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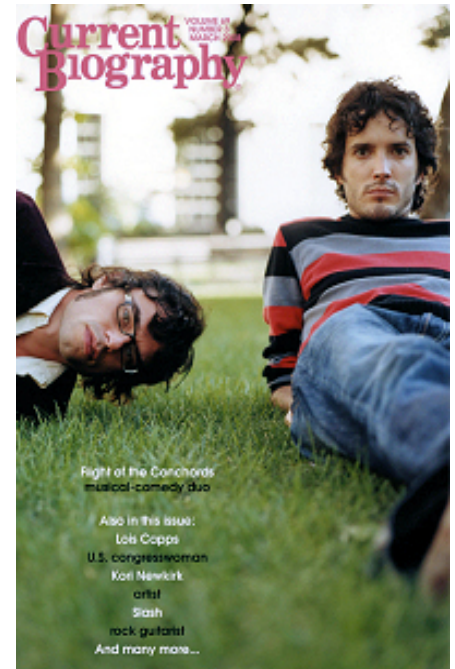
Current Biography

Flight of the Conchords

Since they teamed up in 1998, while they were university students in their native New Zealand, Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie—known together as Flight of the Conchords—have gained a significant cult following for their dry, understated comedic style and their acoustic parodies of a wide spectrum of musical genres, from folk to funk, “gangsta” rap to rock love ballads. They first won attention with performances at dozens of notable comedy festivals around the globe, where they earned several awards, the respect of fellow comedians, and the allegiance of a core following. They received rave reviews and played sold-out shows at the prestigious Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2002, 2003, and 2004. Their smash-hit performance on the HBO comedy special *One Night Stand*, in 2006, that launched Flight of the Conchords into semi-stardom, leading to their eponymous

HBO sitcom, which premiered in June 2007. The show follows Clement and McKenzie as they play exaggerated fictional versions of themselves, awkward members of a two-person band from New Zealand trying to make it in New York City; it also features original Flight of the Conchords songs, woven into each episode. Receiving mostly positive reviews, the show has recently been renewed for a second season, slated to debut in the spring of 2008. Clement and McKenzie have been surprised by the scale of their success but not by the appeal of their low-key New Zealand brand of comedy in other cultures. Clement told Christine Fenno for *Entertainment Weekly* (June 2007, on-line) that there is “something gained” in the translation of their humor to an American setting. “Because, you know, we’re quite low energy. And that’s unusual here . . . usually people are running on stage with their hands up in the air. And we just . . . sit there. I think people find that funny, that we’re not shouting. There’s something funny about being on a big stage and not making a big effort to fill it up.”

Jemaine Clement—the member of the duo with glasses, a cleft chin, and sideburns, who resembles “a hybrid of [the comedian] David Cross and someone very handsome,” as Troy Patterson wrote for *Slate Magazine* (June 15, 2007)—was born in New Zealand on January 10, 1974, the eldest of three sons. He grew up in Masterton, a town near Wellington, the country’s capital. Little is known about his immediate family. His father was originally from Australia. His mother, a fan of the singing group the Jackson Five, named Clement after one of the Jackson brothers, Jermaine. (Available sources do not explain the absence of an “r” from Clement’s given name.) Although he was shy and quiet as a child (traits that he has retained in adulthood), he had an early interest in comedy. From about age nine to 17, he practiced his vocal impressions by imitating the voices he heard on television. Clement recalled in an interview for the fan Web site [whatthefolk.com](#) that at age 11 or so he watched the television comedy series *Blackadder*, starring



