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Presenter, BBC Radio 2

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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 Ken Bruce, veteran radio presenter for BBC Radio 2. Starting out in hospital radio, Ken joined BBC Scotland as the announcer in 1978, and was given his first show shortly afterwards. He moved to Radio 2 in 1980, and his first regular gig came in 1984 when he was offered the Saturday late show. After spending a year shifting around the schedule, Ken found his rightful place in the morning slot, where he has been ever since. He has also been the radio commentator for the Eurovision Song Contest for the last 30 years.

Ken, thank you for joining me.

Well, pleasure! Thank you very much, Paul.

I nearly just did a version that just said, "We're joined by Ken Bruce, who is a legend. Ken, thank you for joining me." Would that have been a shorter version?

Yes, it wouldn't have been strictly true either. You know, I think the longer you've worked for the BBC, the less you feel like a legend.

I've occasionally bumped into you in the corridors of Radio 2. I mean, it must be an incredible place to work.

It's lovely to work there. It's a friendly place, it's an easy place. People who have pitched up at Radio 2 have generally got rid of the massive ambition in their careers. They're not desperate to get on. They're not clawing their way to the top. They've reached a very happy plateau. And so people who work there are content, happy, and just grateful for the work, usually.

And that would include your good self, then.

Oh, absolutely.

Impliedly. We say on Media Masters it's people at the top of the media game. I mean, I shouldn't describe you as an institution, but you are. I would kill people if you moved off the schedule.

Well, that's very kind of you! I'll give you the names of the people to approach first! But... well, I think the great thing about radio is that if you're in the same slot for a long time, people get very used to you. And radio is part of people's 'audible furniture', if you like. They like it to be in the place where it always is. So you're not tripping over it, you're not surprised by it, and you know where your comfortable programme will be. So, if I have had any success, it's due to longevity, if you like. It's just being in the same place, same time, for a long time. People get used to having you around. Therefore, they don't want it to change.

I would object vociferously to any change. And how long has it been, how long have you been in that chair? Is it 34 years?

Well, it's very difficult to work out because I started daily programmes on Radio 2 in 1985. That was very late breakfast shows, 8:07 we went on air, which for most people is way past breakfast. But went on air 8:07, after a year and a half or so of that, I got shifted to 9:30. And I was there for another three, four years. And then I got shifted to night-time, 10pm to midnight.

Wow.

And then back in 6am the year after that. And then following that, 1992, in at 9:30 again. And I've been there ever since.

And do you feel... I mean, clearly you've been there for decades now, but does that slot suit your personality and your disposition?

It suits my body clock. It suits everything. Yes. It's absolutely the right time of day for me to be comfortable, be working at my best. When I did the late night show, I really didn't enjoy that at all. And my body clock kept saying, "You should be in bed by now." I wasn't working at my best. And whenever I've done a morning show, I've been much better. At 6am, I was fine. I was happy at that. But 9:30, it suits me perfectly. I don't have to get up too early. I'm on air till mid-day. The rest of the day is my own. When I was working at 10 o'clock at night, I was always going to work later that day. It was always something at the back of my mind. So, if I thought, "I'll go and have a really nice boozy lunch," I couldn't do that because I had to work later on in the day. So, I felt it was kind of restricting my options, if you like. And my body clock didn't care for it. So 9:30, to cut this story very short, is the ideal time for me. And I'm so glad I'm able to stay there.

What is a typical day for you then? What time do you get up? What time do you rock up to the studio? And I mean this is a compliment, but because it's so effortless what you do, or it seems that as a listener, clearly there will be a lot of preparation, but how do you prepare for the show? What's the actual regime?

Oh, well, I lock myself in a room for the rest of the day really, studying and preparing for the... no. It's a complete lie. I finish work at 12 and I just forget about it for the rest of the day. I live in rural Oxfordshire. So, I get up at six, and come into town on the train every day. I come in, about 8:30, I suppose, I'm in the studio. And then 9:30, I'm on air. I just read the newspapers. That's all I do. Read the newspapers, have a coffee, sit down and enjoy myself, and launch at 9:30 without really a massive thought in my head, just hope for the best.

But that's presumably what your listeners want. Because they basically just want you. It's not even about what records you're playing, or it's a bit of PopMaster, and a bit of you... your dulcet tones.

Yes. It's a dialogue, really. Because the listeners play an important part in my mood and what I'm going to say. So, I get on and I say a couple of things. And then, you know, texts, emails start coming in. And I'll go with the reactions that I'm getting. And if somebody suggests an idea, or something just pings in my mind, I'll go with that right through the morning or, you know, for an hour or so. And that's the great thing about email and texts now compared to what it was when I began; you can just shift streams halfway through the day and just start something totally new, finish it that day. Whereas, you had to keep it going for two or three days before you got a response by postcard.

I want those days back, if I'm honest, I have too many emails. I would go back to carrier pigeon.

Yes, yes. Yes, something nice and relaxed. But I enjoy just going on air and not knowing exactly where it's going to go. And this dialogue starts with the listeners. And as long as, you know, that keeps going, I'm happy to keep doing it.

But there's something about the joy of it being Radio 2 and about it being an enjoyable, meaningful experience. Because I listen to the Today programme. And I wouldn't want to be John Humphrys, as much as I respect him, because there's a tension there, isn't there? Everyone he's getting on he's trying to challenge, half the audience will be nodding at what he's saying, half of them will be saying "That bloody idiot."

Yes. And I find the format of the Today programme... I listen to it as well. You know, I always take half an hour of the Today programme to bring myself up to speed. But I find the format actually works against understanding. A three-minute interview, really, you're not going to get much in three minutes. And especially, if... I'm not going to name John, he's not one of the prime offenders in this regard, but there are other presenters who will say, "Well, briefly if you can, because we're running out of time."

"Can you explain Brexit in 72 seconds?"

Yes. But then they'll ask a 20-second, 25-second question. And you think, "Well, if it's briefly you want, you've already wasted that time." And often, you feel the presenters trying to show how much they understand the subject to the interviewee.

And I think, “Well, that’s not necessary, we assume you know what you’re talking about.” Or at least just ask the idiot question, “What does this mean?” and get the proper... get the full answer, get an extra 20 seconds of answer. But three minutes, it can be frustrating to listen to because... you know, a 20-minute interview, you’ll get quite a lot. People won’t be able to avoid the topic that you are wanting to get them to speak about. So, a three-minute interview, I think, is a bias against understanding.

I work in PR, so I’m part of the problem here. But I also don’t like the fact that the interviewees are over-media-trained these days. But it’s not just politicians, it’s chief executives. They start all of the interviews with, “We’re committed to our customers and we’re very sorry that little Timmy died in our canoe.” You know? We know that, but why did he die?

But I blame broadcasters who are no longer in work for this. Because they’re no longer on the radio. They go into PR, they’re go into media training. And they teach all these company executives, everybody in a public role now, how to avoid answering a question. So you do need longer to get people to answer, because if you get the properly trained CEO or something like that, they will just deflect the question time after time after time. And then, you’ve run out of your slot, and nobody’s happy at the end.

And is that the biggest change to your show then over the decades, that that just the sheer amount of connectivity with your listeners, live emails and texts? As you say, in the old days, newspapers just had their kind of newsstand sales. They didn’t have any ability to interact or know what page, you know, what audiences were reading in terms of individual stories. You must know everything now in terms of metrics.

