

Barry McIlheney

Media Masters - October 16, 2014

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with the people at the very top of their game. Today I'm joined by Barry McIlheney. Barry is a giant in the magazine industry. After a brief spell working for local newspapers and Melody Maker, and being in a punk rock band, aged just 26 the temptation of pop music overwhelmed him and he was appointed editor of Smash Hits, my favourite magazine as a teenager.

Following that, he was appointed launch editor of the film magazine Empire, and that took over as my favourite magazine – and indeed still is. He became managing director of Emap Metro in 1994, where he turned FHM from a tiny circulation magazine into a huge success, and created yet another favourite of mine, albeit a guilty one, Heat magazine.

Returning to management as chief executive of Emap Elan in 2000, he oversaw the launch of Zoo magazine in both the UK and Australia. Today, Barry is chief executive of the Professional Publishers Association, the organisation responsible for representing the UK magazine industry.

Barry, that's quite a CV.

That guy sounds really good! Who is that guy?

It's you?

That sounded really impressive, actually. Yes, it's a long time. It's been...

Are you knackered?

I am a bit knackered, actually! I was just thinking on my way here, that's about 30 years I've done, so you can probably work out how old I am. But I did start out very young; I was a child bride. I did start delivering newspapers in Belfast at the age of 14, which seems a long time ago.

Well, the newspapers still exist, but only just.

Well, yes. That was my first ever introduction actually, to the wonderful world of media, because I grew up in Belfast and literally didn't know anybody in the media. I wouldn't have known what the media was. Getting a paper round at the age of 13 or 14 was probably the first introduction I had to this, you know, amazing world that has opened up for me. But it certainly was not on the cards that the 14-year-old young Barry McIlheney in Belfast would have worked in the media.

Were you already thinking, "I'd like to be a part of this," or had an interest in newspapers generally?

Um... yes, I suppose I was actually. The one subject I was quite good at in school was English. I always enjoyed reading, which I think is fundamental if you want to be a journalist or work in the media in any shape or form; you have to learn to read before you can learn to write. So I always enjoyed that, and I suppose the big thing for me was, aged about 14 or 15, the NME entered my life, and I started consuming avidly, voraciously, the NME, which looking back on it now was going through this astonishing purple patch, with fantastic writers like Johnny Murray, Nick Kent and Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill, and I just became completely obsessed with it. And I think from that point on, if I'd been able to articulate it, I would have said, "That's what I want to do. I want to be one of those people," without having any idea how you do that.

What came next, then? How did you get into that?

I started writing letters to the NME and I started copying their style, which looking back over it is a very strange thing for a 15-year-old boy in Belfast to do. And they started printing them, incredibly. I now realise that actually that was an incredible miracle, you know, that letters got there – this is all prior to email of course – and that they chose to print them. And that went on for about a year actually, and I was getting all of these letters in as B Mac, Belfast. And then, I suppose that gave me a taste for it, but then the normal distractions of teenage life took over – girls and films and music and various other things – and I suppose to some extent I put it away for a while and got on with school, but that bug, that incredible sensation of seeing your name, even if it was just 'B Mac, Belfast', in a paper, in a magazine, particularly for me the NME, was just... indescribable. I suppose to some extent I was always going to try and recapture that.

It's like a validation when you see a byline, isn't it?

Yes. To this day – to this day – I still get a thrill. I don't know what that says about my ego, but still, after all these years, and it doesn't matter what it's in, to see my name in print. It still gives me a buzz.

I do as well, if I'm honest. And it distinguishes you from just a bloke in a pub, waxing lyrical, to someone who is worthy of publication, as it were.

Yes.

It flatters your ego.

Yes, I think there's a large part of validation in it, isn't there, in some way? And I think without going too deep on the analyst's couch here, maybe it was something to do with where I grew up and what was going on at that time, which was clearly not a particularly pleasant environment... I don't know, like an escape or something into this fantasy world of the NME which they created. I managed to get into university, which was not that common a thing for that part of Belfast, and I started a student magazine – so I suppose that shows I was always in there – with another guy; it was a typical kind of student rag. When I left university I started trying to write for the music press, so I tried to make that ambition come true.

Was that as a freelancer at first? How did you do it? Were you sending stuff in on spec?