Rowan Atkinson, and thought, "I want to do something like that." Of on-stage comedy, Clement told Sarah Kuhn for *Back Stage East* (June 14, 2007), "I loved watching it, and I remember going to live comedy shows a couple of times and seeing how the audience reacts and just thinking it was quite exciting; it was like a rock concert, really." Clement got his own start in comedy during high school, when he had to repeat his senior year after failing an exam. Writing for *USAweekend.com* (June 17, 2007), Lorrie Lynch quoted Clement as saying, "I was older than the other kids. . . . I'd always wanted to do something creative, so I developed a new persona and entertained the class." He attended Victoria University of Wellington, where he studied drama and film and began writing and performing his own comedic material. At an audition Clement met a fellow writer/performer, Taika Waititi; together they formed a comedy duo called Humourbeasts and began performing throughout New Zealand and Australia. Referring to the lack of competition in New Zealand's less-than-thriving comedy scene, Clement told Kuhn, "It's very easy to break in. I would say anyone could get a gig. There's one dedicated comedy club in the whole country." During the 1990s Clement worked with Waititi in writing and performing for the New Zealand TV sketch-comedy shows *Skitz* and *Tellylaughs*.

Bret Peter Tarrant McKenzie, who, Patterson wrote, "has a face like a knife and eyes to make all the girls swoon," was born on June 29, 1976 in Wellington, the second of three sons. His mother, Deirdre Tarrant, was a dance teacher, choreographer, and founder/director of New Zealand's Footnote Dance Company. McKenzie and his brothers regularly accompanied their mother overseas, where she worked stints as a choreographer, dance teacher, and dance examiner. McKenzie's father, Peter McKenzie, was a lawyer, actor, and singer. Sarah Boyd reported for the Wellington *Dominion Post* (August 12, 2006) that the boys' grandfather was "an important figure in their lives," often engaging in activities with them after school, when their parents were working. McKenzie's parents encouraged him and his brothers to become involved in sports, dance, and music as children. As a result McKenzie learned to play instruments including guitar, ukulele, keyboard, and drums. Both of his brothers still live in Wellington; his older brother, Justin, works at a liquor company, and his brother Jonathan has a job in telecommunications. McKenzie told an interviewer for HBO (on-line) that he held his worst job when he was 11 years old, explaining, "We had a bowling alley in my town, but it didn't have the machines that picked up the pins. So I was one of the boys who picked up the pins." Like Clement, McKenzie studied drama and film at Victoria University of Wellington. He played instruments in several bands, including keyboard in the seven-person soul, funk, and reggae band the Black Seeds.

Clement and McKenzie crossed paths in 1998, while working on a project with the filmmaker Duncan Sarkies. As Clement explained during an interview for HBO, the two met under fortuitous circumstances: "Bret had a guitar but didn't know how to play guitar. And I knew how to play guitar, but I didn't have a guitar. So . . . Bret came over to my place with his guitar and I told him how to play it." The two aspiring performers became roommates. With three others, including Waititi, they formed a comedy act and toured New Zealand and Australia, performing under the names So You're a Man and Generation Y Literati. Soon Clement and McKenzie, growing tired of auditioning for TV shows and commercials, decided to form a band. Both men have said that the decision to write their own songs, rather than play covers of others' material, was based on their relative lack of musical experience. "It takes ages to learn somebody else's song because you have to remember it all," Clement told Brian Logan for the London *Guardian* (August 12, 2003). "But if you make up your own, who's gonna pull you up for being wrong?" McKenzie recalled to Bess Manson for the *Dominion Post* (October 1, 2003) the simplicity of their first songs' chord progression: "It was like A A A A, D A A A." (In more recent interviews, the pair have boasted of having learned up to 11 chords. "You can always tell when we've learned a new chord," Clement told Logan, "because we'll use it in our next three songs.") Clement and McKenzie did not initially intend to perform musical comedy, as McKenzie told a journalist for the New Zealand *Nelson Mail* (July 17, 2003); rather, they just wrote funny songs. Their becoming a musical-comedy act was an incidental outcome of their first gig at a small New Zealand club. "We were supposed to be supplying the music for a comedy night," McKenzie said to Logan, "but—and I can't remember how it happened—we ended up being one of the acts." The pair's name, Flight of the Conchords, came from a dream that McKenzie had about a "V formation of

flying V guitars that kind of looked like Concordes," as he told HBO. The spelling of "Conchord" was inspired by musical chords. (Clement and McKenzie also considered the name "Tanfastic," after a New Zealand brand of suntan lotion.)

