

ERIC AND ERNIE'S FINEST HOURS

A new two-part documentary pays tribute to Britain's funniest comedy double act

It may be a showbiz cliché, but it's true: they really don't make them like they used to.

Look for a modern-day equivalent to the legendary Morecambe and Wise and you'll draw a blank. Ant and Dec? Not really. Hugely adored though they are, they're the product of a very different time.

The age that created Eric and Ernie – the era of variety and music hall in which this pair forged a partnership that would make them British TV's biggest stars – is recalled as part of a nostalgic two-part documentary.

Morecambe And Wise Forever charts this hard-working northern double act's rise to stardom – from a mid-50s BBC series that the critics slated to a 70s heyday when their Christmas specials drew audiences of up to 27 million.

"Those shows brought the whole country together," recalls Mark Robinson, the documentary's executive producer. "There was a lot going on in the world back then, as now, but somehow they made Britain feel a better place."

The ITV3 special is the latest in a series that celebrates stars from the 60s

"THOSE SHOWS BROUGHT THE WHOLE COUNTRY TOGETHER... THEY MADE BRITAIN FEEL A BETTER PLACE"

DOCUMENTARY PRODUCER
MARK ROBINSON



With Glenda Jackson as Cleopatra

photos from the duo's film career, to the delight of Eric's widow Joan and their daughter Gail.

"We found Eric's old Rolls-Royce," Mark reveals, "and his chauffeur. He took Gail and her brother Gary to the house in Morecambe where their dad was born. They'd never been before."

Other highlights include footage of the pair in New York, filmed by Ernie's wife Doreen. "They were there to try and break America," Mark explains. "It's fascinating to see them out of context, walking down Broadway or on a boat trip to the Statue of Liberty."

Of course, for many viewers the greatest joy will always be recalling the pair's classic sketches – the most famous of which, reflecting their variety roots, nearly always had a musical flavour and usually featured a star guest being gently humiliated.

"It was all done with a lot of fondness," Mark reminds us. "I'm sure agents were queuing up to get their acts on Eric and Ernie's show. It was the ultimate showbiz accolade."

Mike Ward



With the London Symphony Orchestra's André Previn in 1971

GRIEG'S PIANO CONCERTO (1971)

Inept piano soloist Eric does not impress guest conductor Andre "Mr Preview" Previn, of the LSO. But he's riled by the exasperated Previn's criticism. "I'm playing all the right notes," Eric insists. "But," he concedes, "not necessarily in the right order..."

THE BREAKFAST SKETCH (1976)

Eric and Ernie are sitting having breakfast in their dressing gowns, listening to the radio, when on comes the hit tune *The Stripper*. Cue: a spontaneous dance routine around their kitchen, inventively using props ranging from eggs to grapefruit to sausages.

MASTERMIND (1974)

Quizmaster Magnus Magnusson introduces his two finalists: Ernie Wise (Harrow University, professor of English literature), and Eric Morecambe (Milverton Street School Infants). Ernie plays it as a smug brainbox, Eric an utter dimwit.

No prizes for guessing who wins.

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN (1976)

This neatly choreographed Hollywood parody, from the 1976 Christmas show, sees Ernie recreate the role played in the hit 1952 movie by a brolly-twirling Gene Kelly, with Eric as the policeman looking on. There's no rain as such, but Eric still gets hilariously soaked.

LET'S FACE THE MUSIC AND DANCE (1976)

"There may be trouble ahead," warns the BBC's Angela Rippon, perched behind her newsreader's desk. It's the opening line, of course, to Irving Berlin's 30s classic – the cue for Angela, then 32, to shove the desk aside and break into a spectacular dance routine.

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA (1971)

A running gag was the delusional Ernie's belief in his playwriting talents. As Queen Cleopatra, guest Glenda Jackson – then one of Britain's biggest stars of stage and screen – had to deliver the line, "All men are fools, and what makes them so is having beauty like what I have got..."

EXACTLY LIKE YOU (1971)

Exactly Like You is an old pre-war Broadway hit. Dozens have recorded it, including Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. But Tom Jones – guesting here at the age of 31 – is the only one to have had Eric and Ernie as backing singers, doing the "yeah yeah yeah" bits.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A DAME (1977)

A sailor-suited Eric and Ernie launch us into what looks like simply a song and dance routine. But one by one the singers and dancers behind them turn around, revealing themselves to be top BBC presenters such as Michael Aspel, Frank Bough, Eddie Waring, Richard Baker and Barry Norman.

THE CLEANING LADIES (1977)

Upset that he's missed the show, Elton John performs to just the cleaners, ie Eric and Ernie in drag. "That's what I was going to sing on *The Morecambe And Wise Show*," he tells them, glumly, after a moving rendition of *Shine On Through*. Their verdict? "It's a good job you didn't."

SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES (1971)

Shirley Bassey performs this famous number, while Eric and Ernie overdo the smoke effects. Bassey repeatedly cracked up during rehearsals but plays her part faultlessly on the night.



COOKING FOR BRITTON

Fern Britton and Gordon Ramsay are looking for a culinary genius in a new cookery competition

Fern Britton first locked eyes with TV chef Phil Vickery over the chopping board on *Ready, Steady, Cook* in 1999, and they married the next year. So there's a symmetry to their reunion on ITV's new daytime cookery show, *Culinary Genius*.

Fern is hosting the daily cookery-themed competition and Phil will be one of the celebrity chefs featured. Produced by swearly chef Gordon Ramsay – who also appears – the new kitchen competition features nine contestants competing in three quick-fire battle rounds: a knife-skills round, a ten-minute precision and skills test, and a final 25-minute cook-off. After each of the first two rounds, three contestants will be banished from the kitchen, leaving three to compete in the final round.

Despite her previous job as cookery-show host, and the fact she's known Gordon for 20 years, Fern tells *Saturday* she was astonished that Gordon offered her the job. "Gordon's production company told me that I was the

CULINARY GENIUS, DAILY, TIMES VARY, ITV

only person they wanted to do it and I was in a bit of shock to be asked!" laughs Fern. "But finally I realised that it was a wonderful offer and so I said yes."

Despite Gordon's sizzling temper and language, Fern insists that he's actually very friendly and funny and a very good boss. "Gordon's legendary swearing is very much part of who he is. The audience and contestants alike loved it when he let loose with it. There will be lots of editing, because this is a 3pm show!"

With one celebrity chef per week, Gordon kicks off the 20-part series, followed by Rosemary Shrager, Jean-Christophe Novelli and Phil.

"Gordon is charmingly brutal. Phil is so kind that the contestant doesn't even feel the knife go in. Rosemary is exuberant but takes no prisoners, and Jean-Christophe is very funny, then damns them with his Gallic glint."

Fern says her job is just to host the party. "And the cooks want to hear from Chef, not me!"

Vicki Power



MORECAMBE AND WISE FOREVER, TOMORROW & MONDAY, 9PM, ITV3