# Rhod Sharp

## Presenter, BBC Radio 5 Live

**Media Masters – October 13, 2016**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I am in Marblehead, Massachusetts to talk with 5 Live's broadcasting institution Rhod Sharp, from the very studio his show is broadcast. Starting out in 1976 as a trainee at the BBC, Rhod has had a variety of jobs for the Beeb, the World Service, Channel 4 News and LBC, often with a focus on America. When 5 Live launched in 1994, he came up with the idea of an overnight show and has been presenting Up All Night ever since. With well over a million regular listeners, the Washington Post has described it as 'probably the best night time show in the world', and perhaps uniquely since 2007, Rhod has been presenting it from his own home, right here in the United States.**

**Rhod, thank you for joining me.**

You're very welcome.

**It's incredible to be here, actually where you broadcast this show from! It's amazing, as a genuine fan and a regular listener it's amazing, quite surreal.**

It's like Oz letting you behind the curtain and it's not half as impressive is it, really?

**I think it's incredibly impressive!**

I hope you like the blackboard, by the way.

**I do indeed! I have to turn around, but yes, I do. It's not it's not quite how I imagined it to be when I listen to you on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday nights. Actually, that's one of my first questions. Do you have quite an intimate relationship with your listeners? Because the show is unique that it gives you**

**that space to talk to your interviewees with the length and the depth that they need, but I also think it really gets the listeners in as well.**

Yes. Well, I do! And it's just been lovely over the years to be contacted by people. And over the years, my listeners… oddly enough I've had I've had listeners at both ends of their lives. I remember early on in the show I had a regular correspondent who was an old lady in Wimbledon and she used to write to me in a beautiful hand, and she used to tell me what she thought had gone right that week. She was like the Mrs Trellis of that whole night. But she was real, and she and I had a lovely relationship, and for a few years the notes went back and forth, and then I think she passed away. But to have these kind of single relationships is a treat that, maybe because of the length of the programme I'm afforded, maybe because of length of tenure I'm afforded, but I can still say, hand on heart, if everything else goes wrong I've probably got a dozen listeners who I can name, who I know will be listening at any time, and who will be looking out for certain things.

**Is it flattering to be described as an institution, or do you think that's where you think you've been doing it too long?**

Well, it's quite funny because when I came here, my young neighbour, who was still at school at the time, Googled me and she got to this website called 'Rhod Sharp the Legend' and she's so excited, she's running around the house going, "Rhod's a legend! He's a legend!" I don't mind. I mean I'm flattered obviously, because I didn't really think of myself as that at all.

**Well, I've got tons of questions about the show and all kinds of things. But let's go back to the very beginning. Did you always want to be a journalist?**

No. Actually when I was in university, I was so interested in theatre. And I got so involved in different productions but realised that that the real place of art is in the world, and that and one of the fascinating things about art is organising your reality. So you can either have a fictional reality or you can have actual reality, and you can get into it up to your elbows. And so, from a point of view of fiction, I kind of transited from fiction to reality somewhere along the way and I became much more interested in the art of organising reality – which is journalism, in a certain sense – and I applied to join the BBC. And in those days, the BBC ran two very fabulous training courses, and one was called the general traineeship, in which you went on and you became a research assistant and then you went off to join a production team, and the other one was the news training scheme and I thought, "Oh, either one, perfect. Suits me fine." So I applied, and half way through the interview process, which was lengthy and which kept on coming down, you know, I think we were selected down from something ridiculous like 2,400 applicants to a final 12…

**That's an honour in itself.**

It was! It was… I mean, I said to my tutor, “This is going terribly well.” He said, “Yes, you know they call this the ‘crown prince’ scheme.” So I went, “Oh, really? Me?” And so when we finally got to the bit and they offered me a place, I didn’t… I still didn’t quite know what I was going for. But they then said, “Well, we’re not running the general training scheme this year, we’re running the news training scheme.” So I ended up in BBC news.

**But that must have been incredibly exciting because there you are, wanting to be a journalist, and you’ve just landed a job on BBC News!**

That’s right! That’s right. I mean, within months, even within the first month, we were meeting some of the biggest names in the game. I mean, Robin Day sat down with us – I should say ‘Sir Robin’ of course – and he told us all about how important it was to ask prosecutorial questions, and that was the mould that so many BBC presenters came up in. If you look at Jeremy Paxman, well he was a news trainee about two or three courses before us and he too had the down with Robin Day and was told to ask prosecutorial questions. I at some point departed from the old prosecutorial coulé, and I don’t do that as a general rule. I only do that if I get really annoyed.

**But I also think you don’t necessarily need to because of the time and space that you give you interviewees, because often they can end up hanging themselves really.**

That’s much more fun!

**Paxman might only have three or four minutes with someone, even on Newsnight really. It’s not a lot of time.**

Yes. Well, I know, and my dear old colleague John Humphrys the same thing.

**We’ve had John on the podcast, actually.**

Oh, it’s marvellous. John is so fabulous. I remember I was… for some reason we met in the TV newsroom when I’d already started doing Up All Night, and John was walking through – and he always wears sneakers, don’t ask me why. But anyway, John came bouncing along, he said, “Rhod, this is very good. Keep it up!” And then he took issue with something, because in those days before… I know you want to talk about Dr Karl, but before we ever had Dr Karl, I was running this mad minute from the Duck’s Breath Mystery Theatre in San Francisco called Ask Dr Science. “Ask a doctor science,” it went. “He’s not a real doctor.” And then we had a minute about nose hairs or altitude sickness while climbing the stairs. And it was very, very funny I thought, but John couldn’t stand it. He said, “Get rid of that ‘Ask the Doctor Science’.”

**I love that. I asked him on the podcast what his advice would be to would-be interviewees that were about to come on the Today programme and be grilled by him, and he said, "My answer is very simple: don't do it."**

Yes! I'm sure John would be the first to say, "I'm not going on with him!"

