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Journalist and Broadcaster

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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'm joined by journalist and broadcaster Miranda Sawyer. Starting her career in the late 80s at iconic magazine Smash Hits, she has written for the Observer since the mid 90s, and has been its audio critic for the last 13 years. She also presents the Sound and Vision programme on BBC Radio 6 Music, and was one of the founder members of lobbying group Sound Women, which heralded a shift in attitudes towards female presenters. A regular arts critic in print, on television and on radio, Miranda has presented BBC's The Culture Show and her writing has appeared in GQ, Vogue and the Guardian. She is currently writing her third book, Long Term, the follow-up to her 2015 best-seller, Out of Time.

Miranda, thank you for joining me.

Well, it's very nice to be here.

That's a lot of stuff that you're doing.

Isn't it? I was listening to it and...

It was quite a long intro that, wasn't it?

Oh, goodness, yes, really.

Whoever that person is, is obviously an incredibly accomplished journalist and writer.

You know what it is? Freelance, that's what it is.

Is that what it is?

All of that just says freelance to me. If you have a proper job, you say, "I am the CEO of this important company, and before that I was a CEO of something else." It's not like that if you're freelance.

Let's unpack some of that. I mean, Smash Hits.

Yes.

Amazing. We've actually had Barry McIlheney in that chair many, many years ago.

Oh, well, Barry was the person who gave me my job, which was very kind of him as I had no experience at all.

So what job did he give you, and how did that go?

So he gave me pop writer. So what happened was, I was at university studying law, and I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer, because I didn't like anybody on my course really, and I was obsessed with Smash Hits, and I happened to see an advert. Do you remember in the Guardian on Mondays, there used to be media adverts? This is years, and years, and years ago, before t'internet and everything?

When there was money in media, or certainly in the newsrooms.

Yes. And there was a tiny advert, and it said, "Rock and Roll Ain't Noise Pollution, and pop writer was for Smash Hits", and it was literally the only magazine that I read, so I thought, "This is my job."

Dream job alert.

"This is my job." And so I wrote a letter in the style of Smash Hits, and if anyone remembers the style of Smash Hits, there was a lot of inverted commas, and there was a lot of funny slang, and so I wrote a letter in the style of that.

Rock, and furthermore, roll.

Yes, exactly. And so I wrote a letter in the style of that and sent it off, and what I'm really, really surprised about now, now that I know what the office was like, was that anybody read the letter at all, but they did, and they got me in.

Was it total anarchy?

It wasn't anarchy, but it could have really easily have ended up in the bin, do you know what I mean? Just randomly.

I see what you mean. Well, that's like any office, isn't it?

Yes. But you don't know that when you're younger, do you? And, anyway, so somebody read it.

Yes, it's always cock up, rather than conspiracy, isn't it? Whenever some big company's got something wrong, people are on Twitter saying, "They

deliberately conspired." I thought, "No, they didn't, they're just all running around like headless chickens."

Yes, they just made a mess. Anyway, so somebody read it and got me in for a couple of days' work, and Barry, I remember, interviewed me, and, basically, the job had come up because Neil Tennant had moved on to be a pop star, and the permanent job was given to someone with more experience, but they needed someone to train up, because, at the time, they were selling...

Moved on to be a pop star.

I know, amazing.

I mean, that is so Smash Hits, isn't it?

I know.

And Pet Shop Boys are still going well to this day.

I know, they're brilliant. So they were selling over 800,000 copies an issue, which came out every two weeks, so they needed somebody to train up really, and Barry interviewed me, and I remember he said in the interview, "Elton John is number one, should we put him on the cover?" And I went, "No, definitely not, you should put Brother Beyond on the cover," and he said, "Mmm."

And wasn't Nathan someone or other the lead singer?

He was, Nathan, yes.

I remember Brother Beyond.

And he said, "That's interesting, we've just put them on the cover." And so, basically, I think what he recognised in me was I was a Smash Hits reader who might turn into a writer, and the first time I went to the office, I turned up too early, because I'd only ever had cleaning... Normal jobs before that, so I turned up at 9am, which is the normal time to turn up for a job, of course nobody rocked up till 10. I had to sit outside on the step for ages.

Lazy music journalists!

I just didn't know. And they put me in front of an electric typewriter, which I'd never used, didn't know how to switch it on, so I wrote...

I'd bring them back. I would.

Basically, what happened was Richard, who was the news editor said, "Right, go through the last two weeks of tabloids, find me all the pop stories," so I did that, gave them to him, he divided them into two, gave me one half, and said, "Write Mutterings," which was the kind of gossip bit at the back, "Go and do that."

I remember Mutterings.

So I think the main reason why I got the job is that I did it. So I just went out and I wrote it all longhand, and then I switched on the typewriter and very carefully wrote it all out, completely wrongly, no spaces, I wrote on both sides of the paper because I was a student, handed it in, and they were like, “Oh, somebody’s done the work we asked them to do.” And they went, “Okay, fine.” And then because I kept turning up and kept doing the work, I think I got the job that way.

Isn’t that the secret though, to long-term retention?

But that’s what I always tell people.

Turn up, do a good job.

Yes, but it’s not even that. I think it’s really interesting, because I think when you’re young, sometimes that lack of confidence can manifest itself in unreliability, because you just can’t believe that anybody would ever give you the job, and I always say to people who want to be a journalist, I just say, “Listen to what they ask you to do, and go and do it. Do that, and then when you’ve done it, say, ‘I’ve done it now, is there anything else that you want me to do?’” And so it’s literally... journalism, 90% of the job is handing it in on time and to length. That’s it, really. And then all the rest you can learn to do. If you’re interested, and you learn how to ask questions, and you learn how to write properly and all those kind of things, you can learn. But it’s that, and I think that when people are unconfident and young, they get really tied up in knots and they think they have to be the life and soul of the office, and do this and do that. Actually, they just have to do the job that they’re asked to do.

So management consultants would say that you are outcome focused.

Oh, God, yes. All journalists are, surely.

She’s got the job done.

Yes, just get it done. I mean, I’m certainly not saying I don’t suffer from angst about work, because I do, but, essentially, journalism is a very outcome-focused job. It is. You turn up, you do the job, otherwise it’s like... creating a newspaper, even in these online days, is like making a full book every day. There’s a lot of work that goes into that. You’re creating a world every, every, every day, so if somebody doesn’t do that, because nobody’s the time to say, “Oh, poor you, are you feeling a bit rubbish?” They’ve got a hole that’s got to be filled, it’s got to happen. So I think, yes, I’m incredibly outcome focused. I am all about deadlines. Nothing happens in my life if you don’t give me a deadline.

Indulge me for a moment then, because I want to reminisce about some of the bands that you were writing about at the time.

Please do, please do!

Let's just forget the rest of the questions, actually. I mean, what was on the scene at the time? Was it Bros and all that kind of thing?

Yes. So it was the height of the Bros and Kylie and Jason era.

Wow.

And then coming up...

Aren't we still in the Kylie era?