The successful first night of their act led to subsequent gigs throughout New Zealand and Australia. "It was always going to be a strange band," McKenzie admitted to Dave Itzkoff for the *New York Times* (June 10, 2007). "It might have been a very different story if we ended up playing rock venues. We just ended up playing comedy clubs." They received a positive response and slowly began to cultivate a following. Although they billed themselves as a folk duo, they satirized folk musicians as well as some of their favorite artists and groups from other musical genres, including James Brown, Parliament, Prince, Bob Dylan, and Leonard Cohen. Other musical influences include Stevie Wonder, Wings, Cat Stevens, Beck, Crowded House, Hall and Oates, and the New Zealand artists Neil and Tim Finn. Much of the Conchords' deadpan, understated humor came through during their awkward dialogue with each other between songs, when they discussed such purposely mundane subjects as a trip to the post office. "If we can act as though we're the genuine article," McKenzie told Logan, referring to folk musicians, "people will find it funnier. We've been trying to come up with banter that's as boring as possible." The pair soon began traveling the globe—spending more money than they earned—to perform on stages at comedy festivals. They took their first full-length show in 2000 to a small pub at the 2000 Calgary Fringe Festival, in Calgary, Canada.

In 2001 Flight of the Conchords performed their show entitled "Folk the World" to sold-out audiences at Bat's Theatre in New Zealand. The show featured songs on subjects including angels making love in the clouds, the desire to touch the "fishy bit" of a mermaid, and the story of a person being eaten by his starving friends while on a lifeboat. Tim Cardy wrote for the *New Zealand Evening Post* (May 5, 2001), "Decked out in super flares and an overdose of polyester, the two plucked guitars and banged bongos, while helped along by several surprise guest musos, including ukulele and cello players. The songs ranged in style from corny early 70s folk rock to overdone Latin American, pseudo-Hawaiian, bluegrass, pomp rock and a good dose of funk . . . But what took Folk The World to another level was the wit and musicianship Clement and McKenzie also brought to the stage. Not only was each song very funny, but each could be enjoyed even if you didn't take in the lyrics."

In 2002 Clement and McKenzie took their "Folk the World" show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the largest arts festival in the world. During that event the relatively unknown act slowly began to garner an audience, especially among fellow performers. McKenzie told Logan, "We became a kind of show for other comedians to see after their shows. . . . They liked it because it was quite different to what they do." A journalist for the *New Zealand Herald* (May 13, 2002) wrote, "An extremely dry, deadpan wit is on display here as Clement and McKenzie chat in a series of verbal riffs that celebrate the unlikely and the preposterous to equally rollicking effect. . . . What really sets them apart is the fact that the music itself is first-rate—some of their songs deserve radio play—and it runs the gamut from hip hop to bebop, with a fusion jazz underpinning." Flight of the Conchords earned a 2002 Spirit of the Fringe Award, honoring both their talent and their creative spirit. Following the 2002 festival Clement and McKenzie met with casting directors and media executives in Los Angeles, California, to discuss a possible project, but they were not sure what they wanted the project to be. McKenzie told Logan, "They'd ask us, 'So, what do you guys wanna do?' It was a dream opportunity to say, 'We want to make a film.' And they would have gone, 'Well, here's 20 million.' . . . It was really exciting, but you needed to have a clear idea of what you wanted to do. And we didn't really have any idea at all." They did, however, record and release an album, *Folk the World*, in 2002, featuring live performances of several songs.

