perhaps, only siblings can muster. It's The Everly Brothers meets The Indigo Girls with political and comic agendas. It's their music, which usually has amusing lyrics but can also be quite moving, that makes this doco especially entertaining.

At the heart of the film is The Topp Twins' joie de vivre. The footage of them as buskers is especially enjoyable, as is watching them all grown-up, giggling like kids as they put on their make-up before a gig. They're an inspiring pair, and *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls*, which has its serious moments, is as uplifting and as joyous as its subjects.

Fun, disarming and musically provocative, the Topp Twins are New Zealand's finest lesbian country and western singers.

Margaret: ★★★★★ David: ★★★★★

### The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls

Rated PG

*Review by David Stratton*

Now to THE TOPP TWINS: UNTOUCHABLE GIRLS. JOOLS and LYNDA TOPP are lesbian twin sisters who were raised on a farm in rural New Zealand. Since the early 1980s they've made a reputation for themselves as unconventional singers, comedians and political activists.

This film is structured around a kind of 'This Is Your Life' event, in which important people in the lives of the Topps join them in songs and reminiscence.

Leanne Pooley's affectionate documentary is a good introduction to a couple of engaging women who have tilted at windmills with their songs and comedy routines and who have fought for gay rights and other issues.

Household names in New Zealand, they remain unaffected and down to earth – they are clearly exceptional characters. The film includes JOOLS' recent battle with breast cancer, scenes which are a bit confronting but ultimately uplifting.

### Further comments

DAVID: Margaret, how did you like the Topps?

MARGARET: I was really pleased to meet these women. I think they're talented. I think they're intelligent. I think they're fun. They are fine people and I just - I love them. I must say I had such a good time with them.

DAVID: Had you heard of them before, as a matter of interest?

MARGARET: No.

DAVID: No, nor had I.

MARGARET: No, and I feel I should have.

DAVID: Yes.

MARGARET: But I love the way they've approached their fame, used it for...

DAVID: Very unpretentious.

MARGARET: Well, you know, defending land rights for...

DAVID: Yes.

MARGARET: ...Maoris in New Zealand and gay rights, as you say.

DAVID: And the Springbok tours and all that.

MARGARET: Yes.

DAVID: Yes.

MARGARET: You know, I love them, and I think the film has a – tragically - a very strong dramatic arc because of the illness. But, fortunately it's got a happy ending.

DAVID: Yes.

MARGARET: But, I think it's really a very, very enjoyable film. I think people are going to love meeting these two. I'm giving it four stars.

## Retrospective of a double life



The Topp Twins: *Untouchable Girls* is now screening.

Photo: *Supplied*

### Other related coverage

November 27, 2009

#### **New Zealand's favourite twins give their career a flick. By Stephanie Bunbury.**

GOING to a Topp Twins gig in New Zealand is a bit like going to a thousand-strong family reunion. Up front are Jools and Lynda Topp, 51-year-old identical twins singing country harmonies in unearthly stereo.

The fact Lynda and Jools are gay, look gay and talk about being gay when they're on stage doesn't faze the grannies, the children or the country-music rednecks. Partly thanks to the Topps, they're over that.

Last year, when they reached their aggregate centenary, the Topps commissioned a documentary that follows their trajectory from hayseed hoydens to national treasures.

*The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls* is full of music but it also tells their story from childhood to Jools' recent recovery from cancer. It also includes plenty of footage from demonstrations - against apartheid, pro-gay rights and for Maori land rights - where they sang.

Audiences at the Toronto Film Festival may not have heard of them but they voted the film best documentary.

"But every single country in the world has had its own version of these struggles," Jools says. "We've just been lucky to live in a small enough place to be able to make a difference."

Not that anybody has ever sent them hate mail, Lynda assures me. "Of course," Jools chips in, "we've got this fabulous weapon called laughter."

You can get a thousand people in a theatre who may have the most unbelievable disagreements about politics but they want to have a good night out, right? And if you can get all these people laughing at the same time, that is the most political thing you can do as an entertainer."

But it isn't the only thing. Their comic characters - the drunken, race-going ladies; the mad camp leaders; the fat country blokes - are never cruel.

"We had this motto from very early on," Lynda says. "'Amuse but never abuse.' To put someone down, you don't have to know anything about them. To send someone up, you have to know everything about them."

**The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls is now screening.**

Sydney Morning Herald 27.11.09

Australia has Barry Humphries. New Zealand has the Topp Twins - lesbian sisters who yodel and sing country and western and embody a gallery of comic characters of both sexes. The star of the collection wears a fuchsia tracksuit and has all the bossiness of Edna Everage with none of the malice.

But there the comparison ends. In contrast to Humphries' acerbic take on anything with a tilt to the left, the Topps - Lynda and Jools - are seasoned campaigners for homosexual law reform, Maori land rights and a nuclear-free New Zealand. Impressed by their ability to combine radical politics with the conservatism of country music, a fellow activist, the British singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, calls them "an anarchist variety act".

They're now in their early 50s and Leanne Pooley's documentary is a salute to them and their careers. It's not exactly a hagiography.

The word seems incongruous given the homespun air of modesty which epitomises their style but they themselves set the tone of all-embracing cheeriness which pervades the action. It's more celebration than examination.

It's framed around a concert which treats us to an extended sampling of everything they do. They sing, reminisce, take us backstage and bring out some of their more popular alter egos, which span a cross-section of New Zealand life. They do sheep farmers, lady bowlers, teenage delinquents, bootscooters and two socialites called Prue and Dilly, who've become great favourites with their real-life models.

One hostess, who had them along to one of her fund-raisers, fondly recalls them contributing to the day's takings by having her other guests pay to inspect the contents of her well-stocked wardrobe.

Friends, family, colleagues and fellow comics also pitch in with their memories and observations, which are amplified by archival film. There's even a selection of home movies dating from the sisters' childhood, which was spent on a Waikato dairy farm.

They still prefer country life and these days they and their respective partners farm together. Their parents talk candidly about them, saying that it took them a while to adjust to the fact that they will never be grandparents, for the Topps' brother is also gay. But they're clearly proud, if faintly puzzled, by their daughters' success in amusing a large proportion of the New Zealand population, together with audiences in Australia, Canada, the US and Britain.

If the sisters had a tough time making it in show business, we don't hear about it. They started as buskers in Auckland in their early 20s, then in 1982 they joined the anti-apartheid rallies held to protest the Springboks' tour of New Zealand. And from there, it seems, they segued smoothly into a concert career.

Over the next 10 years, they appeared on stage backing Split Enz and Midnight Oil. Indeed by 1989 they were popular enough to draw big crowds and they hit on the idea of touring small town New Zealand in a gypsy caravan. A prime-time television series followed. Now the Topps and their alter egos are national institutions.

In their youth, they looked like duplicates of kd lang but their resemblance to lang - and to one another - has diminished with the years.

The Topps pride themselves on their talent for improvisation. Each show is slightly different from the last and, as with Humphries, they depend on audience participation. Unlike Humphries, however, they take care not to embarrass.

The strength of the bond between them enlivens every scene. They finish one another's sentences and giggle at one another's jokes. And when they talk about Jools's recent bout with breast cancer, it's Lynda who expresses their relief at the success of her treatment.

Do they ever argue? Yes, they do. According to one friend, their fights are spectacular.

Unfortunately, we have to take his word for it because Pooley is too tactful to show them in action. It's a pity. For all their charm, the sisters' perennial sunniness makes for a pretty bland film.

- *Review by Sandra Hall for SMH*

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