Yes, I mean that was as a freelance. I had a proper job, so to speak, I was working in a library! I was the world's most unlikely librarian, looking back on it. And I actually became an assistant librarian of a library in Belfast.

That's not on your LinkedIn profile, I noticed...

It's not on my LinkedIn profile, you're right actually! I must add that on. It was one of those classic forks in the road, where I could have quite seriously gone down that road, there would be nothing wrong with that, and I could be a librarian and be living in Belfast. The good thing for me about working in the library was it gave me the time to work out that actually I didn't want to do that, and it gave me, of course, access to unlimited books and magazines – all of which I devoured – and I started sending reviews off on spec to the NME, to the Melody Maker, to Sounds, these are all the giants of the music press in the 80s, which we're up to by now, and also to the Hot Press, which is an Irish magazine, still going strong to this day, which is sort of like the Irish NME, I suppose.

So how did Melody Maker end up hiring you?

Because... I think the USP, if you want to call it that, or the unique advantage that I had – and I think it's important if you're a budding journalist to work out what you've got that nobody else has got – what I had was, I was in Belfast. And at that stage, nobody else was doing that, and bands would open up their tours in Belfast because they felt relatively free from inspection. There was no press coming with them. So quite often, a band would open its national tour in Belfast, and I would send in a

review of, you know, Spandau Ballet or Status Quo, or somebody, or Depeche Mode, to one of those, or all of those, organs, and kind of incredibly the Hot Press initially said, "Would you like to be our Belfast correspondent?" which was incredible!

So the answer was clearly yes.

The answer was, "I'll bite your arm off." And of course, as I say, without sounding too much like an old codger, because there was no email and no mobile phones, that would involve typing up the review for the night before, taking it to the Post Office, putting it in an envelope, sending it off to the Hot Press, and then just waiting for the magazine to come out. And I started doing this regular column for them. And I remember they rung me – I was still working in the library at this point – and they rung me at work, I must have given them my number, and they said, "We would like you to go to London for the weekend to interview Squeeze." And I... you know, this is how innocent I was...

That's Jools Holland's old band, isn't it?

Jools Holland's old band! And I said, "I'd love to do that, but I haven't got any money." And they said, "No, no – the record company pay for all of it." I said, "What? Let me just put these library books down and walk out of here forever..." And I didn't realise that this world, which may not be the same now, this golden era of record companies ferrying you around the country, and I went to London and stayed in a very nice hotel, it was the first time I had ever been in London, interviewed Squeeze, you know, wrote it up, Hot Press printed it, and it got fairly prominent coverage, and I was kind of off and running. And to cut a long story short, Melody Maker noticed this stuff in the Hot Press and they did a similar thing and said, "Would you like to start writing from Belfast for the Melody Maker?" I ended up coming to London and working for the Melody Maker.

How long were you there for before you went to Smash Hits? And also, were you always a kind of closet pop fan?

Well, I was on Melody Maker for two years so I probably was. I was probably off to the left or to the right, however you put it, of the real hardcore Melody Maker people, I was always quite impressed with pop music.

You couldn't describe it as a 'light' journal, could you?

No, I tended to do... there was a section at the front called Talk, Talk, Talk which was a sort of gossipy section, I tended to do that – and I think again, just luck. Luck plays a huge part, and serendipity, in all of these stories, I suspect. Because I was Irish... there was a band called The Pogues who were just starting off, nobody had heard of them at this point, and I think... again, looking back on it, I think the rest of the

Melody Maker staff were all a bit older than me and though, "I can't be bothered to this band," you know? And I was asked did I want to go to Germany with The Pogues for a week! You've got to remember, I'd been working in a public library about six weeks prior to this, stamping people's books! So again, it didn't take me very long to say, "Yes, please."

Did you leave the library quietly, as you ought to have done, or did you kind of kick up a fuss and kind of dramatically throw a few books around? I'm interested in this...

