

The Topp Twins. Untouchable Girls.  
**A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor**

This is a joyous movie, a healthy yodel to life well lived. Centre stage are Jools and Lynda Topp, filmed in concert, singing their songs, reminiscing among friends, telling the stories that have made them one of New Zealand's most recognisable entertainers.

With the concert providing a central narrative thread, director Leanne Pooley can carefully and tenderly inter-weave interview and archival TV footage.

The interviews offer space for the Twins to reflect on their farming roots, their busking beginnings, their public moments of protest, their touring, and their recent brush with breast cancer. These personal anecdotes are enriched by another round of interviews, from Billy Bragg to John Clarke, who chart the high notes that have made the Topp Twins career.

The archival footage then acts as a welcome interlude from song and speech, painting the background on which the twins have sung. From Bastion Point to the 1981 Springbok Tour, past the protests that marked homosexual law reform and Nuclear Free New Zealand, "Untouchable Girls" becomes a "This is your life ... New Zealand", a poignant contemporary social history of New Zealand.

The Topp twins are impossible to appreciate without the introduction of some of their stage character's: Ken and Ken, camp mother and camp leader, Raylene and Brenda, the Gingham Sisters, Prue and Dilly. These scenes provide some wonderfully comic dialogue, including the twins "in character" commenting on the Twins. One minute we are laughing, the next we are appreciating middle New Zealand caught in the Twins entertainment mirror.

Remuera philanthropist Rosie Horton calls them "prophetic." Normally a word used to stereotype Old Testament figures of doom, it is rarely attributed to a pair of busking lesbians.

So what has made their "prophetic" ministry mainstream? In a Kiwi comedy landscape that has moved from Billy T James through Mike King and bro'Town to the Flight of Concorde, how have the Twins carved a unique niche?

Perhaps it is that for Jools and Lynda Topp, everything is personal. What you see is what you get, authentic and grounded. Whether hosting an agricultural field days, or conducting a Gypsy caravan tour through New Zealand, these two are genuinely enjoying themselves, grounded in their gumboots. The humour is self-deprecating, rarely audience-deprecating. We Kiwis warm to those who laugh at themselves.

This humanity is most clearly seen in the dark days that surround Jools' recent battle with breast cancer. Here we see the depths of both human love and human frailty.

Untouchable, they might be in movie title. Yet in reality the Topp twins have become the tops simply by being touchable.

Untouchable Girls broke all records for a weekend opening of a New Zealand documentary. It has now broken the \$1 million dollar mark at the Kiwi box office and become one of the all time Top Ten most popular New Zealand movies.

488 words

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