Yes, well, the Kylie era never stops, does it? It's really long, like the Ice Age. It was long, wasn't it? Like that. Yes, so it was that kind of Stock, Aitken, Waterman pop it was, really.

Bought all their records.

Yes, of course. And then round that time, so it was '88 when I joined, then what was interesting was that music was changing, so house music was coming through and Madchester was coming through, and because I'm from a suburb of Manchester, I became almost like the Smash Hits Madchester correspondent. So I interviewed The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays, and I drew them a map, I remember, of South Manchester, including this particular pub where you go that was on certain nights, a night called Manchester Vibes In The Area, or MVITA, and I put that on the map.

But the whole country was crazy for Madchester at the time, wasn't it?

Yes, it was.

Everyone was crazy about The Stone Roses.

Yes, quite right. They were a great band, and the Happy Mondays, I personally think even more so really.

So, did you know at that point then that this was your calling? Because, clearly, you'd abandoned your law degree, you're now in the thick of it. Was it just 'head down, get on with it, this is going to be my life'?

Smash Hits... yes. I mean, it was weird. It's very funny when you find your people, I think. You know that quite quickly. So I walked into the office at Smash Hits and I kept looking round for the boss. Obviously Barry was the boss, Barry McIlheney, but he just seemed like somebody who was like me but a bit older, whereas I was used to working in places where people shouted at you, and they were proper grown-ups who wore suits if they were the boss, do you know what I mean? And so to work in a place where everyone is interested in music, everyone is interested in being funny, everyone had a similar kind of outlook to life, I suddenly thought, "Oh, this is it. I have found my people." And I was very lucky to find them at 21. A lot of people cast

around for a career, I suppose, really in the normal way, and then suddenly walk into a place and think, “Oh, here I am. I know these people.” It’s a bit like I... the other times I’ve had it is I had it when I walked into 6 Music. You just walk in and you think, “Oh, it’s all right. I understand people here. We all get each other. It’s really easy to understand.”

We’ve had Jeff Smith sitting in that chair. He was one of the nicest people you could meet, and I really enjoyed talking to him.

Yes, he’s lovely. I mean, it’s really funny, when you find your tribe, it’s very easy, and you just think, “Oh, it’s okay, I can kind of be myself and people will understand.”

What was it like to meet your heroes? I know you had a recent interview with the Beastie Boys and you recalled hanging out with the band in the ‘90s when they were trying to ply you with drugs, weren’t they?

Yes, I love the idea that I was being plied with drugs in the ‘90s.

Just offered drugs. Or a cup of coffee.

Yes, I know. I mean, it’s just this great idea that you were being plied, like it was incredibly unwilling, this poor innocent. So in the ‘90s, I was out a lot, which I think is another important thing in journalism, especially in the media in general, actually. I think if you’re young and in the media in your 20s, you shouldn’t be staying in. It doesn’t matter if you haven’t got any money, nobody cares. I had no money, nobody has any money. Just go out. And don’t think it’s networking, because that’s just kind of boring. It’s just going out and seeing what there is out there. What’s happening? Who do you meet? What will happen?

First rule of success, show up.

Yes, and just see what’s out there, do you know what I mean? Really get up, dress up, show up, and that’s what I was doing throughout the whole of the ‘90s. So I remember I had a telly presenting gig and it went out on a Thursday night, and every morning on the Friday... it was called Raw Soup. And every morning on the Friday, we’d have a meeting about how the show went, and I never saw the show.

Well, you were front of camera, were you?

Yes, well, no, it wasn’t live. It’s because I was always out.

Oh, I see. You were always nursing a hangover or something?

Yes, so I was just always out when it went out. So I’d come in and go, “It was a great show,” not having ever watched it. Actually, I think that was probably quite a good idea, because, if I did watch it, I’d be so self-conscious and never present again. But I think going out was very important. And, anyway, I went out a lot, and because I went out a lot, I met Mike D, and I genuinely cannot remember how. But I met him,

and a few times I went to New York and LA, and they kind of moved between those two places, and I went for lunch with him, and the main thing I remember about him was that he was quite 'vegany'. I don't think he is a vegan, but veganesque before anybody else seemed to be, so...

Before it was cool. Before people like me became vegan.

Yes, exactly. So he was literally drinking twig tea. It was like water with a twig in it.

I shoot people like that.

And I was like, "Whoa, that's quite cool," and I just remember having a bit of a laugh.

What's wrong with a four shot espresso?

Well, it's so un-British, do you know what I mean? It was like, I don't know, I was probably looking for sausage and chips or something really minging.

Pie and mash.

Yes, and so we went to a very trendy place and had lunch, and then we went back to his house and he smoked weed, as I'm sure lots of people know, and he just had really strong weed, and I had two goes on a joint and I couldn't... I couldn't use the phone to call for a taxi, it was really embarrassing. So he had to drive me back to where I was staying, and all I remember is he played some tracks from the new album, and of course, when I got back to Select magazine, which was where I was working, they were going, "Well, what did he play?" And I said, "All I can remember it had a flute in it and I tried to climb out of the window of the car because it was so good, but I can't tell you anything else."

But that's gonzo journalism at its best. That's what I want to hear.

Yes, but you're meant to take notes, aren't you? I just didn't even take notes!

Who cares about the record? I care that you were totally zonked out.

I remember just going back to where we were staying, and taking all my clothes off and watching QVC for about six hours.

That's just a standard Saturday night for me.

Haha!

What was it like though in terms of that line between being friends with these people and building up a relationship and having... because music journalism's not traditional, say, political journalism, where you're holding politicians to account. When I read Empire magazine or Smash Hits, I want my

journalists to empathise and share in the joy of it, as well as tell me what's going on.

Yes, I think it's interesting when you're the same age as the people you're writing about, I think, that's quite interesting. So, if you think about that time in the '90s, I was pretty much the same age as Blur or as any of those bands that came around that time, and was possibly doing similar things. I mean, we used to go to the same clubs. And then, obviously, it changed, because they'd become famous and they move into a different kind of stratosphere, I suppose, but you're essentially... you have a lot in common, because you're brought up at the same time, there was the same politics around you when you grew up, you're probably interested in the same things, so you have quite a lot in common, so you might find it easier to understand those people or to build up a rapport, but what I would say is always, always, always, I always have the reader in mind, actually, more than the band. So what I'm always trying to say is, "This is the band. I think they're great because of this. This is what we talked about," but fundamentally, I'm always thinking about the reader. It's not about me and the band having a great time, that's not the point. I mean, despite how friendly you might be with a band, they are not your friends, they're not your proper, proper friends that you call up in a crisis, are they? And that rapport, really, is because I like to get on with people anyway, but it's also, actually, because I'm trying to make everybody relaxed, so that we can find more out about these people that you, the reader, care about. That's the point.

And how does it work in terms of criticism then, when you're reporting what they're doing? Ultimately, you're going to descend into actual criticism, like is their new album any good?