Well, I wasn't banged out! There's a tradition in the media, of course, particularly in newspapers, that you're banged out by all the sub-editors hammering the desk, but it was more appropriate that I was whispered out very quietly. "Bye! Don't come back!" And off I went to Germany with the Pogues, which at 24 years old or whatever, was an experience that I will never forget! I sort of became... not close to The Pogues... became, I suppose, their writer, because they were on the way up, I was starting to get published, we had this connection of, you know, we're all Irish... and it kind of took off from there, and I stayed there for two years, and then again, to cut a long story short, Smash Hits, who were published by a company called Emap, who were very much an up and coming publishing house at the time, rung me up and said, "We need a new editor – would you like to come for an interview?" And I went into this disastrous job interview – genuinely, I remember going home to my girlfriend in London at the time and saying, "Well, that's that, I'll never hear from them again." – for some reason, I'll never really understand to this day, I wouldn't have hired me, they got in touch and said, "Yes, you're the editor of Smash Hits." I was like, "Oh my God."

Why do you think that is? What did they see in you from your writing that you didn't see in yourself?

Because being an editor is much more than being a writer, to state the obvious. I suppose I don't really know is the answer. I suppose it may have been something to do with the previous regime there, and they wanted a complete change, there's always an element of politics that I'll never fully understand with this... I think there had been quite a strong group in before who were leaving, and they wanted to completely change it. You know, it was probably a generational shift, because I was 26 or whatever, I think maybe they wanted some of that energy, you know, that I probably had then, and beyond that I don't really know. There was a guy called David Hepworth, who's a bit of a legend really, in the magazine industry, and he took a flyer on me – and I guess he was there in case it went wrong as a kind of editorial director. I started there, I can still remember, October 20, 1986.

How many years were you there for?

I was there on the Hits for nearly three years, during which time it had exploded again... without playing myself down, I think I did a good job, and I had a good team around me, but there was an explosion of a certain type of music at that time, which was Kylie, Jason, Bros, Brother Beyond, Curiosity Killed the Cat, and Smash Hits, by the end of this period, was selling a million copies a fortnight, which I know seems ridiculous now, looking back on it, so one million copies every two weeks...

At that age though, how quickly did you kind of thing that this was normal? There must have come a point where you adjusted to it and thought, “Yes – I’m the editor of one of the most successful music magazines there is in the world.”

Yes, you did... you did... I was aware quite quickly of the influence and the kind of power, I suppose, you had because of that phenomenal readership, and at the time there weren't that many other outlets. So if you were a pop star, basically your ambition was to get into Smash Hits and be on Top of the Pops. There weren't all these other TV channels or forms of delivery, as we now say. So if I'd wanted to, I could have turned into some sort of demanding diva, insisting on this, that or the other – but the truth is, you were so busy at producing what was quite a big – it was about 106 pages in an average issue, every fortnight, in the days before desktop publishing – and my memories of it are just working intensely hard, quite late, never really going anywhere. The days of going to Germany with The Pogues were gone. You were sort of a mixture between a travel agent, a football manager and...

I work with some people who you would think have quite glamorous lifestyles, but the reality of it is that a lot of it is just hard graft and long nights.

It is!

How glamorous was it, in reality?

Well, it's not working down a mine, and it's not working in the library. I mean it clearly is one of the best jobs you could possibly have, particularly at that age – but it is not what people imagine it to be; it's not endless parties with champagne, though there was a bit of that.

There must have been some champagne!

There certainly is a bit of that. I met Michael Jackson, he was brought over and he met, I think, six journalists at a dinner, and I was one of them; you got to go to what are now the Brits, then the BPI awards; you would occasionally be taken to New York to do something. By and large, my memory is sitting in the office, having the time of my life with an incredibly, talented, creative young bunch of journalists, and I think I realised: this is what I want to do. I loved the writing, and I loved the being on

tour bit, but I'd kind of done that. What I loved was running magazines, editing them, building teams, and Emap, the people who published it had this wonderful philosophy, this mantra that you're only as good as your last issue, which is a fantastic kind of discipline. It's a real pain at the time.

Kept you on your toes.

Yes, so you would do an issue and you get the sales figure in, and they go, "That one sold £1.1m," but the attitude was, "The next one might not sell anything, so let's do it even better."

A kind of healthy fear of failure.

