



Clockwise from above: Zach Galifianakis in scenes from *The Beanie Bubble*, with co-star Sarah Snook; in a scene from *The Hangover* with Bradley Cooper and Ed Helms; with Kristen Wiig in a scene from the movie *Masterminds*; and interviewing Barack Obama on internet sensation *Between Two Ferns*



The accidental A-LISTER

Zach Galifianakis shot to fame in *The Hangover* franchise, but the comedian and actor remains utterly bewildered by celebrity culture, writes **JANE CORNWELL**

Celebrity culture is poisoning America, says Zach Galifianakis, comedian, actor, producer and, er, celebrity. Even with – or perhaps because of – his Hollywood success (he is best known for his goofball role as Alan in *The Hangover* trilogy), the bespectacled 56-year-old doesn't quite get the slavish admiration of the famous, the mass adulation of those who, through looks, luck and/or talent, are afforded god-like status.

His internet talk show *Between Two Ferns*, a series of awkward interviews with in-on-the-joke A-listers, poked the Hollywood bear in ways funny, mean and ludicrous and became a cult watch (and a 2019 Netflix movie) in the process. From 2008 to 2018 everyone from Jennifer Aniston to Jennifer Lawrence and Keanu Reeves turned up for a roasting.

Even [then president] Barack Obama got in on the act. "What are you plugging?" Galifianakis asked him, knowing the answer (affordable healthcare) but making us smile anyway.

His skewering of the pomposity of fame is sharp, winningly absurdist. "What do you have

against showers?" he asks "Bradley Pitts" of *12 Years a Slave* [sic].

"Would you rather be in Marvel movies or stuff that no one's heard of?" he asks Paul Rudd.

"You have the type of face that masturbates all day wearing a helmet," he informs Benedict Cumberbatch.

Galifianakis's early Comedy Central series *Dog Bites Man* was a fake news program in which people were fooled into thinking they were being interviewed by a real news crew, and puffed up accordingly. His interest in the vagaries of human behaviour feels almost anthropological; comedy, for him, is a pointing finger, a great leveller, a means of revealing the truth.

"The only A I got in college" – that's Wilkes Community College in his birthplace, North Wilkesboro, North Carolina – "was in anthropology," he says, open and friendly on a Zoom call from an island in British Columbia, Canada, where he lives for part of the year with his Canadian wife, a charity worker, and their two young sons.

"Celebrity culture is how we got our last president, the other one [Trump]." He frowns, swats the air. "For the past few years I've been screaming to people, 'Where are the anthropologists? Where are the sociologists to explain what's going on? We need to hear from them more.'"

Galifianakis is a determinedly unvain A-list-er. He's joked that he still can't pronounce his Greek surname (his father's family are from Crete), said that he loves anti-comedy ("Something so unfunny it's funny") over more traditional material. Still, given his rejection of the conventions of stardom, it seems ironic that two American publicists are here in the Zoom room with us – not so much *Between Two Ferns* as *Between Two PRs* – ready to jump in should I stray too far from the Apple TV movie he is plugging: *The Beanie Bubble*.

A semi-fictionalised take on the rise of Beanie Babies, the soft toy craze that blazed through American culture in the late 1990s, the film tells of former salesman and billionaire company founder Ty Warner (Galifianakis) and the three women who helped power his success.

Galifianakis gives a nuanced portrayal of a man-child who manufactured cheap stuffed animals in China for 30c then sold them for a profit to independent gift stores, who priced them even higher.

Embellished with heart-tags, understuffed to make them more huggable and positioned on shelves for maximum eye contact, small toys called things like Chops the Lamb, Chocolate the Moose and Speedy the Turtle became must-haves.

Soundtracked with hits by the likes of Prince