Well, I suppose you just have to be honest, don't you? I think when you're younger you can be quite cruel, but I think people are... I imagine I probably got incredibly offended if somebody made a record that I didn't like, whereas now I just think, "Oh, not very good." I just think that you have to be honest and acknowledge what people are trying to do creatively, and say where it misses and where it doesn't. That's all that creativity is, isn't it? Most people have got an idea of something they want to make, and that never happens. This is the same with writing or with anything else, you never craft the perfect feature that you had in your head, but you start off and you get somewhere near it, and then maybe you get something more interesting. And it's the same with making music, or art or anything like that. You start a process where you think you're going along one way, and it'll change and morph into something else, and sometimes that'll work and sometimes that won't. And what I always think in the end is, as I get older, I become interested in the process around it almost than the product. So, when I was younger, I was very interested in the product, and I still am. If somebody brings out a brilliant single, I am interested in that, and that's absolutely amazing. But as I get older, I'm more interested in how did you get there and what went wrong on the way? I find that really much more interesting. "What were you trying to do when it all went wrong and you did something else?" And to acknowledge that, even if the product is not what you wanted or you don't particularly like, that process is really interesting anyway, so I'm more interested in that these days.

It's the same with me. I work in PR, and whenever there's a crisis or an opportunity, my thoughts are never about whatever it is about, it's always about, well, they've missed an opportunity to frame is this way, or they've missed an opportunity there.

Yes, or what were you trying to do? Quite often, you're trying to do something, even if it's a terrible PR opportunity that somebody makes a complete idiot of themselves, what were they actually trying to do, and was there any value in that, rather than the thing that came out? We've all been to terrible theatre, or films we had to walk out of, or records that we literally want to throw across the room, or you're running to the radio to switch it off because you hate it so much, but that's... you know, if the process that they got there is interesting, it's still got some merit, I think.

But it's always going to be subjective, isn't it? I mean, I remember Smash Hits. For my sins, I was a Richard Marx fan back in the day. In fact, I still am now, although I'm a closet fan now, because we're all old, and he brought out a self-titled album, Richard Marx, and then his second album was called Repeat Offender. Now, Smash Hits gave it a terrible review, and it said something like, "Repeat Offender, you can say that again," like both albums were shit, and I thought, "Well, I'll buy it and see if it's any good," and I listened to it and thought, "Oh, well, that's actually quite good. I quite like this album."

Yes. I mean, there's nothing you can do about it also, because, quite often, in those cases, you're reviewing the person, and not the record, aren't you? They're reviewing Richard Marx, they're not reviewing the record.

I also thought that was a clever Richard Marx reference, because one of the tracks is called There Ain't Nothing You Can Do About It, but there you are.

Yes. You are a fan! But, I mean, music journalism, part of the joy of music journalism is the fantastic slagging, isn't it? I mean, that's kind of partly the point within that genre. I find a really well-crafted, mean-spirited hatchet job is fantastic.

There's a joy to it, isn't there?

Yes. There's something really amazing about it. It's a fantastic thing.

And how do they... for example, if you're writing about someone that you do a well-crafted but joyously mean-spirited hatchet job on something, how do they take it? Does it vary?

Well, it's interesting, isn't it, because I always think that whatever you say, you have to... it's what you think, don't lie. If you like something, say you like it, and if you don't, say you don't, and say why. And obviously I've been confronted by people who haven't liked what I've written.

So you weren't stuck in a lift with, say, Brother Beyond, and they said, "I hated your review"?

No, but I've been in a lift with a lead singer of a band, who absolutely can't stand me, who's shouted at me across various crowded bars in the past, but that's all right, I'll live. He didn't like it, it's okay. I mean, at the time, it felt quite tricky, whereas now, I just think, "Fine." And, actually, as you get older, what's interesting is the people you maybe had rivalries around or who didn't like what you wrote about when you younger, so say in the '90s, I mean, there's a classic kind of... I wrote an article about Noel Gallagher, and in that article, he kind of slagged Damon and Alex off from Blur and said he wanted them to die of AIDS, right?

Nice.

Yes, but we actually thought nothing of it. We just thought he was just being funny. And then it was...

It would clearly be controversial.

Well, I just thought he was being kind of funny, and I also thought Damon and Alex wouldn't care, which they kind of didn't. But it went very big at the time, and he got very upset about it, Noel did.

Were you reporting accurately what he said on the record?

Yes, and I understand why, because he said it and it was quite funny. I mean, I didn't go, "Ooh, you're a really terrible person," I just thought he was just being an idiot, it was quite funny. But, anyway, it didn't go very well, and it was not good for him, and so, for a while, he was very prickly towards me, and I felt similarly prickly around him, but now I...

That he'd overreacted?

Yes, or whatever. But, now, I kind of think, "Well, you know what? We were all around in the '90s." It was quite hectic in the 90s at that time. It was really, really hectic, and, fundamentally, what do I think about Noel Gallagher and Oasis? Fundamentally, I think they're a great band, and he is on the right side of things in life. He is. He's really funny, he pays his taxes.

He works hard.

Yes, he works hard, he's made some amazing records. Fine. Really. Fantastic. That is brilliant. I have no problem with him. And what you hope is, as you get older, you understand that you were all part of a kind of mad scene, and, actually, some people are all right and, even though you got on each other's nerves, you were all pushing it in the right direction, and that's fine. So even if there people that don't like me from that time, I think, fundamentally, we're actually on the right side. We're on the same side, and it was okay.

But you are right though, it is an ecosphere, isn't it, as far as... When I used to go to a lot of gigs, before I settled down and became boring, reading about the

up-and-coming gigs and the reviews of the previous ones and who's on tour was part of the excitement, and then reading the reviews afterwards about whether you agreed with them was all part of the excitement. Reading NME was a joy.

Yes, it was good, wasn't it? I mean, I think also there was a kind of nice rivalry between different papers. So between obviously NME and Melody Maker, but then Smash Hits as well, and there was another magazine similar to Smash Hits called Number One.

Yes, I remember Number One.

And that kind of rivalry is actually quite important because it makes us want to do better, and be better, and I think that those things are really important. And also, I like anything, any music in particular that comes out of a culture, that represents something that's happening, and that culture can be, you know, a classic culture would be a council estate culture, whatever that is, where you're from, you're representing where you grew up, that's a classic way of doing it. But there's also people who feel like they're outsiders for where they live, so they move somewhere else and they form their little culture there, and I think that what happens if something comes out of a culture, then people who are involved in a similar culture will be attracted to it, they'll write about it, or nowadays they'll tweet about it, they'll make radio shows about it, and that is really important. Because that will make that thing get bigger and have more significance, and then it will go nationwide, or maybe worldwide, and people will understand it because it represents something that's really real.

You mentioned the TV show a few moments ago, how did the TV opportunities and other media than print come about, and did you kind of like that? Did you think, "Well actually I do want to be a television music journalist," or do you always want to be in print? How does it work?

It's funny, I mean my career's more haphazard than people I think would ever imagine.

Everyone's career's like that.

It's really haphazard, yes.

I've just gone from failure to failure, but I've been really good at making it a positive spin on it.