And it absolutely was drummed into you, so I got used to that sort of discipline very quickly. The only down side was, because of the sheer scale of the job, and the kind of relentlessness of the cycle, by the third year you were pretty burnt out – and I got to that point. Also, I suppose by that point, I'm nearing 30 and I'm wondering whether to put Jason or Kylie on the cover, or Bros, and then I'm going home and listening to Van Morrison and Bob Dylan! There's a slight dichotomy. Yes, I do think it's a job for a younger man, it's one of the reasons why I like doing what I do now, which I'm sure we'll come on to, which is kind of an appropriate role, to become a bit of an elder statesman. I wouldn't want to be editing Smash Hits, probably not even Empire, as much as I love it. So what happened was, I finished my time at the Hits, passed the baton onto the next lot who were coming through, and again, was asked – and actually, Q had just been created - the idea on a bit of paper was let's do a film version of Q, a movie version of Q, and the managing director of the company said, "Are you interested in films?" and I said, "I like going to the cinema, but I don't know anything about it," and he said, "That's perfect – that's what we want." Because at that time, film magazines tended to be, if there were any, were produced by people who were obsessed by the oeuvres of a particular director, and their favourite film was always *Citizen Kane*...

Which actually is quite a good film.

Which is not a bad film, but it's not my favourite film.

The thing I like about Empire is it's written by people who like going to the movies. No disrespect to Phillip French and people like that, but there's a lot of film critics out there that seem to not like movies – Leonard Maltin was another one, you'd read his columns and he'd just slag every film off. I'd think, "Why are you doing this?" because clearly there are turkeys every so often, but this was good!

I couldn't agree more. That was very much the manifesto of Empire, there was actually a manifesto, it was written down on a piece of paper: "A Manifesto", which finished by saying, "Movies can sometimes be art, but they must always be fun," and that was a totally different attitude for a movie magazine to take. And at the time, there was a review that was in Time Out, which has changed an awful lot since then...

Massively, now it's gone free.

... and had described a film as 'difficult to dislike'. And we saw that and thought, "That's what we don't want to be," because you were going in there hoping to dislike it.

What was the film?

I can't remember what the film was, but it's quite difficult to dislike it, whereas our whole attitude was, "We're going to go into this hoping to love it," and be slightly disappointed not to.

Like the critics who say, "Not undelicious."

So we approached it as, you know, our job here, and it is a function, is to make sure that the people who might buy this magazine go and see the right thing on a Friday night that they will enjoy. So there was a kind of popcorn... and the fact that we called it 'movies' rather than 'film' was quite important. All of that said, it was a bit of a punt, and we only agreed to call it Empire at the last minute, it was going to be called Limelight at one stage. And we got it away – this is only about four months about leaving the Hits – and it went okay. It wasn't an overnight success, for me it was an incredible time because, for one thing, you had to go to Hollywood every three months...

So this was more glamorous.

Yes, this was more glamorous. Smash Hits was hard work.

So the top name at Hits was Michael Jackson. I hope you're going to name a litany of stars now! Dish the dirt.

Well... the most astonishing one, I think, was I went to the Oscars in 1990, at a time when... it was still The Oscars...

Was that Dances With Wolves.

It was, and My Left Foot, I think, Daniel Day-Lewis movie. And I remember standing on the red carpet, and again the red carpet wasn't quite the way it is now, it wasn't full of people asking, "Who are you wearing?" it was the Oscars, but you had plenty of room and plenty of access, and I stood there and, you know, here they come – Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino –

Were you star stuck, or were you trying to maintain some semblance of being a journalist?

Yes. I tried to retain some semblance of cool, but actually you're standing there with your mouth hanging open, because... particularly if you're not over that world, to go and see those people coming past them and stopping, having a chat with you if you say, "Hi, I'm Barry from Empire," they could have vaguely heard of it at this point, and I ended up at a party with Daniel Day-Lewis, joining in a chorus of Danny Boy, who I then found out to be Harvey Weinstein leading the singing, at the Beverly Hills Hotel! It's like, "Somebody pinch me here." So Empire was a lot more glamorous, also because Smash Hits was largely a UK thing. It'd had people like Michael Jackson, but it was a massive UK thing, whereas at that time, films were still largely an American thing, so you had to spend a lot of time in Hollywood, I went to the Cannes film festival every year for 10 years, probably, I went back to the Oscars in 1991, then realised it might not be a very good signal to send out to the staff if the editor goes every year, I should probably let some of them go...