**I mean, you kind of freelanced and did quite a lot of jobs before you started Up All Night. Can you give us a brief précis of that before we talk about the show for the next 11 hours?**

That's right! Well, I kind of broke out of the BBC mould, or maybe the BBC broke me out of the BBC mould, and I went off, as you said, I went to LBC. I met my old friend Malcolm Brabant who I still think is one of the best reporters in the business because he never lets go of anything. And I met Scarlett Maguire and then this guy called Peter Allen was down in Westminster, and Peter was like, a god in those days, so you didn't really kind of meet Peter, you just knew he was there. It was a bit like Doug and Pete, who were the morning presenters on LBC. But I stayed there for long enough to realise that radio was a much more instant and faster business than I'd ever seen it at the BBC. Then I went off to California to find a girlfriend that I had been trying to keep up with for the last couple of years…

**I see, so you didn't just kind of go there generically to find any old girlfriend, it's quite a trip!**

Ah! Oh, no. Cherchez la femme – that's always the case! So I went to California and tried to freelance, and discovered it was much more difficult than I thought it was going to be, and was saved by the fact that I could also paint – as in painting houses, not painting portraits. So I painted a few houses in San Francisco while I was there, and then I started to do features for the Today programme, and things started to work. And then my sister got married in Scotland, and so I spent all my money on a plane fare back home. And then when I was home, by sheer good fortune – although I didn't regard it as such at the time, I was a bit sniffy about it – a local radio station opened up in Dundee.

**Is that Tay Radio?**

Radio Tay! And they offered me a job because people with my experience were quite thin on the ground.

**Dundee isn't San Francisco, with the greatest of respect.**

Dundee is a great journalism centre. You know, the great James Cameron came from Dundee, a lot at a great print journalists came from Dundee, but Dundee suddenly had a radio station. What are going to do? So we, for more than a year, I worked with some great people who taught me a lot, and taught me how to get a

story from the ground up. We were being listened to… the greatest compliment that you could pay us was it we were being listened to in the Courier newsroom. In other words, they were listening to us for stories that they could follow up, so we got to be quite hot. Then after a year I went off to California in search of another girl! And things went from there. You know, was it was terrific.

**And then you went back to California. Did he then start to pick up doing stuff down the line, as it were, for the UK?**

Yes. And I was enormously grateful. I mean, a guy at the BBC gave me a stringer's card. I said, "I'm going to San Francisco." He said, "Well don't spend all the time on the beach," and he therefore betrayed the fact he didn't really know much about San Francisco, because it's not the kind of place you spend a lot of time on the beach except wrapped up in a big, woolly fleece.

**Exactly. It's freezing over there!**

I know! It's not LA, that's for sure. Anyway, it got better and better. I was also working for the Glasgow Herald, and I was immensely grateful to the assistant editor at the Glasgow Herald, a man called Ronnie Anderson, and Ronnie really groomed me and looked after me and helped me write newspaper stories, so I was doing… I was kind of multimedia, you know. I was working for Radio, I was working for print.

**Twenty years ahead of your time, really. Nowadays being a multi-platform journalist is kind of standard – you have to do it. But back then it wasn't.**

It wasn't. I mean, so first of all there was radio, there was print, and then I got a call from my old boss… or actually, he wasn't my old boss at that point, it was a guy called Chris Cramer who… I remember Chris's first day at the BBC. And we sat at the subs table together, and then he rose without a trace and suddenly he was the head of all of news gathering, which is the whole reporting operation, and Chris really created news gathering, and we became good colleagues, and he gave me TV work, which again transformed everything because our learned how to... I'd been trained in it, but for the first time I actually had to deliver. And so I did TV, radio, print and then I had a string for Reuters, the news agency. So I did feel that I was covering a lot of bases.

**It sounds like you were quite busy.**

Yes, yes I was, but you had to keep busy.

**Did you prefer the kind of freelancing lifestyle as it were, where you only ever got paid for the work you do? Because there is a certain satisfaction and a security of having a stipend…**

I feel massively secure and I am deeply grateful for the stipend, thank you, thank you! In those days I think it was more feasible, and you know, I weep real tears when I think about the people who are entering journalism now and are told to go the freelance route, and then they're told by people like Huffington Post that they've got to write it for free and it'll all be good for their reputation. Well, that doesn't put food on the table.

**It's a race to the bottom really, isn't it?**

It's disgraceful.

**I mean, journalism, there's just no money in it these days really. Other than the BBC and a few larger commercial employers, they're all trying to get it done on a shoestring.**

I can't see any good to this. And you know, for a few years I was I was quite involved with the Berkman Centre for the Study of the Internet and Society at Harvard, who also have a big interest in how journalism is evolving. And the conclusion I came to, which I think is shared by Richard Sambrook, who was the head of everything at the BBC for a while…

**I don't think that was his exact title, but that was his de-facto title, head of everything!**

Well, you know, lord of the universe, head of everything.

**It is due to come on. He's a good guy, Richard.**

He is. So Richard will talk to you in much more detail about this, but my conclusion was that other than big public organisations – which are funded by public donations, or in the BBC's case by a licence fee – foundation support is the other big thing in journalism now, so you get things like the Centre for Investigative Journalism, you know, who have a foundation behind them. The big thing in this country – in the US, that is – is called the Knight Foundation, and the Knight Foundation they have their fingers in many, many pies and we're deeply grateful to them for keeping journalism going. But it still seems to me wrong that if you're going to enter journalism and you're going to be a freelance, that what you really have to do is write grant applications. You know, in the old days you used to be your own best marketing man, but now you've got to write grant proposals, you know, before you get anywhere. You've got to set up the Centre for Rhod Sharp studies, and then we're off to the races.