I've been sacked so many times! So the telly stuff came out of, I'm trying to think actually, weirdly what happened was I went onto some weird show where it was like you had to have an opinion about something that was on the telly, and I kind of slagged something off. God, I can't remember. All I remember, I was up against... I think it was youth programmes. So I had to say, I remember being in a room, and this researcher or producer kind of geeing me up to be really tough, and then having

to go up against Michelle Collins, who I think was working for The Word? Does that sound right?

Was she Cindy from EastEnders?

Yes.

Wow.

And I just remember...

I shouldn't know that.

I just remember having to kind of go in quite hard on Michelle Collins for some reason. Anyway, someone saw me do this.

She left poor Ian Beale at the altar, if you remember.

Well, it's fair enough. But it wasn't actually about that, I'm afraid, it was about her presenting in a youth show, anyway. Anyway, I think somebody saw it and then they auditioned me for another programme.

Wow, so you obviously caught the eye of the powers that be?

Just a gob on a stick at the right age. And so I did a programme with Paul Tonkinson, who was an up and coming comedian at the time, and it was a 'yoof' show, as you can imagine. And it was a local, London youth show and it was set in Deptford and it was called Raw Soup. And we had actually pretty good bands on, and really good comedians, but at the time they were just kind of up and coming, and that was my first telly presenting.

Wow, and did you want to pursue a career in telly at that point, did you get the bug, or did you think, "Right, this is going to happen and then I'm going to go back to print," or "I'm going to do all of these things all at once?"

It's funny, because there's something about telly that really messes with your head, and I found that quite hard, so I got a couple of gigs after that and I really didn't like them. What it does is obviously, it puffs up your ego really big, because there's a camera pointing at you, but it also smashes it into smithereens because you've discovered you can't actually walk and talk and remember things at the same time, and you look awful, and urgh, what are you doing? Because if you look at yourself on the telly, obviously you hate yourself forever. So I actually turned down quite a lot of gigs, because I just couldn't deal with it, actually. I remember I had a column in Time Out and somebody approached me and they wanted to make a telly programme about it, which I kind of think, "Oh, you probably should have taken that opportunity," but I found the whole thing so different to writing that I couldn't really cope with it. And so, if I think generally about my career, writing is the thing that I have done all the way through and that's how I pay my mortgage, is writing. Definitely, definitely,

definitely. And then telly and radio and broadcasting, it just comes in and out, because things like with radio, you have to pitch a lot and, oh God, the process is just a nightmare, and the same actually with telly. So I very rarely pitch anything now. If somebody comes to me and says, “What about this?” And I think, “Oh, that’s interesting,” then I’ll do it. But the pitching process is so tedious. And I don’t have the patience, really.

There’s so many people involved the telly, to state the obvious as well.

Yes, because it’s more money.

Well, but if I commission you to write something, you can sit down in front of your electric typewriter and bash out 1,800 words and I’ll just pay you the £50 quid.

Yes, I mean...

Telly’s not that.

No, there’s an element of having to be there for telly that can be quite difficult. You have to be there, you have to look nice, you have to turn up at the right time, you have to do it within a certain time thing, whereas with writing, same thing, as long as you file to length and on time, nobody cares when you wrote it. They don’t care if you wrote it an hour before or two weeks before, just hand it in on time. So you can do it when you can fit it in, if you see what I mean. But I do think that telly and radio does teach you something about interviewing a bit.

It hadn’t taught me anything, this is about the 160th podcast I’ve done, and I’m still shit.

No, rubbish. No you’re not! Yes, but it’s like what it teaches you, I think, especially telly and radio, is you think it’s all about really intelligent questions that you don’t know, and it’s not. It’s absolutely about creating a nice atmosphere with somebody, so that when the camera is rolling and they actually might feel a bit awkward, you’ve created such a nice atmosphere that they can talk to you. I mean, that is like 90% of the job, really.

Putting people at ease.

Yes.

Because there’s an artificial reality to being in a TV studio which affects the interview as you’ve just said, so the more you can try and normalise it and say, “Well, forget the camera’s there, we’re just having a chat.” Because that’s what the viewers want to see.

Yes, and also that’s how you get the best out of them, and sometimes in television you’re in ridiculous situations, there’s like 30 people around you and there’s

somebody knocking on the window, pulling faces. And you have to get it done in two minutes between buses passing, you know what I mean? It's just really, really difficult. So nearly all of it, I think, as a presenter, is make that everything within that as relaxed as you can for the person you're talking to. Explain what's going on, have a bit of a laugh and then when you do it, the interview is fine. And so I have brought that, which I've learnt, quite a lot into my normal interviews, my everyday interviews that I would do for writing, now. So half the time, I'll just stray off questions and stuff like that because I just think, "Well let's have a chat. Let's see what are you actually thinking about? We'll talk about your work and then let's think about something else. What else are you thinking about?"

And I know discretion is the better part of valour and all of that, but spill the beans, who's been the best interview in terms of most enjoyable and who's been difficult? Who's been obstinate? Even if you have got a good end result from it, who have you interviewed that's, you know, for example, Diana Ross apparently is not very nice with journalists and it's not a pleasant process of interviewing her.

She's Diana Ross! I mean, really, you know.

She insists you call her Miss Ross.

Quite right.

Well yes, quite right.

Who has been really good? Loads of people have been really good. I mean, the majority of people I interview, I come out and I think, "That was great. I met a really interesting person, we had a brilliant time, I feel engaged, I feel like I learnt something that was absolutely brilliant." And out of those people, for a long time, it really was a lot of Mancunians I liked. I really liked interviewing New Order.

It's a regional bias.

Yes, it's weird, isn't it? New Order, The Stone Roses, Happy Mondays, they were all really interesting and brilliant. But I would also say Madonna was amazing, and Grace Jones, absolutely amazing.

Grace Jones is amazing.

Yes, she snogged me.

Really?

Yes.

Wow.

I know, so exciting.

Was that before or after Roger Moore?

After, when she was drunk.

Ah right, okay.

She was brilliant. But so, those people, just absolutely great. Then the people that are not good, I find it sometimes interesting if people are a bit awkward. It's nearly always blokes, I have to say.

Yes.

And what you find is, you ask a question and the very first thing that they say is, "No." So everything you say, they go, "No." And I go, "Well, what is it then?" And they go, "Well, no, it's like this." And I remember once interviewing a director, and we were on stage, and he literally started, I pointed it out, and I said "You're moving your chair away from me. I can watch you, you're moving it away." And I dragged his chair towards me. And those kind of things are quite funny.

Why? Why was he doing that? Was he an introvert?

Because he was... yes.

Did he have something to hide?

He was just a little bit defensive like people can be, you know? I've interviewed people on stage and it's just gone terribly, I mean, awfully. And I remember interviewing Bret Easton Ellis, and he was really hung over, it was at a festival. He was really hungover and he wasn't really interested in what we had to talk about which was the sequel to Less Than Zero. But, because obviously I'd read the book, I had all these questions ready.