Every third year.

Every third year, let one of them go, spread the wealth a bit! Yes, and during this period, sort of around 91-92, the thing started to take off, and we went from selling 50,000 a month to 100-150,000. The phenomenal thing about Empire – because all of these other magazines have closed, with the exception of the NME, I think every magazine I've mentioned thus far has closed. Not Empire – Empire has just celebrated its 25th birthday, selling more than it's ever sold, bigger probably than it's ever been – it's astonishing.

It's amazing. I genuinely think it's my favourite magazine. I get the iPad edition, and in fact... I think it was a couple of issues ago, when you had the 300th issue and you had a retrospective, and you were in the room with all the other previous editors.

Yes.

I really enjoyed that article.

That was the 25th birthday issue. The amazing thing about Empire is, it's a bit like Liverpool Football Club: when they were at their peak they had very few managers.

Empire has only had seven editors, I think, in 25 years, which on most magazines you would be through about 15 by then. And incredibly, those seven are all still with us – and all still talking to each other! I think partly because the baton was always passed on internally, so you always had investment in the next person making it work, there was never an outsider brought in. And they got all seven of us together in the Soho House, we did an article, a round table, for the magazine, and then very kindly they invited us all to the 25th birthday awards, with Tom Cruise and Schwarzenegger... it was a bit like reliving my Oscars experience from 25 years earlier, the difference now being not only have they heard of Empire, but they want to be at the Empire Awards! So the power of the magazine over the last 25 years has massively grown. It's probably the biggest film magazine in the world actually.

I would say so. And it's part of the movie-going experience. It's not just a mere magazine, I would say now, you go there for all the reviews – and the tone is just perfect. It's just slightly humorous, but also not afraid to be serious when necessary, and it's not overly fawning.

No. That was very much the manifesto, and I think it's stayed true. The other thing that's changed now, of course, is that you now have a British wave of directors and actors, quite a lot of whom grew up reading Empire – so you don't have to have that conversation I used to have which is, "It's a film magazine, it's called Empire, it's British..." with the PRs in Hollywood thinking, "What is this?" Now, the Empire staff, some of whom I still keep in contact with, are not dealing with Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg, and Ewan McGregor, all of whom grew up reading Empire! So you're sort of in the world. That's both good and bad. It's great, because you get access – the fabled access – but you never want to lose that slightly detached, outside, irreverent look at that, "Look at this strange, peculiar world," which is the heart of what the magazine began as. So I did that, and then moved into *management*.

Why?

Largely financial, is the honest answer!

Sit and dangled a larger cheque in front of you, is that what it was?

I'd been doing it... I'd been writing and everything at this stage for 15 years at this point... I sound like an old footballer now, I just missed out on the big money. Editors now, a lot of editors are quite big-name editors who get paid a lot of money. That wasn't really the case, and therefore the idea of becoming a publisher was quite attractive. It wasn't just that; I also... I think curiosity is a really important – probably the most important characteristic for anybody who wants the –

Presumably you needed a new challenge. You'd edited the Hits, you'd launched Empire and grown it into something amazing...

Yes. And I was curious to find out what a publisher did, and what a manager did. And I suppose I was slightly...

Are you able to tell us?

No – I never found that out! I was probably slightly knackered as well. And I'd just got married and had a kid, so a lot of things were changing, and I thought, "Maybe it's time to move upstairs." The great thing about it, and about email at that time, was actually, even as the publisher, you were still very involved in the creative process, but you were also responsible for all these things that you never think about as an editor – the courses, the paperwork...

The desks, health and safety manuals, pension contributions...

Oh, yes, all of that, the lift not working... and funnily enough, I quite liked all that stuff.

You didn't have your own lift, did you? Like Anna Wintour?

Did I have my own? No, I missed out. I missed out on that golden period. And then of course, you get a more holistic view of publishing and then I just sort of got really interested in publishing, so I'd moved from writing to editing to then running part of Emap, Emap Metro, which was the London lifestyle division, so Q and Mojo and FHM and Empire, and FHM was a critical part of all of that, because men's magazines suddenly became the thing towards the mid to late 90s, this would have been, and internationally that became a thing as well, so then the other great thing is, they say to you, "Would you like to go and run the French division," or, "Would you like to go and launch this thing in Australia?"

