

Bob Shennan

Controller, 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 radio controller Bob Shennan. Bob manages many of the UK's biggest radio stations, and as controller of BBC Radio 2 has led the network to record listener figures. Starting out at Hereward Radio, he later held many senior roles at the Beeb including head of sport, and controller of Five Live, before joining Channel 4 to head its new radio division. He was appointed controller of BBC Radio 2 and 6 Music in 2008, something he's called 'the best job in radio', and now also leads the BBC's Asian Network. He was also recently appointed director of BBC Music and is responsible for looking after all of the Beeb's music output.

Bob, thanks for joining me.

Great pleasure.

Wow, that is an incredible array of responsibilities. My first question really is, what does the controller of a radio station do? It's one of these jobs that I think I know, but when I try and articulate it I'm not quite sure. What would a typical day involve?

There isn't really a typical day. I suppose what I do is, I'm ultimately responsible for the output, I'm ultimately responsible for what programmes we have, what the schedule looks like, which presenters we have, who we're going to give new opportunities to, I'm also currently responsible for a production team that makes programmes on the three stations that I'm responsible for, I've got financial responsibility... also I'm part of a senior management team at the BBC so I do things beyond just the direct responsibility for the radio stations, so I might meet presenters during the course of the day, I might talk with colleagues about schedule changes, I might go and see a performance, it could be any combination of things like that with a few classic BBC meetings thrown in.

What are the best bits of the job?

Well, I was hearing you saying that I said this is the best job in radio, and most of us would probably think we've got the best job in radio because it's such a privilege to be involved in this world with the people we work with, and the different experiences that we get. But it's such a privilege really, to be around enormously talented people who are entertaining the public, and making people's lives just a tiny, tiny bit more enjoyable for that entertainment, and I think whether that's artists or presenters, producers, it's just a real privilege to be involved in that world.

Do you ever feel a kind of weight of responsibility when you think you are the controller of BBC Radio 2, the most listened to radio station, and all those millions of listeners? It must sometimes be quite stressful, is it not?

Well, my predecessor, Lesley (Douglas), had to leave the BBC because of... you know, the burden of responsibility, so... but it's not like being a brain surgeon, it is about providing entertainment, pleasure, fun for people. But it's important in terms of radio, it's important in terms of the BBC, it's an important thing for the audience. The burden of responsibility is really making sure that we're doing right by the audience, that we're giving them the programmes and the presenters that they want, we're playing the music that they love, we're bringing enough surprise but enough familiarity in the right kind of mix – that's really the responsibility, it's about serving the public in the purest way. And I don't mean that in a kind of awkward way, I just mean it's true, that's what we're there for, and as long as we're doing that right, then we're successful. The massive pleasure of success outweighs the burden of responsibility.

Clearly, sticking with BBC Radio 2 for the moment, it's clearly an exceptionally winning formula. Do you ever worry when you slightly tinker with it, or when you appoint a new presenter, or change the schedule a little bit, given how vociferous people are now on Twitter, you mentioned Lesley's departure as well, it's so easy to whip up a twitter storm these days.

I think whenever you change the schedule, whenever you do anything to alter the status quo, there's an element of risk about it, and I've done many things in all of the different roles that I've had that have meant introducing change, and often felt the sometimes vilification of the audience for bringing that change in. I'm not afraid of it because it's a fundamental part of the job; when you say, "What does a controller do," I think the controller has to make sure that the radio station changes enough to stay alive without shocking the audience. But when I oversaw the introduction of Chris Evans to the breakfast show, when Sir Terry moved to Sundays, there was a lot of heat around that move; the stakes were quite high around that move, and now with the benefit of hindsight it was obviously a no-brainer, and it was a no-brainer,

Chris was the only person to do it, but the stakes were high, the publicity was significant, and you've just got to kind of ride with those things. I've made a number of changes which have had very specific, local impact to some of our religious programming, to some of our specialist music programming, to some programming targeted at older audiences, and actually in a way they're a little bit more difficult because they're more niche audiences, they're important audiences to Radio 2, and they often feel like we're abandoning them if we make a change in their areas, which we're really not – but I think that's a more delicate balance to get right.