So this is at a festival, there's an audience, there's people stood there, real people?

Yes, massive audience, real people on stage at Latitude.

Isn't he doing them a disservice by half-heartedly engaging?

It was just, what happened was, he said, "I don't want to talk about the book, I want to talk about The Hills," which is a programme I've never watched, and I was like, "Well, I can't talk about that, so why don't you go ahead?" So I let him talk about The Hills, and then I tried to bring him back to the book. And it was a classic, everything I said, he went, "No." And could feel my... there's a real funny thing with stage technique, so you have to not let it show that you're worried, so I just kept very still, but I knew I was tense because my buttocks were so tense that I'd rose up about like

two foot in the chair. I was really, really rigid. And then after all, I actually said, “Look, this isn’t going very well, why don’t we just throw it open to the audience?” Because there’s no point, if it’s not working...

And then did he refuse to answer the audience’s questions?

No, the audience was quite good, but there was a point also, and I just went, “Can you stop flirting with that bloke over there?” Because it was just really obvious, he was eying him up. And he was going, “I wasn’t,” and we’re going, “You were.” I mean it was quite funny.

So there’s actually quite a bit of tension there, isn’t it?

Yes, and also I think, what I’ve learnt about being on stage, I actually really enjoy being on stage now. Which obviously it takes the time to learn, is if you acknowledge what’s actually happening, everybody is engaged. So if you say, “This isn’t going very well, let’s get some questions from the audience, you don’t seem to like these questions, let’s try something else,” it’s fine. Because you’re engaged in a happening that everybody is engaged within, and that’s okay. If it’s going wrong, just say it’s going wrong. You know, “Oh, I dropped this. Oh, I can’t remember the question.” It’s fine. You just have to be in the moment and tell people. Because otherwise it looks like you’re out of control, and this is your gig. You’re the person steering the gig, you have to steer it.

And do you enjoy the fact that you’ve expanded your remit, as it were, that you write on the wider art scene rather than mainly music as you started in?

Yes, definitely.

How did that happen?

I can’t remember, I’m just terrible, I can’t remember!

It’s still really enjoyable.

Where’s my memory? I mean it’s partly because I was interested anyway. I know what part of it was, actually. So again, in the ‘90s, if you think about the people who were then called the YBAs, Young British Artists. The obvious ones are was Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, Sam Taylor-Wood, the Chapman brothers, all those people were around and you’d see them out. So you’d go to gigs and they would be there. So you would see them.

There weren’t at York Barbican, where I used to go to the majority at my gigs.

Ha! But they were out, and so when I interviewed them, it was a similar kind of thing. You’d just see them out and they’d be falling over in some corner somewhere, and they were friends with quite a lot of the bands anyway. So those people felt very natural to interview because they were part of that scene, really. And then I was

always quite interested in visual art, so because of that, that kind of carried on, really. And artists are really good, if you interview an artist, they're really brilliant because they spent all their time thinking about stuff and they're really honest. They've got no reason not to be honest. Because their work is not being sold to you and me, their work is being sold to collectors or to institutions. So actually it really doesn't matter what they say. Whereas if you're a band, I suppose, your work is purchased democratically. So it's purchased by lots and lots of us little people. So if you are rude about the little people, nobody's going to buy your work, whereas actually that doesn't matter if you're an artist, because you're appealing to people on a different pay scale, and they don't even care. They're just happy you got the press.

And where is it on the kind of push-pull thing in terms of which side of the conversation wants it to succeed more? Because for example, if I'm Rick Astley and I'm trying to build a name for myself, yes, as you've just said there, there's the absence of slagging off his fans, he wouldn't do that, but on the other hand he wants to have a good interview so that people like him. And you're, frankly, the means to that.

Yes, I don't know. I mean, I always think if you, as an interviewee, if you're interviewing somebody, what I want an interviewee is to be honest, right? So I try and give them very few opportunities to lie, so your best bet with that quite often is starting to talk to them about their childhood, it's really hard to lie about your childhood. If you say, "What posters did you have on the wall?" It's hard to fake that environment, because it's just...

Hue and Cry, for me.

Yes, well exactly.

Big Hue and Cry fan, still am.

You would say, why would you lie? It's really hard to create a whole new childhood for yourself, do you know what I mean? And so I always try and create an environment where they don't need to lie, and then you get an honesty around everything, really. Because once you start to, I don't know, ask a question where the only diplomatic answer is a lie, like you ask Rick Astley, "What do you think of the new Kylie single?" Or something like that, do you know what I mean? He can't really be horrible about it, because they were both Stock Aitken and Waterman, so why would you ask that question? It's just pointless. But if you ask a question, which is a classic Smash Hits question, "Have you ever been sick in your shoes?" You're more likely to get an answer. A truthful one. Paul, have you ever been sick in your shoes?

No, I have not.

Have you ever been sick in a cup?

Yes. And do you know what?

Because you had to try and hide it.

In 160 miserable podcasts that I've done, no interviewee has ever tried to turn the tables! It's one of the reasons why I like asking the questions.

You don't want to be asked, yes?

We had Julie Etchingham on a couple of weeks ago, who's obviously a very senior newscaster, she does ITV News at Ten and so on. And she was genuinely quite nervous, and it made me nervous because she said, "Well I've spent decades asking other people the questions and holding them to account, and now you're going to ask me things," I'm like "Yes, it's normal," and she was like, "Not for me, it's not."

It must be quite hard, isn't it? That never, ever happens.

I'm doing that thing on the stage where my chair's moving away to the other side.

Oh yes, the buttocks, oh, your buttocks have got tense. He's risen up in his chair!

So what's a typical week and a typical month for you now? How do you divide it? You mentioned that you're freelance, but I suppose we would call it a portfolio career these days? Do you have lots of different income streams.

Oh yes, that's what somebody says to me, so you have a portfolio career.

But what does that involve, what do you do?

Okay, so, I have regular gigs. So I have a regular audio column for the Observer where I review radio and podcasts. That has to be filed on a Wednesday, so I'm normally doing that either on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, that's just sacrosanct, that has to happen. And then other than that, so I have a 6 Music Show, and that runs for kind of four weeks every time. So most of the work in that is getting people to do it, because it's at a very specific time, some of these people are very important stars, a lot of it is pitching, and they go, "Yes," and then their American PR's going, "No." And then I've probably got something else I've got to write. It's a feature I've got to write up, or an opinion piece, or because of newspapers, you might get phoned up and they say, "Right, we need something now," or emailed or whatever. So there's normally a kind of ticking over, then I'm meant to be writing a book. I am writing a book, just in case my agent listens, I'm writing a book, I'm writing it really hard.

Hashtag #ImWriting.

So that is also kind of ticking over. But most of the structure of my life is provided by the structure of my children's life. That's just what happens. So the problem with being a freelancer is that you don't really want a structure and you like to be able to work as freely as you can, and then you have kids and the whole life is dominated by getting them to school and taking them to football.

Glorified taxi service, as my dad used to say about me.