**I mean it's one of the reasons why I disagree with so many critics of the BBC. Because of the unique way it's funded, yes, that does distort the market a little bit and create various issues, but on the other hand it guarantees that editorial independence. You wouldn't get the chief executive of ITV being grilled by someone on ITN about the terrible job they've done in the same way that say, George Entwistle was grilled by John Humphrys on the Today programme, which led to his resignation. I mean, that that kind of impartiality is a direct outcome of the way it's funded.**

It is, although there is something I really wanted to ask you about, which is this… what some people call 'the myth of objectivity'. A long time ago, John Burt and Peter Jay came up with something which was known as the Birt/Jay thesis, which was… another phrase was 'the bias against understanding'. And you were supposed to contextualise everything, and of course that's what I'm desperately trying to do all the time, I'm trying to de-jargonise all these shorthand phrases which betray the fact that a journalist doesn't actually understand the story, and I'm trying to say in words of two syllables at the most, "This is the story." And then we go on and we can all react to it and we're all on the same page. But the Birt/Jay thesis was that you created so much context that you had a very clear idea of what the story was before you actually went out to shoot it, and then you went out and you shot the story that you knew you were going to get. We didn't let the story develop, because if you let the story develop, it got out of your control. That's one aspect of so-called objectivity. Another aspect of objectivity is that we are all cut from the same cloth in many ways. You know, the idea of the 16-year-old guy who's sharp-witted and leaves school, and enters journalism and goes up through the ranks, knowing how to take a note, knowing how to get names right at funerals, which is how most people used to learn… boy, oh boy, that's changed. So now what we're facing is a slight sort of middle class bias, to put it mildly, in our journalism, where we know that we should give equal weight to both sides of the argument. But my serious question is, when you're looking at an American election like this, there's a false dualism between treating Trump the same way as you treat Clinton, because you're treating somebody who is basically a self-aggrandising reality TV star with the same weight that you treat someone who's got 30 years in government. Trump's still got a message, which is, "It's all broken, and it's not broken, let's break it so we can fix it." Clinton's message is one of progressive improvement, or at least progressive accommodation. But is there a real justification for giving them the same weight in our output? And that's something that I think we'll have to look at after the election is over.

**Because a few other guests have said that there's this kind of over-reliance now on balance, because sometimes if you're presenting two people equally, you know, two opposing views, actually that can distort the reality as well,**

**because as you've just said, you know… a lot of creationists for example, say, "Well, get me on so that I can debate with a scientist," but actually the science is true. You know, you shouldn't really have a creationist on at all.**

That's right. Of course, climate change is the other great example of that because 95%, or probably 99%, of the scientists in the world understand that climate change is real, and you don't understand that climate change is real… you know, we look down the coast today, on the day that we're actually recording this, when Hurricane Matthew has just winged into South Carolina, and ask the people down there if they don't think that something is going on. I think our answer to that has been evasive, if I am honest, and although we've really tried to accept climate change I think part of the answer is we don't talk about it enough. We need to talk about it a lot more. We need to talk about these strange variations in temperature, the fact that the UK, especially the north, is much windier now than it used to be, and these strange heavy rains that are coming in place of the kind of rain that we used to love and enjoy.

**How does it work as a kind of BBC journalist? Because clearly you've got to be impartial and you cant have a view on, you know, whether John Major should be the best Prime Minister or Tony Blair or whatever, but on certain things, like climate change, to say that you don't have a view would be to distort the truth as well, because clearly it's real.**

Of course.

**So do you ever think as a BBC broadcaster, "I can't say more than I need to on this?" How does that work? Can you choose what to be impartial about? Because a climate change denier would say, "Oh, well you're already part of the problem as a broadcaster, because you've already adopted my opponent's position."**

Yes. "You're part of the worldwide conspiracy." Yes, I know. To which I try to raise a radio eyebrow. I don't maybe say it in words of one syllable, but I don't give that kind of thing very much space because I don't think it deserves very much space. But I do see that point. I mean here, between you and I, I feel I can be perfectly opinionated. I have opinions. I'm a real human being. Sometimes you have to sit on them, but because you really want to give both sides time, you want to give them space. I always come back to your argument about giving people enough rope. Some people attack me for that, and they say, "How dare you give that guy so much air time."

**It's great. I'd say as a fan of the show and as a long-term listener it's great that you do, because they hang themselves.**

Well, but you've got to hear them. You can't not hear them. In the same way as we may come at this American election with our British, or particularly actually Scottish, perceptions of Donald Trump, because the entire Scottish nation is lined up against Donald Trump at this point because of what happened in Aberdeen, and for us to say that that Donald Trump, is he good, would be probably wrong. But we can't ignore the people who say Donald Trump is a good, and Donald Trump will bring much needed change. I'm working on a piece just now where some of Trump's supporters talk about why they have to support him.

**Actually, that brings me to an interesting question I wanted to ask really, which is how does it work? You know, you develop relationships with long time guests on the show that appear frequently, and people like Trump, where you either, as a journalist you either really like them or you really don't like them. Does that ever seep in? Do you have to kind of resist that if you… and it could work if you were a big fan of someone where you don't want to be too fawning, but also with someone like Trump… well, I certainly don't like him, I would have to deliberately hide that in the interview.**

I'll tell you what I was thinking about is the months leading up to Obama's election in 2008. And we, of course, because he was such a phenomenon, we were giving them lots of space, and lots of time to discuss how this was all evolving, and eventually somebody just texted me, "Get a room," you know, which I thought was quite cute because they saw me as hopelessly biased in favour of Obama. The difficulty is, of course you like people – but it's not like liking that I think should be the standard. The standard should be whether they are creating news. And if they are creating news, whether you like them or not is incidental.

**Tell us how Up All Night came to be.**

Haha!