Due to the unique way the BBC is funded, do you ever find you have that classic controller's dilemma where you have to serve specialist audiences that commercial broadcasters might not necessarily cater for, but also have Steve Wright, Ken Bruce, Jeremy Vine and so on, to have that kind of mass market appeal as well, Chris Evans as well, of course.

I don't have a problem with any of that! I love our specialist music programmes, I love our big entertainment programmes. We strive to do two key things with Radio 2. We want to be a big, mainstream radio station, and we want to be totally distinctive from anybody else, and I think we are. I don't think there's another radio station remotely like Radio 2.

I have to declare an interest as a huge Radio 2 fan and listener.

Well, that's good to hear! Not everybody agrees with us, and you know, that goes with the territory. If you've got 15 million people listening to you every week, if your radio station delivers a third of all the hours listened to at the BBC on the radio, then you're a target – and people are constantly challenging us that we're only big because we're like everybody else. I would argue that that's absolutely the opposite of the truth; we're only big because we're totally distinctive from everybody else. I'm perplexed as to why other people don't try and follow the formula.

What's next for Radio 2?

We want to continue to entertain audiences. We want to continue to bring people a rich range of different musical genres. We want to continue to offer the kind of variety that we offer, but we've got to do it in a very changing economic, political, technological age, so we've got to make sure Radio 2 continues to be relevant, but continues to entertain and serve large audiences – that really is the ongoing challenge, I think, for all of us in radio, I think to make sure that radio stays healthy and stays relevant to a wide range of audiences, as it has done for more than 90 years.

Moving on to 6 Music now – I really like 6 Music as well, I enjoy listening to it.

Excellent.

But is it safe? Can you reassure us listeners that it will still be there in five to 10 years from now? Because it's had a few issues, shall we say.

I think at the moment it feels very difficult to say anything is completely safe, because we're in a period of great flux and great change. But I don't hear any carrion calls for the closure of 6 Music from any part of the media landscape. The BBC came very close to closing 6 Music in a different time, for different reasons to the circumstances that surround us today, and under a very different regime, and in truth I think 6 Music has got a lot better in the past few years; it was almost galvanised by the experience of near-closure. Certainly, it's talked about as one of the great marketing campaigns of the BBC, to threaten to close something – it brought a lot of attention to the station, the station has grown enormously – but fundamentally, 6 Music is another completely distinctive radio station, there's no radio station playing the music that 6 Music plays.

Agreed.

And it's a beautiful radio station, it's got huge quality, it's got real craft, and a real passion that underpins it, but also there's a kind of lightness of touch from the presenters as well, so I think it's a fabulous service, it's pretty good value for money now, we reach 2.2m people every week, and we have some real star presenters who have become a real fixture to the station. I mean, you know, somebody like Cerys Matthews on a Sunday morning has half a million people who listen to that show – well, we didn't have that many more than half a million listeners to the whole station around the time people were talking about closing us – it just goes to show how things can change quickly. But the great thing about the BBC is it realised that it was the wrong decision, and it was big enough to, if you like, change its corporate mind about 6 Music, and I think that's a great thing, that we were able to ear and see the testimony of audiences, and as an organisation do a bit of a volte-face – and thank goodness for that, because the station has become such a fundamental part of the portfolio across BBC Radio now.

When you are relaxing on a weekend, when you turn the radio on, can you just turn on as an ordinary listener? Which station do you choose, and also are you listening for things? Can you never switch off as the controller, or do you ever listen to Radio 2 as someone who is just driving along in traffic and it just happens to be on, or are you always thinking, "Is that thing right?"

I kind of feel I should say, “Yes, I can switch off,” but... I mean, I do listen to radio for pleasure, but whatever I’m listening to I’m sort of slightly analysing it as well, I can’t help it. I just can’t help doing it.

You’re the manager, aren’t you?

I’ve got three radio stations that I’m responsible for, so I always feel guilty that I’m never quite listening to any of them enough – but I do listen to other stations, and I try... I quite enjoy flicking around just to hear what’s going on, so I might listen to... I mean, I do listen to quite a bit of Five Live still, which for obvious reasons I’ve got a very deep affection for – in fact, I think I probably called Five Live the best job in radio when I did that. I listen to some football on TalkSPORT, if I’m driving and I want to hear what the football commentary is doing, and that’s very good. I listen to local radio if I’m driving up and down the country, which I do quite a bit, just to find out what’s going on – I actually do just quite like listening out for voices, I’ve heard some voices in...