Yes. I think if I were to go and look at it, yes, I could get all that information. I’d rather not know. I’d rather just take it by feel and by judgment and what I think is the right thing to do. But in the old days, as we were saying, I went into the studio with a box of records and no producer, just a technical operator. And I’d get a box of records. And there would be a pile of postcards wrapped up in an elastic band, take those out and see how you could use them in the programme. It made you more creative, I think. And it made you work a bit harder at connecting with your audience. And you could say something, and then, three days later, the postcard about that topic would come in. So you had to keep lines flowing. You had to keep threads flowing through several weeks in fact. But you always did get that feedback. It was always there. And the BBC duty log was always there as well, where the people would phone up and speak to the duty officer down at the front of Broadcasting House, who would dutifully, if you’ll pardon the pun, write down every word that this person said.

So, Mrs Miggins from Cleethorpes has called in saying, “The news jingle has changed and can the old one come back?”

Get that ridiculous Scotsman off the air, that sort of thing. Yes. And when you get feedback from an audience, you look at it and the first reaction is, “Oh, that’s rubbish.” If they’re criticising you. But it lodges in your mind and you go, I think, “Oh maybe they have a slight point.” And a few days later, you will adjust whatever it

was. You might sort of say, “Well, maybe I shouldn’t have said that.” So it’s useful to have it, but you mustn’t be ruled by it. As soon as somebody says, “Get off,” you must say, “No, no, I’ll just stay on for a bit.” And if somebody criticises what you say, you just think about it, but allow it to percolate through your mind for a bit before you make any rash decisions. And don’t shout back, and don’t apologise immediately.

Absolutely. “I’m sorry, but I’m not going to apologise.” Something like that.

It’s not helpful.

So you don’t get an email from an anonymous middle manager at the end of every show saying, “This is what you did right and this what you did wrong.” Are you kind of busking it?

Oh absolutely not. We don’t get any... I mean, absolutely, I am busking it, but absolutely not. There’s no, and there’s never been, any kind of micromanagement from BBC producers and managers. We don’t go at the end of the show and sit and have a debrief, and go over what was right and what was wrong in that show. I mean, I just... I mean, obviously, there are discussions going on saying, “That part wasn’t particularly... I don’t think that was helpful.” Something like that. They leave you very much to your own devices. Having hired people who are experienced in all sorts of areas of media to be on air, they tend to say, “Right, do what you do. And if something goes seriously wrong, we’ll have a word.” But it’s usually only if you’ve, you know, libelled somebody or said something politically wrong or inconvenient, at a time when you’re not supposed to be making political remarks, or you’ve breached the BBC guidelines. Then usually, it will be a very indirect thing. It’ll be somebody will speak to your executive producer, they will then speak to your producer and they will then say, “Well, you know, these idiots upstairs have been moaning about what you said?” “Ah, well what do they know about it?

Exactly.

But you do go away and you think, “Well, maybe I shouldn’t do that again.” But it doesn’t... it really doesn’t happen. They don’t micromanage. They don’t tell us what to say, what to do, anything like that. And it’s always been like that since I’ve worked in the BBC.

It must be a brave person though, you know, to alter the schedule, to make changes. Because I remember when Chris Evans started at breakfast, I thought, “Oh, I won’t like this.” And then, of course, within a few months, I thought, “Oh. this is great.” And he’s on for years. You get used to him and then it’s like, “Oh, Zoe Ball’s taken over. Oh, I won’t like this. It’s changed.” Now, she’s brilliant. You know what? I remember when Jimmy was moved up before Jeremy started. You know? There’s an outcry, isn’t there?

Oh, yes!

It’s almost a sackable hanging offense to consider moving your slot.

But people love the radio. That is the thing to remember. So, you've got to be careful. You've got to be very sure that if you make a schedule change, it's for the better, and it's going to be better, or you can't help it, if it's of necessity. If somebody is leaving for their own reasons, or they're not well or something like that, you have make a schedule change. But if you do change a schedule, of any radio station that's been running for any length of time, your audience, your listeners, are your core support. And there is no point in pissing them off, basically. You've got to take them with you. You've got to keep them listening. So if... the BBC used to do this a lot more, because I remember when I started Radio 2, they changed the schedule almost every year. This was the eighties. And just before I joined on a daily basis, there was a great broadcaster called Steve Jones who was given the 12 midday slot, 12-2 every day. He was following Jimmy Young. And it was very successful programme. He ran a little quiz, I can't actually remember the name of it now, but he ran a quiz, which was a write-in quiz. And I remember his producer saying to me that in one week...

A write-in quiz?

A write-in.

That's not as immediate as email.

Yes. No, no. No, you had to send in a postcard. And they got 10,000 postcards one week. Now, that's astonishing. By any measure, that would be an astonishing response. For somebody to take a postcard, write it out, put a stamp on it, take it to the post box and send it in, 10,000 people did that. So it was obviously working, but at the end of the year, one year it was on, they took him off and offered him a Saturday night show, one show a week, having done five days a week.

Wow.

And in those days because of the BBC "new best", it could do that. No, no, no. It's not up to the listeners what they're going to hear. It's up to us. We know what's right for the listener. And there's something to be said for that. You know, being bold and saying, "No, no, this doesn't feel quite right to us." Yes, it was getting good audience figures, good appreciation index scores, but they didn't feel it was quite right. I thought it was a great show, and I didn't understand why they wanted to take it off. But they had that power. Nowadays, they don't make such decisions as lightly. They know that the audience are listening carefully, and they're very quick now, and it's much easier to respond. You know, if you have a strong view about something, fire off a tweet, an email, some form of electronic communication, it's there. You've done it within seconds. You don't have to get the postcard, get your pen out and stick a stamp on it. You've done it within 10 seconds. "This is rubbish. You ought to be ashamed of yourself." Boom, gone. So they do hear about it now much more quickly. And also, the names of the people, the executives, are in the public domain much more so now. So, they don't, "They don't like Upham," as Corporal Jones used to say. They don't like being named and shamed. Executives don't like that in public. In the days when they were anonymous BBC faces it was fine. But when you say, "No. Dear Mr. Smith," or whoever it is, "You've made a very bad decision." They don't like

that or if it appears in the papers, you know, the name of the controller of whatever network.

Yes.

It's very public now for them. So they have to be careful they've made the right decision as much as we are careful every day on the air.

And you can kind of guess the executive's email address now. I mean, now you can tell when an executive's really important when they have a contrived email address to stop people just getting 'Bob dot Shennan'.

Yes. They put xxx before of the names and things like that.

Yes.

That's a little tip for you if you're trying to get in touch with people.

Well, there's about three ways that the BBC mask the real name. And there's only three of them, so you can kind of guess that now. So now, I've got Tony Hall coming on soon. And it's only because I could work out what his real email address is.

Yes. But Tony dot hall at BBC dot co dot uk is probably going to get somewhere near him anyway, isn't it? These things all work.

I think you're probably right. And talking about the immediacy of it, I mean, I occasionally got on the Jeremy Vine show. And I've been on there, you know, talking and arguing with someone about whatever it was. And I've seen sort of the screens pop up where some... it will, as I'm talking, it'll pop up saying, "Yet another token northerner, who is this idiot?" And I think, "I'm actually still speaking and they're decided I'm a wrong 'un. Let me finish!"