**Let's start at the beginning.**

Well, so here I was working the foreign desk. I had taken a job at the BBC in London after my wife got a big job in London and said, "Well…" you know, and we were only just married, we were literally only just married and we'd been living in San Francisco, and she said, "I'm going to take this job. And it's a big job." I said, "Oh, that's good. I suppose I'd better come with you, then."

**It'd be a thought, wouldn't it?!**

So I had to fold my tent in San Francisco and I started freelancing for my friends at the World Service and the domestic service. But that first summer I actually worked for Bridget Kendall, of all people, because she was the editor of a programme called

Outlook, and I was a sort of general roving reporter on the British election. And I remember doorstepping Mrs Thatcher one day when she had a cold, and I thought, "Oh, this is too funny for words," so I sympathised with her on tape over the fact that she had a bad cough and she thanked me, you know, she said it was something she was getting over pretty quickly. So I discovered a chink, you know, wasn't all solid steel or iron. So this went on and then I started to take shifts on the foreign desk where I'd be talking between the programmes and the correspondents, and I found I had a natural sympathy for that having been out in the field myself. Ultimately, they offered me a contract and I kept saying no. I went to Channel 4 for a year to do their foreign desk, and then I thought I was going back to the States because I had this kind of warning to come back here, and that would be 1989. And then I didn't – but I took a contract with the BBC thinking it would be quite short term and it would be good for my relationship, like any good freelance, you know, I'm thinking, "I'll get to know all these people even better." So I stayed, and I'm working the foreign desk and then the first Gulf War came along in 1991, and of course Scud FM was the response to that. And I was close but I was peripheral to Scud FM; I watched the people who worked this six-week rolling news service, and I thought, "This is great." This is really a proper response, a modern response, finally we were within sniffing distance of a kind of AM news sound that I so loved from over here. And then when I heard that they were going to launch 5 Live as a rolling news station I thought, "This is great." So I wrote a proposal and sent a letter to Jenny Abramsky, who was going to be the designated…

**She was the first controller, wasn't she?**

She was the first controller. And at one point I quoted Duncan in Macbeth in the Scottish play, and I said, "If 'twere done, t'were better t'were done quickly." I don't know how I managed to whack that in, but anyway, I just wanted her to make a fast decision on the basis of my fabulous proposal for having live correspondents from Japan and Australia and India and all those places that we weren't getting on the air enough, and I knew how frustrated these people were that they weren't getting on the air. But here was a natural platform for them.

**To give them the space.**

To give them the space.

**An idea that still works incredibly well today.**

I said basically, "Let's do this foreign news show overnight." And she wrote back and said, "I wish you hadn't used that quote from Macbeth, because my husband is a Duncan." But anyway, it was just nice. It was very, very nice. So we had a very fast start to this, given that Jenny had very few weeks to put this all together. John Birt gave her a couple of months at best, and it really got off the ground, to a flying start. I

would say, without fear of contradiction, that we came out the box fully formed; we knew exactly what we wanted to do, we had a terrific couple of assistant editors – Ian Parkinson who was at Newsbeat before he came to us – and Simon Waldman – who, as an editor, dealt with all the BBC stuff and was wonderful and a perennial optimist, and has now retired, like so many of my friends, but Simon was terrific and that was lovely to work with – and the result was that we had a year of protected development with phenomenal staff, the like of which I cannot imagine today.

**An excellent institution. How has it evolved, in your mind? I mean, in many ways it's the same show it was at the outset.**

In my mind it is, but one of my greatest critics – and I mean that with great respect, because he's a critical listener – is Bill Rogers, who was the deputy controller of 5 Live and now does a regular media blog, Trading as WDR, and Bill said that initially a lot of what we did was quite hard to take in, because we're jumping from things live to live to live to live, which I thought was the greatest fun. It was a tightrope act all the time and I didn't know what was coming next. And believe me, I am a quick study, because sometimes I had no idea what the next story would be, but that would be the listener's experience as well. Although it didn't hurt, because we suddenly found that we had this sustained audience all night long, who would listen through thick and thin, uphill and down dale, they didn't know what was going to happen. And I thought that was important. To be unpredictable.

**And how does the show work in terms of the management of it? Because you obviously do Monday-Wednesday, Dotun does the rest of it, and even though you don't mention it on air a lot, I think all your listeners know that you broadcast here. It's something that even though it's never really mentioned, everyone knows; it's like an inside secret.**

It is! It's like a club, isn't it? You know, here we are again, welcome to the attic… and it's nice. I haven't put up a webcam partly because that involves complications with the BBC firewall… I mean, to be honest that's the main reason. We had a bash at it and then realised that every time we got it up the firewall would take it down. So that's why when you turn on the webcam, you see the empty studio.

**So it's not part of a conspiracy, as some people have said.**

Oh, no! I'm so sorry. No, no. I mean, I think this would be a reasonable thing to webcast, but we'd need to find a way around the firewall.

**As a fan of the show though, I've always imagined when I've been listening to you, that you would be in one of these what I would call 'proper' recording studios with, you know, the panes of glass and all that kind of the sound**

**proofing on the walls and everything, and we are just in your attic here, it's a normal attic. And you have a desk!**

Allow me to describe the detritus around us! But I work up here, so I have a couple of computers which I use to do the show, this is the one I use for live scripting into the BBC. The BBC came up with a virtual private network in the mid 90s, mainly for the use of its bosses and programme editors who needed to work at home. So I hijacked it essentially, which has been the story of my life, you know, hacking the organisation. And I've got this, you know, live scripting through the virtual private network, I'm not on the BBC's T1 or anything like that. I can talk technical because we're on a podcast.

**Absolutely. All of our listeners are media geeks so we want to know this level of detail.**

Okay. So I'm using a VPN and I've also got an ISDN, which is getting increasingly hard to get over here because the telephone companies won't now put them in. But if you've got one, they basically service it with racks and racks of old equipment which is under-utilised, with the result that if I have a rack failure, which I had once, they'll just switch it to another rack! So I figure I've got about 100 years to go before we use up all of the ISDN equipment in my local exchange.