But it's also the regularly of it I find very hard. So I find, I mean, it's fine, and don't get me wrong, I love my children, but the routine of getting up at the same time, doing the same thing every day, the problem I have with it is it makes time pass really, really, really fast and I'm middle-aged and I would like time to slow down.

Because you could see it as enabling, that it's a framework, that once you've got the kids to school, you've then got free hours where you could either watch Trisha or you could get on with writing.

Yes, I mean, there is an element to it, that once you've had kids, there is a whole world of angst that just disappears because you've got a finite of time to write a feature. So you know, when I stop talking to you, I've got to finish off a feature and I've got to write a column and there is no question that has to be done by four o'clock. There is an element to that I do quite like, it's just the repetitive nature of things that I find quite hard sometimes.

And presumably, to state the obvious, kids get in the way in terms of going to endless gigs and reviewing loads of stuff. Were you ever tempted to put them in an orphanage so you could focus completely on music?

Well, there is an element that my daughter, who's eight, and so she's been to festivals where I've interviewed people. So as far as she's concerned, they...

So she's literally one of the cool kids?

Well, she's incredibly chatty as a person, so she thinks that if I'm working in the evenings, she's like "Well why am I not going?" And I'm like...

Because you're eight.

Yes, and you've got school, but she's like, "But I've seen you do this, why is it not like when we're at Port Eliot and it's all fine," so...

She sounds awesome, precocious.

Yes, she's just...

She'll probably end up inheriting the family...

So she gets really, really upset! So last week I did two things, one was I did, Suede had a documentary out on Sky Arts. It's a great documentary, I really recommend it, and what happened was, it was a showing of the documentary and then I interviewed the band on stage, right? Now, weirdly, she has met Brett Anderson because I interviewed him on stage at Port Eliot, and she got on with his kids. So as far as she's concerned, her and Brett are like this, we're mates. So I said I was doing

them, she was like, “Why am I not going?” I’m like, “Because it’s literally on at half past nine at night. No.” And then on the Wednesday, I went to see Christine and the Queens and she really likes that, and she was like “Why am I not going?”

Why am I not related to you? Can I become an honorary... you know like in Japan, where grown men can become adopted?

You can come, you can come along, put you in a bag. So she was really, really proper cross. She’s got FOMO, big style, whereas I’m older and I do not have that any more, really.

Do you enjoy it? I mean, clearly I can see the passion and hear that you do enjoy it, but are there any bits now that where you’re churning out, you mention this column you’ve got to do by four o’clock, will you enjoy the actual process of knocking that out, or is it more about, I need to get it done so I can make a cup of tea?

There’s a bit of both, but the actual process of writing, I like. So that’s very lucky.

Well, yes. What is it you like about it?

God. I suppose I’m show-off enough to think that to enjoy putting my opinion out there into the world, you have to have a slightly show-off element, I think, to be a journalist, really.

Jeremy Vine sat in that chair a few years ago and he said that “You’ve either got the show-off gene, or you don’t have it.”

Yes, yes. I do think that a bit. And there’s an element of if you have that, then you want to say “I found this thing, it’s brilliant! How about this?” So, but then there’s something about writing that I really like, because it orders my thoughts. So I might be able to tell you what I think now, but the actual physical act of writing will make my opinions better, and I enjoy that.

I can write, I’m an alright writer, I’m not particularly great, but it’s not something I enjoy, which is why I employ some writers in my business, because they’re better at it, and you can see they enjoy it and I’d rather give them the brief.

But do you not think that’s because your creativity lies elsewhere?

No.

Well it does. Obviously, it does.

I have no creativity.

Well, of course you do. You're just interviewing people and you have, you have ideas. You have creativity, but writing is not the way that you can express it. So, sometimes when I'm interviewing artists, artists hate writing. Their emails are terrible. I mean, they're just rubbish. They're either a far-too-long stream of consciousness or they're like three words. And that's because it's not their medium. This is not what they do. Their ideas come out, in a different way and it just happens that writing is where I'm able to order my thoughts and to think things properly. That's just kind of what I'm best at.

Do you think we take popular culture seriously enough as a society? I mean, you've made documentaries for Radio Four, you've interviewed all these musicians and artists for Six Music and done BBC2 programmes. Is it something that in the busy-ness of life now, that everyone's working 14 hours a day at the factory and then they've got the kids and everything else, that they don't make time for this kind of thing? Or is it just me?

I think it's harder when you get older, because you have a finite amount of time and it's hard to understand where you find pop culture, I think... when you're older. Because the means has changed a little bit hasn't it? So, you can't pick up the NME or whatever. But I think that pop culture is incredibly important to most people actually, because it frames their life and helps them understand it. I know plenty of people, younger than me, who don't watch films but are really into computer games. I don't like computer games. It's just not my thing.

Something else I'm not into.

But I understand, because it's obvious that computer games are also creative enterprises. So, if you're involved in that, there is something creative about you being in that world, and negotiating that world, and understanding how you want to play it. It's in a very involving situation to be involved in. And it absolutely defines people's lives sometimes. And there's nothing wrong with it. Or they make friends that way. And it's the same with music. If you're really into a certain type of band... even if you can't leave the house, you might be able to join the fan club online, or whatever. It's very important for human beings in general to be able to express all the things they can't express. Sometimes you need someone else to do it for you, and music will almost always do that for you. But film can do it, or dance can do it, or culture in general, whether it's pop culture or what people will call the high arts, is expressing stuff that can't be expressed in any other way. That we can't get out. And so, I think, in order to live a fulfilled, emotional and intellectual life, you need the arts in whatever form that is. And I don't mind if it's computer games and I don't mind if it's opera. You need something in your life to express the stuff that you can't express otherwise.

Did you ever feel, in all the programmes that I've seen you on, did you ever feel that you were the token female panellist? Because you were clearly there on merit, but some of the things that I remember seeing you on, it was you and loads of blokes. And you were there on merit, but why were you dominated by so many blokes? Couldn't they have got more women as well?

You know what? It's so interesting. I just think people didn't notice for a really, really long time. I noticed, and as a woman, you would notice. Although, weirdly, not all the time because we're brought up in a patriarchal society, but I remember there was a point where I was on a committee to do with organising a radio conference... a big radio conference. Everyone was going to meet. And I remember, they kept arranging the meeting for 5:30pm, and it was a nightmare for me.

It's not a family-friendly time.

It was a really bad time. My kids were little... it was a really bad time. And every time I could make it, they'd be doing panels and literally, all I'd do is put my hand up and go, there's no woman on it? There's no women on it. Where's the woman? Can we have at least a woman presenter? I mean, it was just insane. It was so boring. And after that... really soon after that, actually, about a couple years after that, there was a kind of lobby group formed, called Sound Women, and I was one of the founder members, and it was because of that. Because we went to a radio awards show, the Sony's it was called, and it was a bit like the radio Oscars, hosted by Chris Evans, who you can understand why, great host, but every single woman who came on stage- incredibly talented, high-achieving women, were there to hand a gong out to a bloke. It was just unbelievable. It was appalling. And Talk Sport won, at that time, Station of the Year, which I think is completely... you could argue for that. But at the time, they had an advert, where if you answered questions correctly, a woman would strip for you.