Yes. And people have extreme immediacy of contact now, which is a good thing and a bad thing. Because you can be swayed too much by a negative or indeed a positive into thinking, "Oh, I've got this absolutely right," or, "I've got this absolutely wrong." So it's good to see immediate response. But you mustn't believe it all.

What's a good show and what's a bad show for you? Because I mean it is showbiz in a sense, even if you're in a bad mood or you've suffered some... you're tired or you've had some bad personal news, your next door neighbour's broken their leg. Whatever's on your mind, you've still got to be, you know, Ken Bruce off of Radio 2.

Yes. It's a performance of sorts. But then, I think any job is. You know, if you are having a bad time at home, you know, just had a fight with your other half, and the dog has died or something like that, you've got to go into work the following day and put it on your performance of being an efficient worker. So, it's the same for almost

everybody. It's just a little bit more obvious if you're on broadcast media because... fairly difficult to mask your true feelings on radio particularly. You can cover it, and you know, I've gone through tough times in the past, and my boss, I remember once saying, "I'd never have known," which I take as a compliment, but it should be a double-edged compliment in that you should be giving a bit more of yourself. But nobody wants to hear a miserable git on the radio. They want to hear somebody improving their day. And being on the radio improves my day. I always feel better at the end of a programme than I do at the beginning. I have had a lovely time playing great music. People have been sending stuff in that makes me laugh and I use it to make other people laugh. So, it's altogether a life affirming experience. And that's what we should be presenting to the public. It's an entertainment after all and never forget that.

I mean, you are right though, when you mentioned about this, 'the dog dying', as it were. Because in one sense, as a human being, I'd like you to share that with me as a listener. But on the other hand, there is a bit of a daunt in it because I'll have... I'll feel sorry for you as the presenter and as a human being. I also don't want to know that someone's dog has died because I want to be tapping my foot away as I'm driving up the M1.

Yes. If you say, "Well really, I'm sorry if I'm not sounding great today, my dog died this morning," then you'll get, you know, 40 or 50 other people whose dogs have died recently. And then, it develops into some kind of misery moment where you're all going, "Oh my God, my dog died!"

Simon Bates was so good at that, wasn't he? I can still hear the music now.

La da-da-da... but if you get an hour of it...

"Gladys never saw him ever again. Until 20 years later, she was in the fish and chip shop."

It's amazing to think...

"She thought: 'I recognise that guy.' And it turned out that he was her husband."

How did that show ever get popular?

"Geoff, why are you here? And can I have some chips with that as well please?"

Ah, changed days.

But you... I mean, without being overly august and pompous about it, you do have, what is it, nine million listeners? Do you feel that sense of responsibility?

It's not quite nine million, I've got to be honest about this, it's about 8.8 at the moment. It goes up and down. So I don't count heads.

Just like my emotions.

But you might... you can't count heads in this business because radio is one to one. Everybody says it. It's one person listening, usually. Mostly you're always listening alone. Very rarely two people. Maybe if you've got two of you in the car. But usually, you're in the kitchen alone at home, you're in the car alone, you're listening while you're doing something else. It's one-to-one. It should be one person talking to another person, or you know, listening to a conversation with two people. But I think as soon as you get more than two people in the studio, you lose the magic of radio. If you get three or four, then it becomes just a yabba fest, everybody shouting over everybody else, no matter how well it's handled, no matter how well it's curated, it's still too much to take in. And you do feel like you're eavesdropping on a conversation. But you and me sitting here, people can feel invested in both of us as they're listening. And it feels like an intimate, friendly conversation. But as soon as you get more than that, it becomes just a shouting match, even if people are being tremendously polite to each other. Ideally, I think, radio is one person talking to me listening. But that's not to say, you know, comedy shows, you know, with a cast of actors, they're great as well with an audience, that's fine, you know, that's lovely. But the kind of radio I do is, I think, best with one person. I don't like double heads particularly. I've done double-heading and I've enjoyed it. You've got to have complete respect for the person you're double-heading with. That's the only proviso. And if that isn't there, it's never going to work. But if you have complete respect for the other person and basically you're trying to make each other laugh, then it's always going to work.

It's about chemistry isn't it? I mean I think Simon Mayo's an incredible broadcaster, so is Jo Whiley. But when they were paired together, and this is no disrespect to them individually, it just didn't quite work. So, whoever the controller was that put them together, it *could* have worked. So, you know, good on them for trying, but it just didn't work.

There's no reason to suppose it wouldn't work. And equally, there's no reason to suppose it would. You've got two well-known individual broadcasters, put them together. It could have been brilliant. You don't know until you try. And that's one of the things that's great, that people still try. They still attempt to get something a little bit different and see if it works. Sometimes it will take off brilliantly, things you wouldn't expect. Other times, well, it's a bold experiment. I always remember one of my favourite BBC executives, a fellow called David Hatch, who was controller the Radio 2, controller of Radio 4, and then director of radio. And he was a great believer in just trying something for three months. "Yes, put it on. Yes, let's have a go at it. Doesn't work, take it off." He wasn't afraid of failure. He embraced it because, you know, well, you learn that way. Well we try this kind of programme... he tried sequenced programming on Radio 4 for a while, a great three-hour sequence with, I think, Richard Baker presenting it. And it didn't work, but it was worth a try. It was worth trying. And I love that kind of freewheeling nature. I think. "Yes, give something a chance because you'll never make any progress if you don't." But also, you know,

protect what you've got that does work, and make sure that nobody fiddles about too much with that. That's me, I'm talking about. But, I love David Hatch for doing that because he... somebody once described him as 'a man with an eye on a whim'.

I like that!

And I think that's a great description, because he just would say, "Yes, let's try that." And he'd go with it. And he'd really try and make sure it worked. But if it didn't work, quite perfectly happy to say, "Let's forget it, do something else."

I mean the formula that you've developed for your show, if I could call it that, it works perfectly. So do you ever worry that if you ever make any changes, it's like you pull on one string of the tapestry and the whole thing unravels?

You've got to be careful not to... you've got two problems with a long-running show. One is that you just refuse to accept change. You think, "This has worked for me before, it will always work." And the other problem is, "I've been doing this now for, you know, we've tried this, we've run this for a few years, we can't let it run any longer." Well then, you know, you're running the risk of throwing out something that is still working. I like to think I examine what I do quite regularly and think, "Is this still working? Yes. Okay, we'll keep doing it. Is this still working? If we run out of things on this, do we need to tweak this a little bit?" And we have tweaked a couple of things on the show just in the last couple of years, but it's just been a tweak, and it's not been anything massive. And PopMaster, of course, we just daren't do anything to because we'd get an outcry.

Rightly so.

Whenever I make...

Resignation offence if you make the tiniest change.

This very week, I had come to the end of a tie-break. We'd used 22 questions in a tie-break after the main rounds of PopMaster. And I still did have some questions left but I thought, "I'm not keeping this going any longer," because they weren't answering anything correctly, which is always boring. Everything was wrong. And after 22 questions I said, "Right, we'll decide this on a coin toss."

And it made the news!

Yes, well it did! It did. It made the news.

It made the news.

BBC's most read. I even made pick of the Pick of the Week on Radio 4! That made news because it was out of the ordinary, and my decision. People were saying, "Well, you shouldn't have done a coin toss." You know, they couldn't actually say what I should have done.

