



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Jane Cornwell | PHOTOGRAPH BY Simon Schluter

ABC radio host Brian Nankervis (top), 65, met Colin Lane, 56, of comedy duo Lano & Woodley, three decades ago after a volleyball slammed into Colin's head. Since then, how to make their partners laugh has been a stable topic of debate.

COLIN: I first saw Brian in 1987 on stage, at Collingwood's Last Laugh Theatre Restaurant, in a hospital soap opera. I was just out of Victoria College, where I'd been learning to teach drama at the Rusden campus. Brian and his crew were older and, in their gleeful throwing around of fake blood and sausages, seemed free and joyous. Their lack of cynicism was a vital lesson for me, a young, self-conscious comic.

We met properly during the 1992 Adelaide Fringe Festival. I'd come off a waterpark ride called Montezooma's Revenge and was already traumatised when a volleyball suddenly slammed into my head. Brian bounded over, apologised, then led me to this game he'd organised involving other comedians. He loves games; they allow him to switch off his brain and relax.

We've been playing football in St Kilda twice a week for 25 years. We're in all kinds of clubs together: book; cricket; tennis; frisbee. He does this little swagger dance if he wins a tight contest, which is unusual for such a humble guy – and a tad irritating.

Our wives, Marnie and Sue, and our kids – we both have three children – are great friends, too, so it makes sense for us all to take holidays together. We like the idea of getting everyone outside their comfort zones. In Italy once, Brian backed out of a car park, crashed into a

car and managed somehow, in half-baked Italian, to charm the driver and engage the *carabinieri* in an orange-juggling competition. Brian insisted I get involved. Sometimes he's like a bad big brother.

On the Greek island of Hydra in 2013, he had us playing table tennis on the kitchen table using books as a net. When he discovered that Leonard Cohen had a house nearby, he went on about it until my eyes glazed over. Brian's love of music borders on the obsessive [Nankervis is a co-creator of *RockWiz*]. It perplexes him that I don't feel the same way, yet he's so un-rock'n'roll: he hardly drinks and doesn't stay out late. If a candle had four ends, though, he'd burn them all: writing, performing, organising, supporting good causes and getting lost in *bobdylan.com*.

He asks questions constantly. He wants to know what everyone's reading, listening to, thinking about. Talking about our various encounters, Brian and I will ask each other, "Were they interesting – and were they interested?" Empathy's important to both of us. Sometimes I can feel a bit uncomfortable in some social situations and we agree that it's often easier to listen to someone else's story than reveal our own. As my dad used to say, "It's better to be silent and look like a fool than speak and remove all doubt."

I can be a bit negative and critical of people from time to time, but never of Brian. I can talk to him about anything. The fact that he loves what I do and that his kids still genuinely enjoy Lano & Woodley lines feels pretty special.

Brian expects everything to be great, therefore it kind of is. Even after all this time, I think I'm still trying not to disappoint him. He helps me be my best possible self.

BRIAN: My first main memory of Colin is from the '92 Adelaide Fringe. It was hot. He was standing outside the Magic Mountain theme park wearing white Bermuda shorts and red socks. He looked dazed; maybe it was the volleyball that had just hit him in the head. I invited him to join a game. I'd admired him onstage so it was an opportunity to get to know him.

Our friendship deepened when Colin joined our local football collective, The Kick, in St Kilda. Then we started playing cricket in his backyard, since we lived just five doors away from each other. Today we're still just around the corner and we still play so much sport.

We often discuss how to make our partners laugh; they can be really tough. Their opinions are the ones we value most, but it's hard to come back from "I've seen that before" or "What made you think that was funny?" Colin copes better than me with that kind of feedback: I'm trying to learn from him.

We both grew up in the shadow of Shopping Town in Doncaster and share a shorthand in terms of geography and our place in Melbourne's tribes. Our upbringings were religious. Colin's dad was in the Salvation Army and Colin played trombone in church in Box Hill. I went to the same Methodist church in North Balwyn until I was 20. Belonging to church youth groups probably stopped us going off the rails.

Colin is dashing, confident and articulate, but there's a vulnerability there, too. He was 19 when he lost his brother, just two-and-a-half years older, in a car accident. The tragedy has given him a depth of character; he's certainly a very good listener. I once visited him at home at midnight after a terrible corporate gig. Being able to talk to him about that over a cup of tea meant the world to me. I was feeling humiliated – I'd died on stage – but hearing him talk about a couple of his bad experiences, which were funny in hindsight, I realised I had to lighten up.

I think he finds my endless curiosity a bit irritating, but I'm just genuinely interested. I suppose I'd like him to be more aware of the early work of Bob Dylan or happily read a depressing novel in book club; he gave Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* three out of 10! He thinks life is already full of pain, so why read books that wallow in it? He wants *Jive Talkin'* played at his funeral.

I admire Colin's inventive clowning. When he comes over, my kids love quoting Lano & Woodley dialogue back at him and he's chuffed by that. When they took a break in 2006, it gave Colin the opportunity to showcase some of his other talents, like his beautiful singing voice. In a rooftop bar in Athens one night in 2013, he mesmerised everyone with his version of *Fly Me to the Moon*. I was thrilled watching my friend entertain all these strangers thousands of miles from home. ■

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