**Have you never been tempted to move to broadband? Because I deal with a lot of correspondence and they use like (Lucy live? 30:04) and (Apple mainframe? 30:05)**

Oh, I know. But it's all about latency, which is the fine question of delay. So if you have a delay of less than, you know, some real small delay, it's imperceptible. And so you get Dr Karl from his studio in Australia from the ABC and me from here, and you know, Mr Smith in Wigan, and we're all talking to each other and there is no perceptible delay. So in order to use that codec… I know that ISDN works…

**But the Internet isn't good enough yet?**

It might not be, but there is a piece of kit that that some people use which is broadband-based, and I'm going to try it out because I've got an election night contribution to make, and I'm going to try it out then. So I'll be running it here just to see if the latency issue is more pronounced than it is on ISDN and if it's not, well, it might become a believer. But I'm kind of old school in that regard, and if I've got the ISDN I'll use it.

**How is the show put together? What's a typical week? I mean, because like you said, there's various ingredients of a week like Dr Karl and so on… do you self-produce some of it? Do you have a team in Salford as well?**

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. I mean – and you know, I regretted this more than I do now – it's become a little bit more formulaic. But then you get things like Dr Karl, which are sort of appointment radio for some…

**If I've fallen asleep I'll listen to Dr Karl on podcast.**

It's amazing. Yes, so… and I apologise here for any podcasts that we haven't put up. When people write in and say the podcast isn't there I always chase up. But sometimes people are better at following it up than other times, and we had a great success this week, so I put two up which was very good. But the fact is that I start on Monday morning, and quite often on a Monday I'll have a book to read, and you can see I've got a bit of a slush pile over there of books that I am either about to read or have just read, and I speed read them. And I often speed-read them standing up, because it gets it gets the job done faster. And so, that takes two or three hours. By four o'clock – well, I'm talking four o'clock Eastern Time, which is nine o'clock in the evening – so by nine o'clock in the evening I'm ready to roll, and we start recording. We may record anything up to six or eight interviews, sometimes not as many, and then we slot them in. The rest of the show is live, or in in these days of slightly straightened resources, some of it might be repeating something that we did at one o'clock at four o'clock – and I mean, again, I can say to listeners of the show when we were really humming, we don't need to do that. But sometimes we do. And I just hope you'll bear with us, because we're not trying to short-change you, it's just that physically there isn't the manpower.

**I also think it helps as well, because sometimes if I fall asleep listening to the show – I wake up very early anyway, sort of half-past four, quarter-past four – and I can catch the tail end, and it's often, you know, the best bits of the show there as well I think.**

Well, thank you for saying that. I mean, so I do also occasionally produce little bits and pieces and as I say I'm working on a piece about how the election is being viewed locally, and I've realised that, you know, this is an incredibly white part of the world, and yet views do diverge. So we have a little bit of that. And I'm looking forward to creating something, because I always like producing stuff. You know, it's like when you're in radio, you like to do your own packages now and again because it just keeps you right. I know you've spoken to Peter Bowes, and Peter does lovely packages and lovely mixes sometimes when he interviews somebody, and we still all talk about his interview with Glen Campbell which was such a success.

**Some people love producing themselves. Others hate it, they just want to be the… not that there's anything wrong with that, but they want to do the on-air stuff purely and have everything handed to them. Obviously that's not your stand.**

No, I'm just a hack. You know, I do this because, you know, it's fun, you know, and I can think of a lot of jobs that are not half as much fun.

**Do you feel it gives you a unique perspective, being here in America? Because with the election several weeks away, that must give you a unique perspective as a broadcaster and someone who lives here as a resident.**

Yes, oh yes. But I think it's terribly important not to put your own values into it because I'd be the last person to say what's good for me. I'm not trying to get out of this any personal advantage, but if I can use the position to better interpret this for our British audience, a predominantly British but not always British audience, then I will. So I like to think of myself… if you remember in Dan Dare, although you may be a bit young for Dan Dare, but in Dan Dare they had this evil character, it was a small green man called The Mekon. And The Mekon had a like a floating platform in which he floated about six feet off the ground. And I think of myself as floating about, you know, six feet off the planet somewhere that I can actually see both sides of the Atlantic at the same time.

**And it must give you a unique insight as a Brit but living here, covering the American election insofar as… I don't think us Brits quite get it. I mean, I come over to America regularly now, but I see it from a different perspective when I'm physically here. It sounds obvious to say it, but I feel less remote from it when I'm here.**

Well that's right. And if there's one thing I can do, it's communicate to people how terrified people are about losing health insurance. I think that's one of the underlying messages of this, and other elections, is how vital health is to people and the fact is that Americans pay more for it than anybody else. They pay more than Canadians. They pay twice as much as we do, and it's a different way of delivering it, and it all goes through insurance companies, and you're either insured or you're not. And if you're not, then you fall into the into the public here which ends up costing people who are insured, because it's all added to the premiums of the insured. But if you have a good job, then your employer provides health insurance for you. So an awful lot of the domestic discussions that we gloss over as Brits as not very interesting are to deal with us life and death matter of how much of the family income actually goes on healthcare.

**Interesting, your perspective on this, because as a Brit I think America's great, there are so many aspects of society that's fantastic, but I don't get guns and I don't get healthcare. Is it because just the sheer weight of the entrenched interest to promote them the change isn't possible? Yes.**

Yes. And people… if you say… if you're around Republicans, and many Democrats, and you say 'single-payer system' they immediately go, "Oh, that would be like the

National Health Service in Britain. That's not very good, is it? People have to wait for a long time for their treatment," if they even know that. But often, 'single-payer system' is a kind of a trigger word for 'I don't want that, I can't have that'. It's, you know, 'my health care, my health, is far too important'. But what they're really then doing is opting to pay more, and pay more, and pay more, which has been the way of things.