Jesus.

Yes. Yes.

You wouldn't get away with that now, obviously.

No, that was eight years ago!

How could you even get away with it then?

Yes. So, that's how bad it was. So, you have to keep raising these issues, because people just don't even notice otherwise. They don't notice.

It seems to me that the BBC in particular, with #BBCWomen and all of that, are really doing their best now to make sure... I mean, we've got Zoe Ball replacing Chris Evans, we've got Sarah Cox on Drivetime now. There was a point I think, where, other than Vanessa Feltz, it was an all-male line-up on Radio 2. It was like that for decades.

Yes, and I remember having a conversation with Bob Shennan about it. And it was in my capacity as a radio reviewer, and I was saying, "This cannot exist like this. You cannot have a weekday schedule, where it's literally white middle-aged men from the time that Vanessa finishes, which is seven in the morning, seven thirty in the morning, until seven o'clock at night, every day. It can't happen." And he said, at the time, he said, "We've missed the boat. We haven't trained up enough women to be

good enough to replace them." And I was like, "This is rubbish. It's just rubbish." So, then I was like, "What are we going to do? Wait until somebody literally dies on air, before somebody gets replaced?"

That is Radio 2's way, I mean Steve Wright's been having the same show for 30 years. And it's a good show don't get me wrong, but...

There's a couple of factors that happened, and the first one was actually Sound Women. So we created this lobby group, and we brought things to their attention, and actually, as a direct result of that, Tony Hall, who came in as the Head of the BBC, said, "Right. We need to change local radio, so that there's an equal amount of women presenting on breakfast shows as men." Because, there was literally one woman with a solo radio show across the whole of the UK.

Incredible.

In breakfast. It was just unbelievable.

And yet, you are right about societal and institutional blindness, because Bob Shennan has sat in that chair, but it was about two of three years ago. I never asked him about the number of women presenters on Radio 2.

No, because you didn't really think, did you?

No. To my shame.

Yes, well it's fine. Nobody did, but some of us were kind of banging on about it. And then, so that was slightly... there was an alteration. And then, what actually happened was two things. One, was the presenter's pay was published. And that was a big shocker for everybody.

Jo Whiley being worth half of Simon Mayo, for example.

I mean, it's mental. And then the other thing was, that Ofcom took over the running of the BBC at the very, very top. And they said, "You legally now, have to represent the diversity of the United Kingdom." So, the BBC went into a panic. And then, because of that... luckily for them, Chris Evans left. And so, therefore, they had the people who were eminently qualified. Zoe Ball, Sarah Cox, Jo Whiley, these people are... I mean, how much more do they have to do to prove they're brilliant Radio 2 presenters? They are amazing. So, all the people that lined up, they were the people that were already there. But I also think there's a really interesting, subtle point, which is that Sarah Cox, Zoe Ball, Jo Whiley, they all came out of the 90's, and all of them at that time, were called 'ladettes' – i.e. women you could have a pint with. And, so what I find quite interesting is those women are still seen as... I mean, obviously they're seen as women, and they are absolutely eminently qualified to do that job, but they're all seen as slightly blokey, so they're allowed into the blokes' world.

Yes, but you could contrast that with people like Lauren Laverne, who doesn't seem to me to be a ladette or a blokey type. She's very talented.

No, she's not. But she's also the same kind of thing. She ticks slightly blokey boxes. She knows everything she can about music. She's incredibly well-versed in those kinds of things.

She's a very talented broadcaster.

Oh, she's amazing. She's like, absolutely at the top of her game. She's completely brilliant. But, she will tick slightly kind of nerdy boy things, that people want. You can imagine that she might be fun in a pub... she would have a laugh with you, she can take a joke, she can make a joke. She knows loads about music. She's ticking quite male boxes.

So we're looking at women presenters even then, even though they're women, and they're doing the job, we're looking at them through a male lens.

I think very, very, slightly. I would be absolutely gobsmacked if Vanessa Feltz ever got a Radio 2 gig during the day, because she is not like that. And yet, she's absolutely brilliant.

She is. She's a fantastic broadcaster. But she's older as well. You can start to see the reasons why she doesn't fit that mould, and that's to the station's shame that she doesn't have a primetime slot. I agree with you. Let's talk about swingers' parties.

Shall we? Do you want to come? We're having one on Saturday.

I've seen these documentaries about swingers' parties and I would never go to one, because they're all ugly. They're all like morbidly obese, middle-aged people. But anyway, we digress. Obviously, I would never go to one on principle as well. You wrote a book about Britain's suburbs called Park and Ride. That meant visiting golf clubs, swingers parties, all this kind of thing. Tell us about the book.

Okay. That was at the end of the 90's, 1999.

See, I've done my research.

Thank you. That's very sweet of you. And it's about the suburbs. So where I grew up was a suburb of Manchester. It's like Footballers' Wives, but up North.

Was there loads of swingers parties?

I don't think my mum and dad would have ever been invited to them, because they were teachers, do you know what I mean?

Yes.

It was very white stiletto, show everyone you've made your money kind of thing. And what I had a feeling about, which I think has slightly been borne out, was that that suburban approach to life was taking over cities. So, what used to happen, was you, as the person from the suburb, or from outside the city, would move to the city because it was really grimy and glitzy and odd, and there were funny spaces between the cracks where you could come in, right? And when I was young, to go into town, into Manchester, was seen as a really reckless thing to do. But what I could see, was that the values of the suburbs were coming into the city and taking over. You know, so everything was becoming pedestrianised and nicer, and a bit more glitzy.

Gentrification.

Well, almost, it's like a mallification, is that the right word?

Suburbification, if that's a word.

It's like everything turns into a shopping mall, even though it's actually a street. And that means that suburban people will now go in. So, like Manchester, loads of suburban people go into Manchester now, where they didn't before because it was a bit scary before and now it's not. So that's what kind of, I was writing about. And within that, it meant that I went to a swingers' party.

And how did that go?

It's a bit like what you said. It's just not really my scene. It's not really my scene, and I didn't really fancy anyone, and it was all a bit awkward. I did the classic tabloid. I made my excuses and left.

I always used to read that in the Daily Mirror in the early '80's.

There is a point though, where you just think, "Oh my God. Please, no." I mean, "I'm very happy that you're all having a great time, but this is not for me."

As long as it's all consensual and it's all behind closed doors and I can't see it, and I don't want anything to do with it, then best of luck.

I would say, it's absolutely... I mean, I think that it is all consensual. There's no single males allowed. It always has to be couples. There's quite a few very particular rules around it. I just didn't fancy anyone. And also, I was of an age still then, when really, if you wanted to have a quick elicit shag, you go to a nightclub, you know? It's not that hard.

Now, I've been putting off my mid-life crisis for quite some time now, and I've managed to stave it off. But you actually wrote a straight-talking handbook about tackling that.