The following year, at the 2003 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Flight of the Conchords took the stage late at night and in a secluded venue underneath a bridge. That uninviting site notwithstanding, their show, "High on Folk," gained widespread popularity as the year's "buzz comedy act," as it was dubbed by Brian Logan. Of the 2003 performance,

Logan wrote, "The musicianship is impressive: Clement and McKenzie's folk-rap crossover, 'The Hiphopotamus Meets Rhymenoceros,' sounds like a beatbox Bohemian Rhapsody. And there's more, from Ennio Morricone to acoustic electronica and beyond. There are also blissfully funny lyrics." The show was nominated for a Perrier Award, the United Kingdom's most prestigious comedy award, honoring the most outstanding up-and-coming stand-up comedy/comedy cabaret act. The duo stayed in the U.K. and Ireland for three weeks, performing more than 40 shows; one took place at Her Majesty's Theatre in London's West End, with other comedians on the Perrier Award shortlist, before an audience of 1,400. Flight of the Conchords also participated in a six-part pilot series for BBC Radio about the band's bumbling, misguided attempts to make it big in London; narrated by the Welsh actor and comedian Rob Bryn and featuring several other Fringe comedians, the series, almost completely improvised, was recorded on a portable mini-disc machine in various London locations. It was eventually picked up by BBC's Radio 2 and aired in September 2005, earning a bronze Comedy Award at the Sony Radio Academy Awards in the following year. Meanwhile, in 2004 the pair made their third appearance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where, as a well-known act this time, they had their choice of stages. They performed their show "Lonely Knights" before sold-out audiences and stayed in London to perform a 10-night gig at the Soho Theater.

As Flight of the Conchords gained increasing popularity, each member continued to pursue his own creative projects, which were many and varied. McKenzie directed and performed in a number of successful New Zealand theater productions, including *Dirt* (1998), which was named best original production at the Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards; *AAARGH!!!* (2000); and *Live Transmissionz* (2002). He gained cult recognition as an extra in the film *Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). Among fans of that film, whose characters include Frodo Baggins, McKenzie's role as a silent but distractingly attractive elf earned him the nickname "figwit," an acronym for "Frodo is great . . . who is that?!" (The line is meant to represent the excited reactions of viewers who find McKenzie so attractive onscreen that he steals their attention away from the film's main character.) At least one Internet site is devoted chiefly to McKenzie's turn as an elf, and many others mention it. Shot in his home town of Wellington, the film and its sequels employed quite a few residents as extras, including McKenzie's brother and father. McKenzie also toured with his band, the Black Seeds, and recorded three albums (*Keep on Pushing*, 2001; *On the Sun*, 2003; and *Pushed*, 2003). In 2003 McKenzie released a four-track record with a group of musicians called the Dub Connection. He also played gigs around New Zealand with the Wellington International Ukelele Orchestra.

During his time away from the Conchords, Clement performed with Taika Waititi as the Humourbeasts. They took their award-winning show, "The Untold Tales of Maui," to stages all over the world in 2004. Clement also earned awards as a writer and voice actor for a number of New Zealand radio shows, including *Trashed* and *The Sunglasses Store*. He wrote and appeared in the action comedy *Tongan Ninja* (2002) and, along with a fellow comedian, Guy Capper, wrote a clay-animation film called *The Pen*, about two sheep chatting in a bar. The Pen appeared at film festivals in 2007. Those numerous and varied projects notwithstanding, Clement told Margaret Agnew for the Christchurch, New Zealand, *Press* (October 20, 2004), "There's other things I'd like to be doing as well. I always feel like I'm missing out on something."

At the 2004 Melbourne Comedy Festival, where the duo took home the award for best newcomer, Flight of the Conchords caught the attention of the U.S. networks Fox and NBC; they accepted an offer from NBC to develop a TV series, but the deal later fell through. In the spring of 2005, Clement and McKenzie attracted the interest of another big name, the cable network HBO. After they performed at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado, where they received the award for best alternative comedy act, HBO executives invited them to perform in Los Angeles for their stand-up comedy special *One Night Stand*. Following the success of that special—and in light of its popularity in later months on the video-sharing Web site YouTube—HBO signed Clement and McKenzie to create a 12-episode sitcom series, scheduled to air beginning in June 2007; in the series they would star as fictional versions of

themselves. Clement told Tom Howard for *Time Out* (September 12, 2007) that their dealings with HBO executives progressed quickly. "In England a meeting is: 'Well we hope you can work with us if you're at all interested,'" he said. "In America it's more like: 'We want you to start on Monday.' I'm sure that's part of how we got swept over here. You have to be stronger willed than we are to say no to the Americans."