**What's the plan for the election? As we record this, we're only four weeks away. I mean, aren't you and Peter Bowes going on the road?**

Well, wouldn't that be lovely! And frankly, I think that Peter and I are a dream team because we had such fun at the conventions.

**He said so, yes.**

It was really marvellous. Peter, in fact, is in LA, and he'll be covering the California end of things. And I'll be doing the mirror image here, because Jim Naughtie and Tim Franks and others will be anchoring it from Washington. I'm going to be up in New Hampshire basically taking on one of the early voting states, so we will know early on in the night what the national result is in New Hampshire, and if Trump wins in New Hampshire, it's going to have a good night so we'll build say that categorically. Conversely, if he doesn't do very well in New Hampshire we'll know very soon which way the wind is blowing. It's a cliffhanger, well, you know, all bets are off. Equally, control of the Senate could be 50/50, I think that's the current projection, but it requires a woman called Maggie Hassan to win the Senate seat in New Hampshire. So I'll be tracking that too. And once I've done that, I think my job is done. So I'll have a couple of hours in to the late show with Phil Williams on 5 Live.

**Another good show**

Yes. Which would be great fun and I get on so well with Phil. I have a bunch of people up there who know what they're talking about, who I've been… they've been so nice to us. We went up there in January and February, and just really got our feet under the table this time in terms of New Hampshire politics, so I'll be repeating a bit of that probably. And then the scene switches to places like North Carolina, Pennsylvania, which should be so important, and Ohio. And then of course it goes out west to places like Colorado, and you notice I'm naming states because over the vast majority of the country the vote is a foregone conclusion. You're going to see a red state for the Republicans, blue state for the Democrats but could turn out to be a very red night, unlikely in my opinion, or a very blue night, possibly more likely. We'll have to wait and see.

**How do you maintain and build relationships with your BBC colleagues, being here? Because now you mentioned that Jim Naughtie is going to be there in D.C. but you're obviously not there. Do you see them as they're passing through?**

I mean, the joke is I always see Jim at election time! We don't see each other for years, and then we can't get over each other's way. And I've known Jim since we were both students together in Aberdeen. We've known each other all our adult lives, pretty much.

**But you can't have those kind of water cooler moments that you would if you were based at NBH, for example.**

No, that's right – and I can't say that… you know, I'm constantly on social media to my pals. You know, if you've been around for – let's add up the numbers – 40 years, then you just know people, you know? It's like seeing old friends you haven't seen for a long time – you pick up where you left off.

**What's your perspective on the UK broadcasting scene at the moment? For example, we had Mark Thompson recently on the podcast, and there's all this thing going on with Bake Off and on this kind of thing, and I asked him, and he's got no insight because he lives in New York and he's not involved in the BBC and he lives in America now, whereas although you live in America, you do broadcast for the BBC still.**

Well, exactly, and I try to keep across it.

**How do you do that, then?**

Well, I read and I listen and I talk, you know, I talk to my pals in the UK, and Bake Off strikes me as most unfortunate episode, and I'm sad about it because obviously the show is going terribly well, and if there be any fault, that's probably with the producers who saw the deal as the thing, rather than the show, and they put the deal before the show.

**Mark mentioned it because obviously he ran Channel 4 and he ran the BBC so he could see it from both sides, and one of the things I got from the interview was in a sense isn't it an ultimate conclusion of kind of the John Birt producer choice type thing…**

It is.

**… where if you have independent companies they're going to take the best offer, whether it be for the BBC or Channel 4.**

That's right. And if the BBC helps you develop a really successful show and then you become a brand, and then you go somewhere else, well, you know, that's tough, BBC. That's the view. If the show just evaporates in the process then you're a bit stuffed, aren't you?

**What are you going to do with Up All Night over the next 20 years?**

Haha!

**Because part of me wants you to say nothing is going to change, because then I can rely on something being a constant. Is there an urge within you to kind of innovate, change and evolve it? And you mentioned earlier about how it's evolved, but you've not noticed it, as it were.**

Yes…

**Will it carry on like that? Will you be doing it 20 years from now?**

Well there is a question. I mean, I'd be quite old! Mind you, this guy called Vin Scully has just retired as the basketball caller for the Los Angeles Dodgers at the ripe old age of 84. Oh please, God, don't make me Vin Scully! I don't want to be Vin Scully. I don't actually know. You know, I don't go around threatening to retire or something. Maybe this is keeping me alive? You know, there's that too. You know, maybe there's a symbiosis here that I haven't quite come to terms with. I think if it's evolving anywhere its probably evolving towards podcasts, because you know, this is the way everything is going, it seems to me. It's radio on demand.

**It's sort of time shifting, isn't it?**

It is time shifting. My one sadness would be that back in back in the year dot, when… we just had an anarchic website for about a year because nobody else had a website, and we had a wonderful guy called Dennis running it, and we were basically running the website like a webzine, and everybody just piled in and they said what they liked about the show and what they wanted to see and everything.

**Never get away with that now.**

It was hilarious! But that was before bureaucracy realised that the Web was a marketing tool. And of course now, it's all about marketing. Quite simply, everything we broadcast is available as a link. In other words, if I do a 10-minute interview, there's a link. If I do a five-minute interview, there's a link. We do a 30-minute interview, there's another link. What are we waiting for? You know, storage is cheap as chips and yet we're being held back and we're held into what seem to me artificial constraints.

**Do you ever feel a little bit like these slightly older kind of rock stars where they lament the demise of the album…**

Haha!

**Up All Night, you might you might be able to chop it into say, 10 different chunks, but there is a joy to kind of listening to the whole thing, isn't there?**

I mean, there's kind of a funny progress isn't there, when you go from, you know, the Japanese prime minister talking about the money supply, to some woman talking about you know her pet snail or something, and the dog that dialled 999. There are things like that.