Did you say, "Mais, oui!"

Mais oui, monsieur! So I did that for a while, and ended up doing it in South Africa and Australia, so you end up having this astonishing journey – literally, you know, going to different cities –

It must have felt like an adventure at the time, because looking back on it, it just sounds awesome.

Yes, it was – and again, as with Smash Hits, your memories are two-fold, aren't they? They're like any job where you remember... it's quite hard work, and you've got people to deal with, all of that, salary increase negotiations, but yes, of course you also at the same time occasionally pinch yourself and say, "This is fantastic! I actually get paid to do this! Don't tell anybody but I'd do it for nothing!" Don't tell them

that when you go into the salary negotiation. And I think somebody said once, if you find something you love, you will never work a day in your life, and that's kind of how I feel, and how I've always felt, which is I managed to end up doing the one thing I think I can do – I'm not being modest there, I've got an awareness that I might find other things a lot harder – I live doing this, I seem to do it pretty well, okay-ish, and you get paid for doing it! Happy days!

Did it feel more risky when you relaunched FHM? Because you had done well with Smash Hits, you'd done well with Empire, did you think, "Oh, God – this might be the one that's going to be a spectacular failure." Or did you think, "I know enough now to know what works and what doesn't, and I'm going to apply those principles."? What was your mindset at the time?

FHM is a slightly more complicated one, because there were a lot that were actually... there were other people involved as well as me. Smash Hits and Empire were teams, but I was heading it up, but FHM I suppose, as the overall manager of the company, you've got people, like I was, were on it, and...

But you hired those people; you had to select them and make sure they were the right people.

Yes, and I felt very confident in those people. On FHM, we sort of had a dummy run. Loaded had launched about six months prior to the acquisition of FHM, so FHM was a magazine called For Him – hence FHM, For Him Magazine – and having seen the success of Loaded, and having realised it would probably take us about a year to get our own thing off the ground, we thought, "Let's buy this other thing and turn it around very quickly." The discipline there being you've got to get it out every month, you can't fanny around.

It forces you into action, doesn't it?

It makes you do it. And of course the myth is that, you know, that we instantly stuck a woman on the cover and everything worked – that's not actually true. Those covers had Harry Enfield on them, Chris Evans, Steve McQueen – always on a men's magazine –

It was a great magazine. For me, a guy in his mid-20s, it was fantastic. Something to look forward to.

Oh, yes. And the prevailing wisdom at the time was you don't put a woman on the cover. Don't ask me why, it was just one of those many publishing myths that was very hard to crack down, and I still remember to this day, we put Liz Hurley on the cover, and we'd been selling say 60,000, and the circulation guy comes in and goes, "We've sold 130,000." You think, "What?!"

Again, the tone was right – Loaded was slightly too laddish and overly objectified women, if you could call it that, in the sense that... because you guys still had pictures of female celebrities in bikinis and so on, but there was a respect for them I felt, it was quite mature, that I... tonally for me, was what I wanted.

Yes. Loaded, I think, was aimed at a slightly sort of edgier, more out there bloke, you know, whereas FHM was aimed at fairly kind of regular guys who maybe had a girlfriend, or certainly liked to have a girlfriend, and would go down the pub, but yes, they weren't... it wasn't that extreme. It was quite an affectionate magazine, it was quite warm. And of course became this runaway success, as did Loaded, so there's this huge period in the 90s, a bit like Blur/Oasis, where you had Loaded and FHM duking it out. What FHM did that Loaded didn't do was went worldwide very quickly – at one point it was in about 52 countries, and I remember going to an FHM convention, believe it or not, in Thailand! And it was like the Olympics – all of the FHM teams would come in, carrying their flag – you know, FHM Ukraine, FHM Lithuania, FHM Mongolia, FHM America – huge group of people, and march in, and we would spend a week in Thailand *allegedly* planning the strategy for world domination but actually, as you can imagine, having a very good time.

Did Felix Dennis come afterwards with his kind of globalisation of Maxim?