On several previous occasions Clement and McKenzie had pitched the show to media executives in New Zealand without success. Once Clement proposed the show to a co-worker at a TV production company where he was employed around the time that he and McKenzie formed the Conchords. "I said, I'm doing this band thing, and I think that may be a good show, with two guys trying to get gigs and stuff—basically the same idea [as the HBO series]. And he just screwed up his face really," Clement recalled to Thomas Rogers for salon.com. Clement and McKenzie have frequently remarked—likely somewhat in jest—on the humorlessness of New Zealanders and the frustrating lack of recognition they have received in their native country. "New Zealand is where comedy goes to die," McKenzie quipped to Charlie Amter for the *Los Angeles Times* (July 5, 2007). "It's so hard to get anything in New Zealand," Clement told Cardy. "You feel a little bit under-appreciated and you go: 'I'm sure if we did this thing in America people would like it or if we did it in England.' It's good to find out that you are right."

As co-writers, executive producers, and stars of the new series, Clement and McKenzie faced many challenges in adapting their on-stage performance to a half-hour TV series. For example, they needed to give their characters, also named Jemaine and Bret, greater dimension. Clement told Kuhn for VNU *Entertainment News Wire* (June 27, 2007, on-line) that on stage, he and McKenzie "had vague . . . personas, but we had to [create] characters that you could tell stories about." The Jemaine character, he said, is "an exaggeration of what I'm like on a bad day. When I get grumpy and I'm sick of doing something, I'm slightly like that character." For the television show to work, the pair also had to create some kind of conflict between the Jemaine and Bret characters. Unlike many comedy duos, however, whose acts are based on the illusion of conflict and competition, Clement and McKenzie always agreed with and helped each other while on stage. "We tried to make [the original relationship] into a sitcom, and you couldn't—that structure didn't really help in creating stories, so we had to add a little more antagonism between the characters," McKenzie told Rogers.

Shot on location at bars and on streets and apartment stoops in the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City's borough of Manhattan, the show follows the roommates and bandmates Bret and Jemaine as they fumble through their attempts to secure gigs, get the hang of living in New York, and find true love. They are helped (or hindered) by their manager, Murray (played by Rhys Darby), who also happens to be the New Zealand consul, and constantly followed by Mel (Kristen Schaal), the sole member of their fan club. The story lines tend to be absurd, the conflicts humorous and inconsequential. In one episode Jemaine discovers that he has been dating Bret's ex-girlfriend; in another Jemaine decides that an audiotope would be an adequate substitute for Bret in live performances; and in another, Bret becomes obsessed with constructing a helmet that resembles his own hair. In meetings with the duo, Murray insists on parliamentary-style roll call, and every few episodes Bret quits the act, only to return shortly thereafter. The group's songs—about two per episode—are incorporated into the story lines as music-video-like segments, often resembling iconic videos from the past. "One of the challenges of the show was to incorporate songs we'd already written so they felt like they organically fitted in," McKenzie recalled to Howard. As in their live performances, the humor of the show—which has no laugh track—is not punchline-based; rather, it comes from the quiet, deadpan delivery of lines (many of them improvised) and from long, awkward silences. McKenzie told Rogers, "James [Bobin, the series' director], Jemaine and I, we're all big fans of understated comedy shows. That's a style we enjoy. I guess we made the show to amuse ourselves rather than being conscious of a particular audience." The show's aesthetic has been compared to that of the filmmaker Wes Anderson's work.

The series *Flight of the Conchords* premiered in the United States in June 2007 and received mainly positive reviews.