**What a helpful dog, if it was an emergency!**

These are the joys of radio after all, and that's what we live for. And again, I'm well aware that in the days when journalism was bigger and faster and there was more journalism, we were more likely to get these stories. And I know that they are there somewhere, and we can pick them up if we can only find them on Facebook – but it was a lot easier to find that stuff when that was in one or two places.

**It's quite difficult though to do light and shade both well and both credibly, and your one of the few broadcasters I think that can do it. Jeremy Vine springs to mind, Nicky Campbell…**

Oh, Jeremy is so dear. I mean, he used to come on all the time when he was in South Africa, and I was thrilled when he got the Jimmy Young gig. It was just perfect.

**Do you think that is that a question of temperament, then? Because clearly you went to the same journalism school that Paxman did and Humphrys and all these people, and yet your going to get something different from a Rhod Sharp interview than you are with a Paxman interview. Is that just purely down to your upbringing and your temperament?**

I think it is. I think we just look different ways. And you have to look different ways for this audience. I don't think it would be fair to this audience to hammer them. I mean, all the suffering in the world is hard enough to take if we don't take a relatively humane view of it. And therefore I think you have to emote a little bit more, and you have to empathise a little bit more than you would do if you were doing the same interview for Newsday or Newshour or the World at One. It's just a different… it's a different beast. You know, we make it different for the programme. If I wasn't doing this programme, if I had said to Jenny, "I could do this really great show in the afternoon," I might never have developed this tone at all. It's possible.

**And could you redevelop in another direction?**

I hope so! I hope I'm not completely a one-trick pony! But who knows? At this point at this point nobody's ever asked me to do it.

**How does it work in terms of Dotun, then? Because in a sense I think there's two Up All Nights, isn't there?**

Oh, yes! I think it's

**Because, you know, there's your show and then there's his**

Oh yes I think it's completely separate

**Do you pass like ships in the night or something?**

Yes!

**I always imagine that, you know there's that Michael Mann film, Heat, where there's Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino and they never meet through the whole film, then there's like one coffee shop scene in the middle of five minutes. Have you ever had that?**

Oh, yes!

**Is that how it works with Dotun?**

I mean, when I see Dotun, it's great!

**How does that work, then?**

Oh, we love each other! It's just so much fun. But I know that Dotun… I used to sing more on the radio than I do now, but I know that Dotun has cornered the market.

**He's very musical, isn't he?**

Yes! So that's fine. You know, it should go in different ways. And maybe that gives people some relief too, because if we were always hammering it, all the trouble in the world, maybe it wouldn't be as appealing. Maybe it's these two faces of the programme that that make it so long-lived.

**How does it work in terms of lifestyle, if you don't mind me asking? Because you are on air Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday but your not on a Thursday.**

That's right.

**What do you do on a Thursday and a Friday?**

Haha! It would be wrong to say that I only cultivate my potato patch, but I cultivate my potato patch, I grow lots of potatoes and tomatoes and stuff in season. And I go and see friends, and I talk to a lot of people, and sometimes I work on a piece, which is something I like to do. I travel, you know, I meet as many people as I can because my Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday is a vaguely monk-like experience. I don't get out very much from Monday morning until Wednesday midnight, so after that I feel that I'm at liberty. And then I also… I spend a lot of time… in the wintertime I spend a bit of time with a group of kids who tend to be 12, 13, 14 and I talk to them about ethics, for some reason. And we have lovely conversations, and they give me a different perspective.

**You say monk-like existence, but in one sense your isolated because your here in this attic and your on your own, but in another sense your presenting a BBC network show with a million listeners and you've got to be hyper-connected to the world, so you're both kind of isolated but super-connected at the same time.**

Yes, so I think actually the essence of virtuality! You know, this is virtual me you are seeing here.

**It's like Tron, is it?**

Yeah, it's funny isn't it? As you say, I mean I'm constantly open to stuff. I have to soak up much more than I will ever be able to, you know, expire or whatever the word is. Suspire, I suppose rather than expire. That's a word I haven't used in 22 years on radio!

**First for this podcast as well.**

There you go! There's a first. Yes, it's complicated.

**Would you ever move back to the UK?**

I now – and here's a revelation – I don't think this compromises my position, but it makes it… it's part of my reality, which is after a lot of thought I became a an American citizen this summer, and I went along to be sworn in with 350 other people

– many people from Brazil, people from India, from Pakistan, from Russia, not very many people from the UK it has to be said, from Canada – just because I feel I've been here long enough now not to be fully bought into this particular project, and I've been playing at this for the last 30 years anyway, maybe 40, in fact. So I'm now a dual national. So what this means is that at any given moment, I can come to the UK and I don't have to kind of sweat it with immigration, which is one of these secret things that Trump supporters don't get – they don't understand how we sweat when we go to immigration or when we have to deal with visas… I've kind of regularised my position, and people say, "Well we expected that of you anyway." You know, I really do have a foot planted on both sides. And I still have my mum, who is in Scone, just north of Perth…

**Does she listen live, or is she a podcaster?**

No, I've actually got her… I think podcasting is still a little beyond her, because iPhones, you know, and mother's not very good at kind of touching things. She's very good at pressing them really hard, which would have serious results with an iPhone! So I have a radio with a little card in it, and it basically records the show.

**Oh, that's lovely.**

And she can listen to it when she wants to, so she does.

**My mum listens to about 80% of these, so hello mum, if you're listening.**

Hello mum!