Felix, God rest his soul, was very clever. Felix launched Maxim in the UK, and clearly FHM was number one, and Maxim probably became number two, and then he launched Maxim in the US before FHM in the US but essentially launched FHM. So he launched the mainstream, regular mag – which of course put FHM in this terrible position of having to become something else.

And need to in its own image.

To itself. And never really recovered, I mean truthfully, we can say that now, looking back on it. Maxim became this astonishing success in America, FHM probably worldwide, would have been number one in most territories.

Do you think that was just because traditionally, you know, as Felix is, you know, he was more agile and he had this burning desire to get there?

Yes. I think the bigger the company gets – and at this time Emap was getting quite big – the harder it is to move instinctively. It had become almost impossible to do what we did with Smash Hits and Empire, which was, you know, do one and then do another one four months later. You become subject to focus groups, there's more money at stake, you want to launch it with a £10m advertising budget or whatever, so the bet becomes that much bigger.

You get kind of weighed down by the corporate treacle, don't you?

It's very difficult, yes. And by this stage, Emap have become this behemoth of publishing, so in order to get something off the ground – particularly in America, which is ten times the money – whereas Felix I guess, being a private individual, could just take more of a fast decision and say, "Yes, let's do it."

I'm a massive fan of Heat magazine, and again, tonally – certainly in the early years – it was almost like Smash Hits, I thought – there was a real sense of fun and energy and dynamism... I thought that was fantastic.

Yes – I think you can trace a lineage through all of those magazines, because a lot of the same people were involved in them, myself included, from the Hits right through, probably the next 20 years, through to Zoo. Heat was actually launched as a British entertainment weekly, so a lot of us were reading entertainment weekly and thinking we need a smart entertainment magazine, and of course it was a complete disaster – people forget this – for about the first year, and was probably six weeks away, I would say, from being closed, and sometimes that can focus the mind, as you can imagine.

What did you get wrong?

I think what we got wrong was we launched it as an entertainment magazine for couples. So it was aimed at 20-something couples. I remember doing a presentation, it's be, "The kind of couple, when they move into their flat, the first thing they do is rig up the stereo..." – that dates it, obviously. Do you know those kinds of people? Before they put their curtains up they would rig up whatever the equivalent would now be. And I think launching unisex magazines is incredibly hard – we knew that, but we thought we could do it. Maybe there was a little bit of hubris involved. And what happened, of course, was by turning it into a celebrity magazine for women, that's quite a different proposition, and almost overnight – à la Liz Hurley on FHM – the figures exploded, and suddenly from selling 60,000, you're selling 400,000. I went through this incredible purple patch... the truth is, by this point I was not that involved with it because I was moving onto the men's titles, FHM and what became Zoo, worldwide, but Mark Frith in particular, as editor of Heat, had a kind of golden decade, pretty much, 1999-2009, and again, a bit like Empire... Heat may not sell quite as many as it did, but the brand of Heat, through Heat Radio and Heat World, the website, and through its Twitter feeds and its Facebook pages, has this astonishing footprint. The magazine in its print form sells less than it did, but that's a fairly common story.

Last quick question before we move on to what we're doing currently, which is, when you set up Zoo, how does it work? How do you get an idea for a magazine? Do you think, "Right, okay, we're going to have a men's magazine but it's going to be more cheeky with a slightly different tone..." How does it work? Or do you do the focus groups and react to them? Or do you come up with a product and then put it to the focus groups?

That's a good question actually. Zoo was quite unique. The big thing with Zoo, the USP, was it's weekly. That was the big battle really, internally and externally, was will men buy a weekly magazine? And believe it or not, at the time there was quite a strong view that they wouldn't. And of course my view, and the view of a couple of other people who were centrally involved was, "They're only not buying one because there isn't one. If we give them one, they'll buy it." There was a little bit of the 'if you build it, they will come...

The Steve Jobs approach.