I did, yes. How old are you?

I'm 43.

Oh, great. It's just going to come. Woo-hoo for you!

I'm already feeling a creeping sense of ennui.

Yes, exactly. So, I genuinely had a mid-life crisis. But it was a very small and slightly pathetic one. So, I didn't want to leave my husband. I didn't want to run off with a builder or take up mad yoga somewhere. I just felt this sense of having lived over half my life, and what was I going to do with the rest of my life. And there's quite often a trigger around it. And the trigger can be things like your parents dying, or a divorce, or in my case... I had my second child very late. So I had her when I was 43 and so I was incredibly grateful, she was a great... and is still, a great kid. And I just remember looking at her...

This is the eight-year-old that insists on going to gigs?

Yes, exactly. So she's brilliant. And she was a lovely, easy, baby. But, I remember looking at her in the kitchen and starting doing the death maths. So, basically, what you do is you work out how old you're going to be when she leaves home... goes to university, then also work out the fact that she's probably going to come back, because you live in London. And then, once you've got rid of her, how old you're going to be.

The orphanage was never an option then?

No. And how many years you have left before you die. And the average age... you know, there's some terrible hardcore facts which are, essentially, if you were born when I was born, which was '67, then you are statistically likely, as a woman, to die at 83. And if you're a bloke, it's 80.

Wow, this podcast has taken a maudlin turn, hasn't it?

So you think, "Okay. With a following wind and a few greens, and if I keep jogging round the park, maybe I can push it to 86."

I'd rather not do the jogging and die earlier... just watch telly. There's loads on Netflix now, you know?

But still, you're over half-way, right? And that is very difficult. Because if you have a metaphor in your head, it's very, very likely to be, "I'm at the top of the hill now, and it's downhill now. That's it. It's downhill into death."

Yes, it's game over. Well, I mean, my back isn't hurting now, but I genuinely put my back out about four weeks ago, just tying my shoelaces. I mean, what kind of a total numpty puts his back out tying his shoelaces?

A middle-aged one.

And that's my point. I used to think I was indestructible, and now I think I'm destructible.

Exactly. And also, there's a lot of shifting around your headspace around that. So, especially, if you write about music.

Because it's seen as a young person's game, isn't it?

Exactly. And also, not to be funny about it, I'm writing about music and I'm also a journalist. Both those, music and journalism, are kind of a dying industry, right? You really might as well be a miner. You're not qualified to do anything else, and what you're qualified in doing is a dying industry. And there is a shift that needs to be done around your head. So, the shift essentially, is that if you're younger, you think, "I've got loads of potential, I can do this and do that." And when you're in middle-age, you think, "Actually, there's a lot of things I can't do." It's really basic dreams that people have for a really long time, that in extreme forms are, "I'm going to play for Man United." "I'm going to..."

Be Prime Minster. That was my dream when I was a kid.

Yes. All those kinds of things. And you have to acknowledge that those are not going to happen. So, if they're not going to happen, what is going to happen?

But also, and I've had this with my friends, where things that they've aspired to do... like marriage and mortgage, they actually then tie them down. So, they get the kids and they get the mortgage, and then they're 10 years in and they actually feel locked in by that.

Yes, exactly.

Or their job choice.

That's what I mean by 'the potential'. So there's no sense that you can move around freely, and fulfil whatever this brilliant person is, within. That it's much harder to do. And yes, you're locked down.

So, what was the advice then? Can you give me the answers for when I need them?

Yes, I can actually. So, I would say, especially for men actually. Men have to really watch it. There's a big spike in suicides around the early 40's, and that is because of those things. They feel locked down, they feel like they've lost their potential. It's really, really difficult. They don't talk to anyone. It's incredibly hard. And so what

tends to happen is, they might act extremely. Whether that's something awful like suicide, or equally something bad like splitting up their marriage and just throwing everything up. Because they don't like what they've become and they can't work out how to manoeuvre within that life that's so locked down, how do you find the freedom to be who you are? It's very difficult. And what I think you need to do is, you need to learn to accept the things you can't change... which is quite hard. You can't change the fact that you're getting older. That you don't look as good as you used to. That you can't get an extended mortgage because actually, you're a bit old. That you're never going to get a house with a garden because you live in London and it's completely impossible to afford one. You know, these things are not your fault. Don't beat yourself up about it. You made these choices. So then, you can adjust things. So the thing that I find very difficult about middle-age is a bit like what I was talking about before, that routine. The fact that everything is the same. That you do the same thing, over and over, and then before you know it, 10 years have gone past. So, within that routine, you have to alter it up. And the best way of making time stretchy again, is to do something that is completely absorbing. So, go to a gig... if you like gigs, go to a gig. If you like nightclubs, even if you feel really embarrassed in a nightclub now, just go for two hours. Go and enjoy it. Put something in your life, that will take you out of... well, it's called Out of Time. And it's called Out of Time for a reason. It needs to be out of that boring routine. Take yourself out of that time and do something else. It could be reading, it could be writing... some form of creativity. Doing some form of sport that is similar to what you did when you were young, so, swimming, cycling, running, those kind of basic things. Maybe football if you like football. Those things bring you into your body and you feel like you could be seven, you could be 70, you could be any age at all, because you're doing something that you did when you were young and now you're a different age. And so, there are different things that you can do, to try and take yourself out of this... the middle-age kind of fug, really. And I think it's quite important to do that, really. You have to do it. Even really basic things like, if you always take the dog to the same park, go round the same way, just take him to a different park. Walk a different way to work. Just really, little things like that will change it. And also, the other thing I would say, is focus on how happy you are at the moment. So, you might think, "I have a really boring life. This is what I do every day." But if you focus on how you're actually feeling in it, are you feeling happy because you're in the park with the dog and it's a nice day? Are you actually feeling happy? And if you are, just enjoy that. And then, you'll find that you actually feel better about everything, because it's really, really, really, common to have a mid-life dip in happiness. Generally, it's a U-shape dip. So, you're happy when you're really young, happy when you're really old, big dip in the middle, right?

Well, there's a quarter-life crisis now, isn't there?

Yes, but they studied big apes – I can't remember if it was orangutans or chimpanzees – but they studied apes and apes have a mid-life dip as well. I mean, obviously younger, because they don't live as long, but they have the same thing. Where they suddenly think, "Oh my God. I'm not as good looking as I used to be, and this young chimp has come in."

I have an afternoon dip.

Well, everyone does.

On a daily basis.

So, those things... it's very, very, common and you just have to understand them and work out things that you want to keep. And also, I would say shed a lot of stuff that doesn't matter. Just shed the stuff that you don't care about and keep the stuff that you like. So, what can you change and what can't you change? And mostly, what you can change is you. Really, you can't change the circumstances; you've got to go to work, you've got to pay the mortgage, you're married to the same person. So, actually, all you can really do is really change your attitude towards that.

And I refuse to change. And I refuse any form of personal growth.

You are a classic middle-aged man.

Miranda, you're a total legend. Thank you very much.

Thank you, it's been a complete pleasure!