Yes, I was going to say.

People have all got...

That's the Brexit problem, isn't it?

Exactly, yes. I know this is wrong, but I don't know what's right.

Yes, exactly.

So we just had to do that. But it did show that people, you know, "Well you've done something different. Don't do it." It's a vital thing to remember that you protect what is really good and works, but don't be afraid to move things around and tinker with it and see if you can try something better.

I think it's universally acknowledged that PopMaster is the greatest quiz in the history of humanity. I would go one step further and say that I think it's the greatest thing humanity has ever achieved.

Wow! You know, I'm prepared to defer to Steven Hawking. Maybe, maybe, you know. But yes, it's a very popular and successful quiz, and we didn't know what we were starting when we started it. That's the thing. We only thought it would run a few months, and we haven't assumed it will run forever. We just keep doing it while we sense that people are enjoying it, and people do still seem to be enjoying it. I mean, it has the peak of the day on Radio 2; 10:30 is the peak audience of Radio 2's day. Unlike most other stations where it's the sort of 8am news, which everybody tunes in for. On our station, it's 10:30, PopMaster. I'm very, very proud of that. I'm delighted by that, and I think we have to protect that and nurture it and make sure we don't mess with people's expectations.

And you're still innovating with PopMaster in a sense, because you're going to take it around the UK for the first time this summer?

Yes, we're doing a bit of a tour. It's really just an excuse to do outside broadcasts, but we're going to people's workplaces. Because we were getting a lot of stuff from people saying, "Our whole factory stops for PopMaster. We all get the, you know, get our pens out and paper out, and we do this." Building sites, we get the brewer on. Painters and decorators, they lay down their brushes and they do PopMaster. People working in your house, you know. They go, have you got a cup of tea there, missus? You know, and they...

It's an institution.

It has become a point where people stop. So we did this, will you stop for PopMaster little idea, and we found that quite a lot of people were doing that, and were sending pictures of themselves stopping. And we thought, "Well, let's just take this a little stage further." So we'll go to workplaces, people's workplaces right around the country. We'll do one in Northern Ireland, one in Scotland, one in England, one in

Wales, go to workplaces and stop with them. We'll just do the normal programme, or a pretty normal programme from there. We'll still have the two contestants on the radio. They'll be on the phone from wherever in the country. We won't be using people in the factory, because there's got to be kept the same as it usually is. But the whole factory will stop, and we'll just have a little chat with the people working there, comparing scores and stuff like that. And we'll bring them a bit of entertainment, get some singers along, some popular acts, some local people, and just take it out to the people. It's what the BBC doesn't do enough of, I don't think. And going out to meet your audience, although the listeners want the show to be the same as it was the day before, they're prepared to put up with a day or so of something a little bit different. So we'll take it out to workplaces. But we've never done it before, and we don't know whether it will work tremendously well, but we want to do it, so we will.

I remember the Radio 1 Roadshow. I was in LA a couple of weeks ago chatting with my friend Peter Bowes, and we were just reminiscing about it, and I said, "Oh yes, did you ever go to it?" And then he said, "I was on them all the time. I read the news!"

Yes, of course he did.

He said, "I was the Radio 1 Roadshow." And I went, "Oh yes, of course you were!"

Did he have to wear shorts while they read the news though?

Well, he showed me some pictures actually. They were as horrendous as you'd expect. The haircuts were amazing. This could be like a Radio 2 PopMaster roadshow.

Well, it's not quite like that, and it won't be really open to the public. But we will be in people's workplaces and letting them join in and be part of the show.

What happens if you're ill, or you lose your voice, because it does happen from time to time. Is there like an emergency response button, where Vanessa Feltz can sort of stay on for another three hours or something?

She's doing too many other programmes.

Well, someone has to play the records.

Yes. We haven't had to test it for a while, but I've only had one day off sick in the last, however long, 34 years. Unforced day. So I've just, couldn't come in one day because, well I won't give you entire details.

Yes, illness will suffice.

Yes. I was ill that day. And so I just, I think I was able to do it either the night before or early in the morning, saying, "I can't come in." The producer then sends off

distress flares to management. And we used to have the great Richard Allinson on our roster, who lived in north London. So he could be in the studio within 20 minutes or so, in the event of somebody not being able to do it. And of course he could cover any programme, being the brilliant broadcaster he is.

Indeed.

And so he could be called in. Because he's working for other people now, they can't do that. But they do still have, I think, a couple of people up their sleeve that they can get in at short notice. So that's what would happen. Or, the person who was on would have to stay on for a bit. Zoe would, you know, maybe stay on for an extra hour. But I don't think Jeremy could come in early, because he's coming in as early as he can with his Channel 5 commitment.

He can't, and then of course the last half of his show is actually pre-recorded.

Oh! Is that true?

Yes.

Yes, I know it is.

It's a two-hour show, but the second hour is recorded before the first hour.

Yes, I always wonder how...

It's clever, that.

I wonder how that's going to work though. They're reviewing the newspapers, I know that's what they do in the last bit, but if there's some big news comes in, how are they going to cover that? I don't know. I suppose they'd go to something else entirely.

Yes, I was chatting with Phil actually, Jeremy's editor, he's a good friend of mine, and he was saying that's only caught them out a couple of times where something big happens on air in hour one, and then they can't do anything about it unfortunately. Unless it's huge, they just have to cut the broadcast entirely.

I suppose they just go to rolling news at that point, would they. Something like that. Yes. I mean, it's a little known fact that the last half hour of his programme is pre-recorded on Channel 5. But his radio programme is absolutely live, and he's with me in the studio at 11:30, absolutely live again.

As I said, I do Jeremy quite a little bit in terms of his show they... I'm a bit like Richard Allinson, where if they can't get anyone good on at short notice to talk

about a variety of nonsense topics like veganism or politics or whatever, I am available at short notice.

You're rent-a-view.

Basically, yes. And I hate all those people, but I am one, so anyway. But it's a very professionally produced show, and the whole studio is like something out of NASA these days. Is that something that you've got used to now that the technology's just so immediate, you can almost do anything now, just at the press of a touchscreen?

Yes. You get used to it very quickly. I mean, I've always self-opped to a certain extent. When I was a staff at Ironside, we were self-op in Scotland. And as a television announcer, we were vision mixing and speaking at the same time.

So you could walk and chew gum at the same time?

Yes. I've had to. I mean, that was the worst job I ever had in terms of stress because, vision mixing, you know, you're watching the network programme finish. We had to do Scottish opt-outs, if you like. And we also just had the blanket, as we said, the London announcements, because they wanted a Scottish announcer between programmes. Even if there was nothing coming from Scotland, they wanted the BBC One Scotland logo, and so we had to come up. You fade out of London, fade up your symbol, fade up...

Fade up BBC One Scotland.

Yes. Yes, fade up your mic, and then say, "BBC One Scotland, it's Star Trek. And then mix slowly into the bing, bong, bing, bong." And missing the London symbol, of course. You had to... if you caught that, it was very bad form. But one of my colleagues, once, was opting out to run a local programme. He didn't do television continuity very often, and so he faded out the network programme, opened his...

I'm pre-laughing.

