

DON MILLIGAN'S  
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## **John and Edward Grimes**

**JOHN AND EDWARD GRIMES** aka *Jedward* are the subject of a maelstrom of opinionating about, talent shows and celebrity. Is Simon Cowell playing a double game, denouncing the tuneless duo, while secretly planning future lucrative deals for the lads with the electric shock haircuts? Why does it matter where Cheryl Cole and Daniil Minogue sit in the judge's line-up? "Who knows? Who cares?" I can hear you say, but you'd be wrong. Indifference can seem cool and sophisticated, or even politically sound, but as Daniil Minogue says "We live and die by the decisions we make". How true.

The boys, John and Edward, are privately educated members of Dublin's well-heeled middle class. The twins cannot benefit from a 'rags to riches' fable; *Jedward* are not only lousy singers and dancers, they have also had a privileged upbringing. Now that's what you call unfortunate.

They know this. They also know that they will not be eighteen forever, they know that irrepressible enthusiasm and self-confidence, coupled with large smiles, bags of chutzpah, and perfect skin, is fascinating and admirable, regardless of their manifest failings. They also know that they must tirelessly rehearse and at least *try* not to be quite so bad, because they know that any hint of arrogance will be the end of them. It's a fine line they tread, and it is remarkable that they're able to walk it.

These kids are intelligent and talented; they simply have not yet found their true *métier*. No doubt Boyzone manager, Louis Walsh, and Simon Cowell of Sony Entertainment's SyCo (Simco Ltd) will help them to do so. Cowell has made a name for himself by being severe in both his judgements and his facial expressions. No doubt contestants in the many talent

shows he fronts are terrified of him but, like John and Edward, he knows exactly what he is doing. An A[rtists] & R[epertoire] executive for many years Simon Cowell has a detailed knowledge of music publishing. He knows how to spot potentially successful pop performers, find the right record producers, liaise with record labels, and organize studio sessions. He's capable of idiosyncratic initiatives like putting the operatic foursome *// Divo* on the pop circuit, and of promoting singers like Leona Lewis.

Cowell's UK tax bill of over £20m seems to indicate an annual income in the region of £60m. He has turned being a television producer and personality into an extremely successful business. Consequently, we should think of him for what he is, a talented entrepreneur and capitalist who makes his money from the public's fascination with cheap and cheerful entertainment shows that can sell advertising slots of thirty seconds for £200,000 minimum, and for many multiples of that in the United States.

The widespread belief that celebrity is undeserved needs thinking about. It is obvious that some people's claim to fame is somewhat thin, and they don't generally last very long. People like Jade Goody, famous for being famous, are few and far between (and Jade was indeed a one-off); most celebrities are singular athletes, actors, comedians, artists, singers, businessmen, journalists, academics or entertainers. They can, like *Jedward*, startle and astonish us; they can do something that most of us can't, and they can do it well. The "anyone could do that" argument, which often blends into the "I could do that" argument, is plainly absurd. Who else could be Paris Hilton or Lady Gaga, or, John and Edward for that matter?

"Are they worth the oodles and oodles of cash they get?" Should lottery jackpots be so big? "I wouldn't want to win £49 million, would you?" Well, I would actually, in fact, I had a ticket; unfortunately it was the wrong one.

The real problem with popular entertainment, from the National Lottery to *The X Factor* is the amount of

banal chatter, envy and just plain mean mindedness that it throws up. People generate very serious, hotly defended, opinions about this or that. They can get very annoyed when contradicted and everybody can establish a firm reason for their point of view. It is obvious why; if you can't explain why a short strand of Elvis Presley's hair mounted in a 12" x 22" frame sold at auction in Wiltshire last week for £1,055, why should anybody listen to your views on the nature of capitalism or the decline of civilization?

Discussions about the oodles of cash inescapably associated with celebrity and being a winner in the race of life, revolve around notions of value or worth, which are entirely irrelevant. People often talk as if they are discussing hourly rates of pay or the wages of postal workers. Footballers who are paid £115,000 a week by their club are not being paid a wage, they are getting a share of the profits earned from the sales of television rights and the marketing of their image. Like Simon Cowell or Cheryl Cole or Dani Minogue, their fees are negotiated by agents, or lawyers, and represent their share of the profits. In this sense they are not employees at all, they are capitalists living high on the hog from the profits of their personal enterprise, which is, of course, themselves – this is what they uniquely have to offer. They get paid oodles because unlike an ordinary worker, a family doctor, or a rank-and-file academic, their celebrity is irreplaceable; their bargaining power resides in the fact that nobody else could be them or could do precisely what it is that they do.

So celebrity finds itself often at the heart of a paradox: although apparently meretricious, superficial, and unimportant, it is the cause of much indignation and opinionating. The very same people who insist upon its superficiality and unworthiness are passionate in their interest in celebrity and are just as passionate in their denunciations of what they energetically argue is so obviously shallow and irrelevant. 'Celebrity Culture' is a mark or sign of our

decline. It signals not 'the end of history', but the end of rational thought, 'the end of politics'.

Now there's a thought. Might 'Celebrity Culture' have just been got up by the rich and powerful to distract us all from the really important things in life? Perhaps the trivialisation of everyday life is part of a capitalist plan to keep us all in our place. Perhaps?

On the other hand it might simply be a product of societies which are rich enough to provide most people with a fairly decent life, but not rich enough to ensure that everybody has the resources and leisure, or the capacity, for creative engagement. Perhaps it is because we are well enough off, and for the most part, secure enough to find politics dull and irrelevant, and yet not well enough off to take a hand actively in shaping our own circumstances and our own lives in a way which we would find intrinsically satisfying.

There is little doubt that it is through celebrities that we can live vicariously. We can imagine what our lives would be like if we were in control of them. This is why our popular media is saturated with the doings of the rich and famous. We love to imagine what we would do if we had a life we were in control of, we love to imagine what we would do if we could actually do what we want. This is, of course, why "dream", "living the dream" in a "dream home" with a "dream girl" or a "dream boy" (or both) is such an inspiring aspect of celebrity culture. It is all about dreaming that we don't have to go to work, dreaming that the mortgage is paid off, or that the landlord has vanished, dreaming that our credit cards are clear and that, we have, in some magical sense, become remarkable.

*Jedward* are living that dream, they have only been living it for a few weeks, they might be pitched back into lives like those of everybody else in the leafy parts of Dublin, or they might be the new Ant & Dec. We should wish them well. Let's hope that they, like the recent Euromillions winners, escape into the realm of freedom of which we all dream. It is true that we would gain nothing from their success, but we would gain even less from their failure.