Yes... and it's a really frustrating experience to go through, because you feel like you're banging your head against a brick wall, and then we did two years, pretty much, of – focus groups would be giving it a rather dignified title – we sat in a pub, upstairs in a pub in Richmond, South West London, for two years, with a different eight blokes every Wednesday night, and we did half and half, in answer to your question. We had probably half the idea, we would test it with these guys, and we would test it with these guys, and then we would say to them in the last half hour, "What other sort of things do you want in it?" And they would say, "Lots of really gruesome accidents," or, "Lots of conspiracy theories about JFK," or whatever, and you would through that hybrid about what they liked and didn't like about what we presented to them, and pretty much universally would say, "This is what we want," we created Zoo, and then of course, bizarrely, at the same time, IPC, the oasis vs the Blur, were creating Nuts, and the two magazines launched at the same time, which on the surface you think would be a disaster, but actually was an incredibly good thing because it boosted the market – and it got past that weekly thing, because if the two biggest companies in the country are doing it, it must be right. And it became a sort of phenomenon. Now, both those magazines have tailed off to the extent that Nuts closed a few months ago, although again, which takes me into the current thing, they may well have declined on their print version, but they are still reaching quite a lot of other people through all of the other platforms.

Tell us about what you're doing now at the PPA.

Well, I suppose to use a football analogy, you go from being a player and scoring a few goals, and a manager, and I'm now in this equation, if I stretch this analogy, Trevor Brooking, I suspect. So I now run the association, the equivalent of the FA, so all of the magazine publishers, all of the ones I have just been talking about, about

220 in total, are member of the Professional Publishers Association, the PPA, as it's colloquially known, and my job – and the 20 or so people who are there – is to essentially represent magazines to...

To who? I mean, who's out to get you?

To all sorts of constituencies. The government, so I have to be a little bit grown up and put a suit and tie on and go and speak to the government about all sorts of things to do with the regulation of magazines, particularly in light of phone hacking; to advertisers, so yes, of course individual publishers will talk to advertisers, but they need to hear it at quite a high level about why magazines rather than radio or TV, particularly in the current digital world; to retailers, similarly; to students, who may wish to pursue a career in magazines, I was talking earlier, we accredit 18 universities with a PPA stamp of approval, which is...

Incredible.

...quite significant. And to the general public, I suppose, ultimately, and then all of the members, all of the 220 members from IPC through to Emap, people who we were talking about earlier, have all got their own demands, so it's trying to sort of coordinate... the equivalent of the magazine's strapline, is: Promote, Protect and Advance. PPA. And it's promote, protect and advance the interests of anyone who would consider themselves to be a magazine publisher, and that definition is changing all the time.

Listeners will have to take my word for this, you're not an old giffer, clearly – so what's next for you? You're still a young bloke; what's next for you?

Well, there are two things. One, if somebody said to me, "You're going to have to spend the rest of your days at eh PPA," I would actually be quite happy with that, because I love the job, it feels *natural*. As we touched upon earlier, I don't really want to be editing a teenage music title.

You've done it.

I've done that, and I think a 25-year-old should do that. So it's one of the few jobs in media where to some extent, the older you get, the more experienced you get, the better, rather than the opposite in the media which is normally you get kicked out by the time you're 34, or whatever. Secondly, if somebody came along and said, "Here's an amazing job doing..." I can't think what it would be. It would have to be something pretty amazing.

Ever been tempted to go into politics?

Funnily enough, I would never have said I'd be interested in that, but actually, the part of the job that surprised me the most probably is, I do quite enjoy the political side of it, political both in terms of our dealings with the government, and political I guess also in the sense with 220 competing publishers as your membership base, you have to tread quite a diplomatic line, and the medals only take you so far. Yes, it helps, of course, that most of them would know who I am, and have some acknowledgement of quite a good career, but that only gets you so far. If you start to get it wrong, or to favour one lot of people over another, you would soon get yourself into trouble.

It's very difficult.

So I don't know... I don't think I'm perhaps cut out for the Westminster world...

Should I speculatively register barrymcilheneyforpm.com?

Well, you could do! I suspect you might be wasting your money...

I could sell it back to you 10 years from now!

You can sell it back to me when I'm hobbling around looking for a job! I don't think I'm sufficiently interested in party politics. I'm really interested in promoting media, within that magazine, literacy, all the things that you need to consume and to produce quality – as I regard it – editorial, which I think finds its most beautiful form in a magazine.

Barry, it's been a pleasure to take you through this swashbuckling adventure of your career! We've been chatting for ages, I've really, really enjoyed it. So thank you very much, Barry.

Thank you very much.