... yes, opened his broadcast microphone, and said, "Run VT." And then closed his broadcast microphone and did his entire announcement. So all the listeners heard... they saw the BBC Scotland symbol, and they just heard, "Run VT," and total silence for 10 seconds until the VT came up. So it caught out a few people. Luckily I think I got away with it, but sweat running down your back every time.

But people love that these days. I mean, I remember when the BBC News studio last year had some kind of malfunction and Huw Edwards was just sitting at the desk twiddling his thumbs for three minutes. That then became the most viewed article on the BBC News website, that they'd had a malfunction. And it is four minutes of Huw Edwards just sat twiddling his thumbs. People loved it.

We don't get enough going wrong these days. That's the problem. So when something does go wrong, we absolutely adore it. We want to see it over and over and over again. Because you know, the old days of things breaking down so much, and people getting things wrong, and spooner-isms when it meant a lot. You know, saying the wrong thing, if you're reading the news, and making a mistake, when it was very formal. And so now things are much looser. It doesn't matter so much if you say the wrong thing, you know. And I love Simon McCoy on BBC News.

Legend.

And he's great, because he just says what he's thinking. And I think that's...

Brilliant.

But you couldn't do that 20 years ago, or even 15 years ago. You couldn't do that, certainly do that in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. So things have become much easier now. So mistakes don't happen, and if they do, they just get, "Oh yes, it's a mistake." So when a really good one happens, oh, we all pile on that.

What does actually go wrong then in a show?

Well, very little goes wrong in my show that, you know, I can't just laugh off.

Do you get people that ring in and swear, because that's always my worry. Because I always remember that famous clip where, on Going Live, where Five Star in the studio and some young kid... which to be honest, I mean I... officially, I condemn him but secretly, I think he was a legend. His question was, well Sarah Greene, I've got a question for them, why are you so effing shit?

Yes, yes.

And yes, it was very rude and offensive. But also, what a ledge.

Yes, you know, it made you sit up and listen, didn't it? You know, we'd never get swearing on... I can't remember anybody.

Is someone, are you hovering over the feed just in case they say...

No. Nope.

Okay.

We don't have a delay either, but in the BBC way, what we do is, they phone in, we take the number, we phone them back, and put them on the air that way. So we always know where they live as it were.

Yes. You send the boys round.

Yes, you know, we've got your number. And it makes people a bit more, I think, wary of doing that. But I... touch wood, I don't wish to encourage anybody. We haven't had that. We've had some odd people on, but we haven't had any swearing, apart from, you know, inadvertent.

Yes.

I've had people say, "Christ!" And I say, "Well, could you please make sure you don't do that again?" And they say, "Oh, no, I'm sorry." But they're so wrapped up in it, they can't help themselves. I haven't had anything worse than that, I don't think. So, yes. I've been lucky so far.

I love it as a listener when some of your phone-in guests waffle on a bit, I can hear you very professionally steer them back. And although you're doing it politely and maybe they're not aware, your millions of listeners are aware of that. It's a bit meta, but we know what you're trying to do.

Yes. I like to think that works.

We're kind of behind you with it.

It works on both levels. You know, I do get people saying, "Oh, I could hear what you were thinking there." And you know, maybe they could. But yes, I think I'm representing the great British public. But I've got to be... to be honest, I believe in being polite to people, and people are on the radio who are not used to it. They need a little bit of, you know, help and encouragement. And they don't want somebody being a smart arse with them. And so I just think... and if they're really annoying, I'll say something that's, you know, it's a message to the people at home, as it were.

Yes.

But I've never had to cut anybody off. Well, I have had to cut one person off. I didn't believe they were who they said they were. So we did that.

All right. So that was an editorial decision. They hadn't said the f-word.

It was, to cut a very long story short, somebody who was misrepresenting themselves, we thought. They'd tried the previous day, and then an executive had phoned up – because quite rightly this person had been flagged, and they wouldn't let him on – so an executive had phoned up the person, talked to them, and been convinced that they were on the level. But as soon as I heard them on the air I thought, "No, you're not on the level. You're not who you say you are." So I took them off.

How do you decide what to play?

In music terms? There is a... it's far above me. I mean, such decisions are not taken by mere presenters. We have a music team, led by Jeff Smith.

And Jeff's been on the podcast. Legend.

And his very small team, I may point out, there's only three of them.

It's the BBC, of course.

Yes, indeed. They programme the entire day. I have an ability to move things around in the schedule that I have. I can also ask...

But you can't veto Five Star's song being played.

Yes, I can... if I don't want to play something, I won't play it. I don't do that regularly or often, but there have been a couple of records that I think, "No, I don't like this." Or I think it's wrong for us, and it's wrong for my audience. So I don't want to play it. And there's a couple of artists that I think are vastly overrated, and I'd rather play something by somebody else who's in that kind of area, but I think is better. But by and large I do... I'm not so ego-driven as to think that only my taste is the right one. If this has been chosen by the Radio 2 playlist people to play, I think, "Okay, let's play it." Even though I don't think it's the best record ever made, a lot of people do. A lot of people like the music by x or y. So who am I to say, I'm not going to play it. But if I don't feel comfortable with it, then it's not going to sound right. I'm going to, you know, I have to, you know... when you're on a programme every day, you have to be honest to a certain extent. So I will... I would say something which would be a barbed comment about the record. And I think, "Well what's the point of doing that?" Because most people think you've chosen it. And the listeners think, well you know, why did you play it if you don't like it? So it's a double-edged sword.

They assume you're all-powerful.

Well, they just think it's the Ken Bruce show or the Jeremy Vine Show, whoever. You know, why would they play a record they don't like? But that's not to understand exactly how the radio industry works. So, I generally play what's there, sometimes in a different order, depending on how I feel I need the music to be.

What do you do while the records are on? I mean, I imagine once a show you might have a five-minute song where you think, "Right, I can now pop to the lav." But you know, is there... do you have a kind of M.O., where you think, "Right. The record's started now, so I'm now going to catch up on my emails or read tweets." I imagine you're not just sitting there waiting for the records to finish, but what do you actually do?

I actually go on to tweets and text messages and emails, and just see what, you know, what's come in and what I can use. And I try to use it as quickly as possible, if I'm going to. I'll bank some for, I think, "Oh, that's quite good, but it's not quite right just now." So I'll find something that I can use immediately, and if I can't use anything then I'll just go off on my own. But I do like to keep the listeners' input used, and the

more you say, the more you use listeners, then the more they will respond. So I like to prime the pump and get people to contact the programme and use it. So yes, I'm looking at what I might do next. You know, there's a sort of vague format to the programme, formula, of certain things at certain times. There's a lot of space on the show, which is what some people who have depped for me find a bit difficult. You're left on your own quite a lot. Now, I'm not on my own, because I've got the listeners getting in touch all the time. But you are left to your own devices, which I think is great. I love that. But not everybody does.

And does happen in a way, say Mrs Miggins emails in and says something interesting over email, and there's her phone number on the bottom where you... and you say to your producer, "Let's get her on air. She sounds amazing."

We really don't do that. We don't get the punters on the air, because you'll never get them off.

Yes, well that's...

So I mean, usually... I do one-liners, or very short stuff. I don't do great long stories, so there's no point in getting somebody on for a one-liner. And sometimes, I mean, I'm not bigging myself up, but I think sometimes they've written the one-liner, which just needs a tweak to make it funnier, and I'll do it funnier than they will. That's the way I look at it.

Yes. You're a professional, darling.