Rogers wrote, "Unlike most musical comedy groups, Flight of the Conchords are legitimately funny. Their lyrics are neither sophomoric nor overly precious, and their deadpan delivery is frequently hilarious." Reviewers also complimented the quality of Clement and McKenzie's songwriting and singing. Howard wrote, "The sections that give Conchords a real edge are the self-penned songs that the duo burst into at key moments. They add a fantasy element, but are included in such a way so as not to hold up the narrative or the laughs." In one episode McKenzie, having taken a job as a sign holder to supplement the band's meager income, falls for a co-worker and sings, as quoted by Rob Owen for Scripps Howard News Service (June 13, 2007), "I want to tell her how hot she is, but she'll think I'm sexist / Oh, my god, she's so hot, she's making me sexist." In another episode, when Clement's girlfriend breaks up with him, he croons, "I'm not weeping 'cos you won't be there to hold my hand / For your information there's an inflammation in my tear gland / I'm not upset 'cos you left me this way / My eyes are just a little sweaty today." A number of critics found the show too awkward to be funny. In a review representative of that reaction, Ray Richmond wrote for Reuters (June 14, 2007) that *Flight of the Conchords* "has its moments of wiggly charm but lacks an essential ingredient: star charisma. Its two leads . . . are deadpan and clever but so cloyingly doofy that they're not only tough to root for but difficult to watch for extended periods as well." In September the show premiered in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, where it was also met with mostly good reviews.

Flight of the Conchords' second album contains songs from the first season of their TV series. Released on August 7, 2007 on the indie-rock label Sub Pop records, the album is titled *The Distant Future*, after a line in a celebratory song written for robots to listen to in the future, after humans have become extinct.

On August 17, 2007 HBO announced the renewal of *Flight of the Conchords* for a second 12-episode season, set to premiere in the spring of 2008. McKenzie told Howard, "Unfortunately we've used most of our stockpile of songs up to now. We'll have to write a whole bunch more for the second [season]." Clement noted to Cardy for the Dominion Post (August 20, 2007) that it was likely that the second season would include fewer than 12 episodes, so that the group could concentrate on creating songs of "quality not quantity." Clement and McKenzie returned to Wellington in October 2007 to write the material for the next season. DVDs of the first season of *Flight of the Conchords* were released in November 2007.

Meanwhile, Clement and McKenzie's side projects flourished. In 2004 McKenzie launched a solo music project in which he performed as a character called the Video Kid, with a debut album, *Prototype*, and in 2006 McKenzie's band, the Black Seeds, released a new album, *Into the Dojo*. Clement appeared in a series of commercials for Outback Steakhouse, thanks to his exposure on the 2006 HBO special. He told Kuhn (June 14, 2007), "The people making [the ads] saw the special. I guess out of me and Bret, I'm the bigger one; I look like I eat more steak than him." Clement has written and directed several films, including the mock documentary *What We Do in the Shadows* (2006), exploring the lifestyles of three vampires, which were shown at New Zealand film festivals in early 2007. He also starred in *Eagle vs. Shark* (2007), a quirky comedy about two misfits who fall in love, directed by his fellow Humourbeast Taika Waititi. That film won the award for best screenplay at the 2007 U.S. Comedy Arts Festival and was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. It appeared in select theaters in the United States in 2007.

Flight of the Conchords has continued to perform their stage act throughout the United States. The laid-back duo seem largely unchanged by their success, remaining self-deprecatory and seemingly puzzled by the idea of their celebrity. They stress to interviewers that they are neither wealthy nor famous, especially not in New Zealand, where comedians are not seen as "cool" the way they are in the United States. For the past year or so, Clement and McKenzie have divided their time among New York, Los Angeles, and Wellington, the last-named city being the base of their other artistic groups and projects and a location that Clement has described as "a good place to be creative."

Both Clement and McKenzie have girlfriends from New Zealand, whom they “imported” to New York City while filming the HBO series. Clement told Itzkoff, “People are always surprised to hear that I’m a comedian. Like, people will say: ‘But you’re not funny. You don’t even talk.’” McKenzie agreed, adding, “Jemaine and I are both particularly understated. When we’re hanging out with other New Zealanders, we’re still two of the quieter ones.”

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