**What is it that you like about America? What made you fall in love with it, and what are the differences?**

Oh, isn't that hard… it's so easy, you know, to fall in love if you come over here when you are young, and your natural tendency is to fall in love anyway. And of course, I had a blissful entry because I came over as a student and I was… I won a scholarship and I came over as a graduate student to Princeton, which is probably one of the most beautiful university campuses, and I came over at in this time of year and I immediately discovered the kindness of complete strangers, and I discovered American idealism, enthusiasm, genuineness, friendliness, outgoingness and generosity. I don't know if I've said enough! You know, there are all kinds of…

**There's a lot good about this country.**

… wonderful, warm human qualities on display here. And then of course I got the overlay of the founding fathers, and the nature of the republic, and I got a heavy

dose of that, and I loved it. And I suppose that I might have stayed here and I might never have gone back, but I did go back.

**What's been the best day of your career so far, and what's been the worst day?**

Oh, haha. Oh, these questions, these questions…

**Are you used to having questions asked?**

I still think that the best day of my career, weirdly enough, was finding Bob Geldof. Now, Bob Geldof played a major part in two stories I did for BBC TV news in the 1980s. First of all, I was at the press day for Live Aid, and we didn't know what this was. I suddenly got the phone call, "Get your butt down to Los Angele, because there's something going on. Go to Universal Studios," you know, "Hear this." This recording studio… so I basically walked into this recording studio…

**Was this the one where Queen did Wembley and…**

It was what *led* to Queen doing Wembley. And I walked in, and it was still a dark place, there were a lot of people moving around. I thought that I recognised Kenny Rogers and I thought that I recognised Quincy Jones. And at the back of the hall there's a shuffling figure in carpet slippers, and it's Bob Geldof! What's going on here? And then of course, the whole story, you know, we were presented with what Live Aid was going to be, which was the original Live Aid record, which was We Are the World. They give us all t-shirts and I give the t-shirt to the daughter of a friend of mine, and she probably still has it…

**She should get it straight on eBay.**

Yes, she'd make a ton of money. Anyway, I did the interview, I kind of got the story right, I think I said that it was all Kenny Roger's idea and maybe Quincy Jones had a part to play as well, but of course… everybody had been there, Cyndi Lauper, Michael Jackson…

**It was Midge Ure and Bob, wasn't it?**

Midge Ure, yes, that's right, there was a ton of people.

**A fellow Scot.**

Yes! And then a year later, Geldof was given an honorary knighthood, because he's an Irish citizen. And so he was given an honorary knighthood, and the news of this

came out and he was in LA, so I got the phone call, “Go and find Bob Geldof, would you? He’s in LA.”

**How do you do that?**

I was like, “All right, well I’m going to think of all the trendy hotels I know.”

**This was pre-Google, pre-Twitter…**

Yes, so this was 1986, so…

**I mean, now you could go on Twitter and probably someone would have just tweeted that they’d seen him somewhere.**

Yes, that’s right. So I rang two or three, you know, I rang the Bel Air, and the Beverly Hilton and a couple of others.

**“Hi, I’m Rhod from the BBC. Is Bob Geldof there?”**

More or less!

**Wow.**

No, I actually said, “Is Mr Yates there, because I realised he wouldn’t be staying under his own name. You know, low cunning being an aspect of our trade. So I then called a place called the Mondrian in West Hollywood, which curiously enough I had either just been to or I talked to somebody who had just stayed there, and this was one of the new breed in the 1980s of boutique hotels, I thought, “That’s a likely place.” Sure enough, I got right through to Mr Yates’ room, and we’re off to the races! So at this point – Steve would laugh if he ever heard this – I was having a mini war with a guy called Steve Futterman who was in LA for CBS, but he was also in LA for the BBC – and whenever I came to LA, Steve miraculously got to know about it and got very upset, because I was poaching on his turf. He regarded me as… it was okay for me to be in San Francisco, it was not okay for me to be in LA, even if I’d been commissioned to come and do the story. So I thought to myself, I’ll make the ultimate sacrifice because Steve had also been put on the case. They told me that they were… you know, I was basically the first one to the story.

**That was very collegiate!**

Wasn’t it! Well, wait a minute, you know, so I called Steve and I said, “Look, I’m going to produce it, you can report it. We’ll both get the money,” which was very important, and so he actually went on the air with Sir Bob. I had found him.

**Even after you had done all the legwork?**

Yes. After that, Steve and I were bosom buddies, as we remain to this day.

**And the worst day?**

What was the worst…

**Or has there been a litany of worst days?!**

Oh, yes – no, there was that… no, there have been worst days…

**Ray Snoddy once said to me, "Journalism is the worst job in the entire world unless you just happen to think it's the best."**

Ha – I like that. And Ray is so good. The worst day is quite honestly when I was working in TV news, and I was working as a sub in the TV newsroom in a job that just didn't really fit me, and this may sound silly, but if you've been through university, and if you've got most of a postgraduate degree, coming and writing down people's names is really difficult. And I screwed up the name of this racing driver – I gave him the wrong surname or something – and this went out on the air, you know, on the six o'clock news or something, and I got at such a fanging for it from the assistant editor, who was a terrifying character. And after that, he took against me in a big way. And… gee, I suppose I deserved it. But if I look back on that, that was that was a gloomy moment in my journalistic career, that it all hung on getting names right. But I have to tell you, young journalists, it all hangs on getting names right. You know, get the names right and the rest will follow.

**Last question, then. What advice would you give to an aspiring journalist who wants to be the next Rhod Sharp?**

Oh, my goodness! Well, try and do as much as you can. Really try and do as much as you can. And if something doesn't suit you, remember Tigger. Because when Tigger went around looking for a breakfast, he tried thistles. He didn't like thistles. And he tried honey, and he didn't like honey. And finally he settled on extract of malt. You've got to find the thing that you like. Journalism isn't just one thing – it's a myriad of opportunities and different things, and you may find that you're naturally attracted to celebrity journalism and TMZ and all that, or you may find writing financial reports as your thing, so don't give up until you've found it. And don't forget to remember to always make money. Never. Give it. Away.

**What if it was up to me, this podcast will be 11 hours long because I've got even more questions! But I think we're going to have to leave it there, unfortunately. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Thank you.