Well, yes. Well, I'm not a comedian. I would just hasten to say, I'm not a stand-up. But I do recognise something that, "Oh, I'll just move that around. Change that word." Bingo. You've got a great line.

I went to see Bob Monkhouse when I was a teenager. My dad dragged me to see him, and I actually thought, "Oh, he just kind of presents quiz shows." I didn't know him as a comedian, and it was the funniest night I've ever had in my life. He opened up with, he said, "When I was young, I told my parents I wanted to be a comedian, and they just laughed. Well, they're not laughing now."

I'm a great friend of Colin Edmonds, who was Bob's writer.

His joke writer, yes.

For many years. And is the inheritor of Bob's joke books.

That's the one. And the one that was famously lost and recovered.

And Colin is a huge admirer of Bob's expertise, and so am I. I just think, you know, he was always funny. He suffered a bit from being seen as the cheesy game show

host to slight insincerity. I never saw that, but some people accused him of it. And it's so not him. So not him.

I think it was a generational thing. Because I only ever knew him from Family Fortunes and all of those kinds of things. I didn't know him as a comedian. And then when... it was the same with Ken Dodd, I just thought he was some old irrelevant comedian, and then he played the York Picture House. And again, I saw him and first of all, he was on for about seven hours. But it was seven hours of almost painful laughter from start to finish. I nearly checked into casualty, really. I laughed myself nearly to death.

These older generation comics really knew how to do it.

Absolutely.

They could do it. And so people like Bob Monkhouse and Ken Dodd, they were vastly experienced and could keep you in the palm of their hands for hours on end.

Now, I know you said you're not a comedian, but I was doing some research for this, and I've got you on record as saying you think that radio is showbiz for shy people. What made you say that?

Because certainly when I was younger, I didn't want to go on the stage or anything like that. I wanted to go on the radio. And I had a performance gene, a performance urge. But I certainly didn't want to go on stage, because I thought, "I can't do anything. I've got no talent." You know, I can't sing, can't dance, can't do anything. Can't act.

There's still time.

Well, I might start. But I just thought, oh the radio sounds like good fun. And I went onto it. And I think if you watch a lot of radio people, and they're saying the most outrageously egotistical things, but blushing at the same time. So that's the kind of person that goes into radio. They want people to notice them – but not that much, just a little bit. They don't want people stopping them in the street particularly, they just want somebody to be aware of them. And that was certainly how I was. I'm much better at standing up in front of people. I've always quite enjoyed actually doing concerts on stage and whipping up an audience into something. But I don't like being the centre of attention. I like being the person who is bringing you another act, somebody else. I don't like being the main act, because I feel, ooh, it's too much responsibility.

But you know, with 8.8 million listeners, as you've said, that is quite a lot responsibility.

Ah, but the music is the main act. The music is the main a... I'm presenting the music, so it's not... they're not tuning in for me, they're tuning in for the whole programme, the whole package, most of which is music.

But given the intimacy of radio and like you said, the decades you've been doing it, there must be hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people that feel that they know you. Do you get recognised in the chip shop, and presumably because your voice is so recognisable? I mean, if you rang me about anything, if I was working in a call centre I'd say, "Excuse me, are you Ken Bruce off of Radio 2?"

I do get a bit of that, yes. I do get a bit of that.

And do people go, "You're a ledge"?

Yes, I don't get... well, you know, sometimes they say, you know... but I get a little bit of facial recognition as well. But not, not that much. Because I'm not, you know, a television face. And I enjoy it. If anybody ever stops me to say, you know, "Hi, Ken. Could you just sign this?" I'll do that all day long. Because I don't get as much of it as somebody who's on television every day gets. So it's not an irritation to me. It's actually, it's lovely. I don't say anything else, but it's lovely. I actually love meeting people who enjoy the show. And I always... you know, they all say, "Oh, I really enjoy the show." And I say, oh, you know. But it's lovely to hear. It is lovely to hear. So I have no problem with that whatsoever. But I don't get so much recognition that I can't walk the streets without being disturbed. And I, you know, I live in Oxfordshire, where people in my village just think I'm Ken who lives in Harry's old house. Or you know, I walk around the local town, and everybody's just... they see me every day or every other day in the shops. So it's no big deal. It's just, you know, "There's old Ken."

I mean, you mentioned that you've started out in radio and it's always what you wanted to do. You grew up in Glasgow, and you started in hospital radio. I mean, do you think that is still the best grounding for aspiring DJs?

Well it is. I think it still is. There are other ways now. There weren't when I was young, because there was no commercial radio when I started. There was only really Radio 1, 2, 3, and 4 when I wanted to get into radio. BBC Local Radio in England started about 1970 I think, 1969 or '70. But that was an England, so it wasn't in Scotland. We just had 1, 2, 3, and 4 for Scotland. The Radio Clyde then began in 1973, but it wasn't the kind of... I was so BBC-ified by that time that it wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to do, great station though it was. So I wanted to get into the BBC to do it properly, and the only way you could get some experience was by working in hospital radio, so I did that. And it is still a great way to enjoy radio. It was quite tough getting into hospital radio, because they let you join the station, but they don't let you on air unless you could prove your worth. So the standards were very high. Eric Simpson was the man who was running it in Glasgow at that time, and he didn't allow you on air unless he thought you were not just up to the job but beyond that, you know, fully capable of doing it, and he would come back and say, "Don't do that." He had a great rule, which I think is... I've broken it every day of my life since, but the rule was, if you're playing a record, you either talk over the entire introduction, or not at all. So you don't talk over... if it's a 16-second intro, you don't talk for eight seconds and then leave it. No, no. You've got to do the full 16 seconds, or nothing at

all, play it cold from the start. That was his rule. I break it, as I said, every other day, but it's a great rule.

Steve Wright's very good at that, where he'll waffle on, and you'll think, "Steve, you'd better get a groove on, in one bar's time he's going to start singing." We all know it, and then...

He'll be back timing.

Yes. Is even hospital radio still a thing these days? I've not been in hospital, but I imagine everyone's just on their apps.

No, no, it's still a thing. It is still a thing. Because I'm involved in, very far removed, with a couple of hospital radio stations, and the overarching organisation, the hospital broadcasting organisation, and it's still very much a thing. And I thought, I was certainly part of a group who said, "Hospital radio, oh, as soon as you get television in, people won't listen to the radio." But it hasn't worked like that. Hospital radio does still work, and particularly for people who are in long term. People who are in for longer than one day, one night, whatever, it's very, very important. And I always remember somebody saying to me, "You will never understand how important hospital radio is to you when you're in hospital." And also, slightly diverging, I had a show on the World Service for a few years, and I met Terry Waite after he had been incarcerated, and he made a point of coming up to speak to me, and said, "Oh, I used to listen to you when I was chained to the radiator," as it were, and he said, "I used to think there was no place for music on the World Service, but," he said, "I used to listen to your programme, and..." he named a few others, like DLT's Show. "And they were so important to us." So I think those of us who work in radio on a daily basis all our lives can forget that actually that powerful intimacy that radio generates works in all sorts of situations that we don't really know.

Because you must get fans that have listened to you for 20, 30 years, who know what... I have this with my own listeners of this podcast. We've been going three years, and I'll have said something three years ago, and I'll bump into someone, and they'll say, "Oh yes, you did that," and I'll think, "How did you know that about me?" And they'll say, "You said that three years ago on a podcast," and I think, "Wow."

Well, you do well to remember what you said. Because people say, "I remember you said, it was really funny," and I say, "I don't remember saying that at all, or anything close to it." Well, if it's good I'll try and remember it and use it again.

I was doing my research, again, and I was shocked to learn that you were an accountant at one point. You had these wilderness years where you longed to work at the BBC. I can't imagine you as an accountant.

No, neither could the accountancy profession! I was a terrible accountant. It was just... because at school I had decided that I wanted to work in radio, so I wasn't really interested in anything else, but I had to find some work when I left school, and they said, "Well, you could go to university and study..." Well, I'm not sure what you

could study. I had university entrance qualifications, but I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do. And I was so up to here with academic life that I thought, "I don't want to study in that sense any more." So I went into accountancy, and it was an apprenticeship. You were articled to an accountancy firm for five years and you had to go to classes in the evening, after you'd done your day's work.

You'd get less for burglary.

Well, you got less money certainly. I got paid £350 a year. A year!

I dream of earning that.

In 1969, 1970. So £6 a week, I think. I didn't pay tax, because I wasn't earning enough to pay tax. So I did that for two years, but it was really, I was just looking for something to do. I never bothered going to the classes in the evening, so I kept failing the exams, and they eventually thought that perhaps the accountancy profession could manage without me.

Yes. It seems to have suffered actually since you've left, there's been a lot of scandals and so on.

If they'd had me, the very essence of probity, I could have been running these companies. But no, I went off, and some friends of mine were washing cars for a living. They were students, and they were washing cars in their downtime, so I went off and did that for a month. Then they said, "Well, there's a job going in the office here, do you want to work in the office?" I said, "Well, that's nice, yes." I stayed at that company and became a manager for another three or four years, until a job came up at the BBC. And I just wrote in for it, and in fact it wasn't a job at all, I'd just heard on the grapevine that somebody was leaving; through hospital radio I'd heard this. That person actually didn't leave, but I'd written up and sent a tape up to them and they gave me a short-term contract.

And what advice would you give someone listening to this that's starting out on their career, that's eyeing your slot at Radio 2 enviously and thinking, "Well, whenever he chooses to stand down, I'd quite like the mid-morning slot." Is it easier to make a name for yourself nowadays, given social media? You can start your own podcast, you can do all these things. But in another sense, is it more difficult because, because anyone can do it, you're drowned out by the noise?

Yes, I think there are an awful lot of people around who would like to get work in the media. I don't think people are as focused on one particular branch of the media as I was, certainly, because I think now people look at it all as a much bigger business where you can move from one part of the media to another. And we're actually seeing that in radio. Amanda Holden has just been started on a breakfast show in commercial radio with no radio experience whatsoever. It's a gamble, but as Paul Chantler, who's a great man in radio, said, "With intensive training, she'll be great." Part of me thinks, well, shouldn't you be doing the intensive training before you get the job, but the other part says, no, people like that bring in a ready-made audience.

They bring in their own fan club, as it were, they bring in people who are interested in them. So you can add that to your existing audience. And if there's chemistry there, then the double-head with Jamie will work. So people come in from all sorts of areas. They always have in radio. Jimmy Young, who was on Radio 2 for 30-odd years, was a singer. He was tried out on radio and it worked. So you try out people, and if they work, they work. If they don't, you don't need to use them again. For people who are dead keen on radio and love radio, it's more difficult to get to the top jobs in radio, but I think there are still a lot of jobs around in radio that mean you can work in radio somewhere, but it may just not be the top job. But to be honest, when I was young, I had no chance of getting to the top jobs in radio, as far as I thought. So I was going to be happy doing what I did to begin with, staff announcer. I could have done that, I could still have been doing shipping forecasts on Radio 4. I'd have been perfectly happy with that, because I'm on the radio, and getting that communication going. But as things worked out, I got jobs I wasn't looking for, and I'm where I am and have been for a long time. There's no magic bullet that gets you to the top jobs, but it is still, I think, open to almost anybody, if you go about it the right way. You need to make yourself, as you say, you need to make yourself seen. People to know who you are, somehow or other. So yes, it can still work. And if you don't want to work in radio then you can go and sing.

You're right about Amanda Holden, but it's obviously a commercial consideration. The managers there are thinking, "Well, she's bringing an audience on board," because she's got a big Instagram following, she's done Britain's Got Talent and all this kind of thing. Whereas you did it the more traditional way that you worked your way up, you built your audience over a career. But now it's easy if you've got two million Instagram followers to then suddenly just be the new breakfast show presenter.

Well, yes. It may not suit people who've come up through radio to think that, but it is actually a fact. It's just the way things are at the moment. You can hate it, but you can't fight it, so you just have to go along with it. It works brilliantly in some cases. Rylan has started on Radio 2, and he's terrific on radio. He brings a real force of personality to it. And he breaks rules, but if you're doing a show once a week then you can break rules. It's a one-off show and it's got to be done in your style. So he's doing a brilliant job. People like Paul O'Grady do a brilliant job on radio, while not obeying every rule that comes down. "You must not do this, you must not get your producer on air." All these rules are broken; makes a great listen.

In terms of commerciality, because of the unique way the BBC is funded, through the license payer, Radio 2 gets to serve under-served audiences, as it were. I'm a huge country music fan. I know Bob Harris is not particularly well at the moment, but I loved his show. I hope it comes back soon, because it's two hours of the best country music. I can't imagine it gets millions and millions of listeners, so if I was a commercial station manager I wouldn't put that on air, because it's not going to butter any parsnips and drive the revenue, but I love it.

Yes, and like Show Tunes with Elaine Paige. There's not many stations would have two hours of show tunes, but Radio 2 does, because we exist to serve the widest

possible range of music. You don't necessarily get the show tunes in daytime Radio 2, you don't get much country music in daytime Radio 2, but these programmes are in the schedule, so we do represent these people. And young artists, young British musicians, we try as much as we can to get them on the air as well. So that's our job, I see that's Radio 2's job, playing music that not... I do a few Friday Night Is Music Night programmes. Big orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra. Now, no commercial station is going to have an orchestra on staff like that, let alone four orchestras on staff. So that's something the BBC can do, should do, and ought to keep doing.

But I mean, the nature of how you listen to radio has changed massively over the last couple of years. For example, with Bob's show, I've never listened to it while it was broadcast ever. I always listen to it on catch-up via the iPlayer app. I listen to Sunday Morning Love Songs with Steve Wright, but I never listen to it when it's on air, because I suffer from medical laziness, and I actually want to sleep in on a Sunday. And it's on air at nine o'clock, I'll be buggered if I'm going to get up at nine o'clock.

Just to hear Steve Wright.

Yes. Well, he does it on a Wednesday anyway.

Thursday, actually.

Right. Okay. Again, one of these open secrets that everyone knows anyway but it's never mentioned. "We can't take live requests." Why can't you, Steve? It's because you did this two days ago!

I'm not here.

Exactly. You're at home. But I can click Listen Again and listen to it at 11 o'clock, so I can do that when it suits me.

Yes. That's one of the great things, because it hasn't really damaged live listening. That ability, it's a great thing to be able to catch a programme... for my sins, I do follow The Archers, but again, I never listen to it as it goes out, in its scheduled time. I will listen to it on the train going home, or in the car, or something like that. Just 15 minutes, just plug in the phone and listen to it that way. It's a great thing to have. It's a wonderful resource. But it doesn't seem to have damaged live listening figures, and people still want to hear radio as it happens. I've been told that radio is about to die since I started in 1977. They were saying, "Yes, well, you don't want to stay in radio, because it's dead. Dead medium, it's going nowhere. Dying." People have been saying that ever since. There's still life in the corpse. It's still moving around, and I think there's still plenty of life left. People come up with different ways... I was told when the Sony Walkman came in, "That's it, done. That's done for radio." People don't necessarily want to hear their own choice of music all the time. They would like to hear something they're not expecting, and they still want to hear somebody presenting it to them. How long that will last I've no idea, but as I say, in the '70s I was being told, radio's dead. In the '60s they'd been saying it as well,

because television was seen to be totally in control, and radio was just, no, no, it's going nowhere. But so far, it's still going. I can't see anything that's going to knock it off its perch.

I said this to Jeff actually last year, when he came in. One of the things that raised my eyebrow is, occasionally I listen to 6 Music, I think it's a great station, and then you've got the DJs that play the music. But Spotify have the official BBC 6 Music playlist, which is literally the same songs the DJ's playing, in the same order, without any talking, and you have a choice. Do I want a human being making some observations and chatting in between the songs, and some traffic and travel, or do I just want the music?

Some people will choose that, and fine. It's a choice. But there's still a need and a want for a human being and some human interaction. Even though it's not direct and immediately personal, it feels personal to you. So I think it'll be a long time before people say, "I don't want to hear anybody at all speaking to me while there's music playing."

Now let's talk about Eurovision briefly, because I've only got a few minutes left. I think your commentary is brilliant. Graham Norton does a great job on the telly...

Oh, he's fantastic.

But actually I prefer to listen to it, because you're 15% more hilarious, I think, at least.

I love how you quantify it! All I do is go in there and try and reflect what's happening.

Very amusingly.

Well, it's a huge responsibility, if you like, but it's actually a huge freedom, to have three... it's actually four hours of airtime to say whatever you like, with nobody leaning over your shoulder, and to describe an event as it happens. So I regard it as a great honour to be able to do it, and it's greatly enjoyable, because it's a massive event, still today. People rip the piss out of it, but I think it is a great event. If you've ever gone to a Eurovision, where it's happening, the whole week around it, two weeks around it, it's a massive cultural... I know that sounds wrong, but a cultural event, and there's such warmth and happiness around it. I think it's a great thing to witness, and I don't think people truly get Eurovision until they've actually attended one.

Do people take it seriously? Because I respect it, I think it's great fun. I pretend to take it seriously because that's part of the fun, but the reality is when we came last this year, it doesn't really matter to me, I'm not really vested in where we came. But people seem to get actually upset about it.

Yes. Dear old Terry Wogan actually got upset about it in his last couple of years doing it, which is why I think he stopped doing it. Because he felt, what's the point?

There's a conspiracy against us.

Yes. But actually I just think, well, nobody likes us. We're a bit like Millwall. "No one likes us, we don't care." We're still going to turn up and do it. The problem is, it's not that people hate us, they just don't care about us, in the vast part of Europe that takes part in Eurovision. Europe and beyond. We don't have any real friends. Lots of countries in Europe have their next-door neighbour as their best friend. We don't really have anyone. Ireland have voted for us more than anybody else, but even Ireland, their patience is running out with us. So they don't vote for us very often.

I mean, sometimes we've performed poorly because we've been crap.

Yes.

But other times you do feel a slight tinge of injustice, where you think, "Okay, we were middling, but we weren't bottom rank."

No, exactly. That's the way I look at it. We've had very good singers, and very good songs sometimes, and we haven't done as well as we should. You just have to accept that. But we have, as you're absolutely right to say, we've had some crap songs.

But again, that's part of the fun.

It's part of the fun. It's an entertainment, it shouldn't be taken seriously really on any level. It's an entertainment show for television that is an event slightly beyond television. That's why I'm doing a radio commentary on it, because it's more than what you see on television. But it's not serious.

Last couple of questions then. Who's been your favourite interview guest over the years? When you were working back in the '70s at Radio Scotland you were interviewing legends like Sean Connery and Billy Connolly and Peter Ustinov.

Yes. I'd forgotten at least one of those. Yes. These were lovely people to meet, but I'm a bit... it's a very Glasgow, west of Scotland, thing, not to be impressed by famous people. "Oh aye, I know who you think you are." So actually that hasn't bothered me too much. The most fun I've had in interviews, the most enjoyment, has been people like Barry Cryer, talking to Barry Cryer, who's just...

He's just funny.

He makes me laugh non-stop.

He's brilliant.

And of course the greatest thrill of my entire broadcast life was to meet in the flesh, in the fur, Basil Brush. I did an interview with Basil Brush and honestly, I can die happy now.

So how long are you going to go on for then, if you don't mind me asking?

Well, I don't know.

Are you just going to "go on and on" like Mrs Thatcher did?

Well, it's not... this is a basic thing that a lot of people don't understand, that it's not actually my decision.

Yes. It is though, come on.

The BBC employ me...

Yes, but there'd be rioting in the streets. It'd be like the poll tax again if they got rid of you.

They've done things like that before. I'm employed on contract, one or two years, three years sometimes. Usually two years. I'm on a contract at the moment which ends in 2021. When we get close to the end of that, I'll have a look and see what I think. If I'm happy with what I'm doing, if the BBC is happy with what I'm doing, we'll carry on. If not, if the BBC's not happy, I might go and do it somewhere else. If I'm fed up with it, then I might go and do nothing at all. Although I'll have to do something, because I've got kids to feed.

Would you ever stand by the studio door with a baseball bat and take on all comers? Anyone who wants to take the mid-morning slot is going to get it.

Oh yes, certainly. I'll be on the roof of Broadcasting House with no clothes on and the police underneath saying, "Calm down, Ken, please. Please don't let this go on too much longer." I'll say "Never, never!" So... no. I hope I will know when to call it a day, although Bob Shennan, we've been talking about, said to me, he said, "I've known a lot of presenters. Not one of them has ever known when it's time." I said, "No, no, I will, I will." He said, "They all say that."

How does he know better anyway? Bob's a great guy, we've had him on the show.

He is fantastic.

Would you ever move into a different medium? Would you ever set up either like a podcast, a speech podcast, or an app, or something like that? There's so many different ways you could do PopMaster, for example.

Well, yes, we have been thinking about a PopMaster app and stuff like that.

I'd pay for that.

Good, thank you. Just sign here. We are thinking about that sort of thing, and just developing it slightly away from radio, as well as radio.

But then you've got all the rights management stuff. To be honest, a lawyer's going to charge you a hundred grand just to think about it.

Well, we've got a lot of that in place already.

Ah!

PopMaster is actually a registered trademark, and has been for a long time. So we have the rights for radio use and we have the rights for live shows and stuff like that. So yes, maybe there's something there we can do.

Wow. Last question then, Ken. What has been the best day of your career so far?

This one! Sitting talking to you, Paul. Absolutely. Well, apart from Basil Brush. This is the high point.

Well, Ken, you are an absolute legend. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Well, you're very, very kind, Paul, and it's an honour to be on it.