What, like talent scouting?

Yes, a little bit, yes. A little bit. I quite enjoy that. But I flick around the dial like everybody flicks around the dial as well, and sometimes I’m just in a mood to listen to Magic, and I do.

Well, just kind of going through your responsibilities to start the interview, as it were, as you’ve said you control three networks. So let’s just talk about the Asian Network for a little bit. What do you do there? Does it fit in with the kind of musical aspects of Radios 2, 6 and your director of music position, or is it slightly anomalous?

It’s *very* different. So I keep using ‘distinctive’ and ‘unique’ as adjectives – well, here’s another one: Asian Network is... actually, running the Asian Network is the only job I’ve ever done twice – because I used to be responsible for it when I ran Five Live, and when I came back from Channel 4 it was in a different portfolio, and when the person who ran it whilst I had gone away left, I was asked to look after it again! So it’s the only job I’ve ever done twice. I wouldn’t say that it’s part of the kind of mainstream; it’s a very specific service for a very specific audience, a really important audience for the BBC, a growing audience, a young audience, an audience that it’s really important that we reach, and I’d like to think that some of the work that Asian Network does in journalism, in news, now increasingly in comedy and also in music, is starting to filter into the wider BBC, which is as it should be. It’s an influential audience with influential artists, and they’re increasingly going to filter in and become mainstream.

Which brings me on to your final responsibility as BBC director of music. Tell us how you came to do that and what the responsibilities involve. It seems to me that that's the biggest job of them all.

It does occupy a big chunk of time and attention. BBC Music came about because it felt to Tony Hall that we'd got a lot of different musical assets around the BBC, we've got radio stations, TV programmes, websites, but they weren't all necessarily joined up, and under Tony – he wanted to be clear, he wanted music to be one of the things that the BBC is famous for – and he said, "I want to create a brand, BBC Music, like BBC News and BBC Sport, which is a compilation of all the great BBC assets in that area." So obviously I run three of them, but I work really closely with all the other ones – and my job is about effectively increasing the BBC's reach in music, increasing our reputation, increasing the impact and the benefit for audiences in all platforms of our musical content, by joining up the BBC – leading the Glastonbury coverage, for example, which is a multi-platform coverage.

Ensuring things don't fall through the cracks, as it were?

Making sure they don't fall... but also being bigger than the sum of the parts. You know, we've got lots of very effective parts, but when we work together, we can just achieve a little bit more. Creating new events is another part of it, so the BBC Music Awards for example, broadcast on Radio 1, Radio 2, BBC1, with a team from all of those areas building an event with real quality and high production values. That's been great for launching a day of celebration, Music Day, great fun, building a kind of learning arm to what we do, getting other things away on BBC1 with great impact, collaborating with entertainment. We did the Adele programme at the BBC, which has had a phenomenal response, particularly in the digital space. All of these things designed to bring the best out of the BBC by bringing the BBC together, and making music a priority – and that's really what it's about. So it's a great pleasure, because it's all about creativity and ideas, and working with enormously talented people, which is the greatest pleasure of all of them really, because this place, and other places around it, are filled with amazing talent, so liberating their ideas and bringing them to air is just great fun.

It genuinely does sound like you've got the best job in the BBC.

Yes, I think that's about right! I love it. I mean, I have to confess, I have said I've got the best job many times, but I've meant it. I always wanted to work in the world of sport, in fact in the world of football, and I got to do that early on in my career, and I felt I'd got everything I wanted, and then the wider world of sport, and then Five Live was an absolute passion, then I wound up here in a very different and yet similar kind of environment in music, and as I've said before, it's a great privilege to work in these places and with these people, and it is great fun. I love it.

My interview plan was to go through your responsibilities for the first bit of it, but I'd like in the second half, if we can, to talk about yourself personally and your career, and how you got into this. Because you started in local radio, did you not?

Yes. I started, I think like a lot of people are planning to start now, or have started in the past – I fell into this when I was at university. A friend of mine at university is a woman called Eleanor Oldroyd, who is a fantastic broadcaster with the most amazing voice, and Eleanor and I were at university together, and she asked me, she was running the sport bit of the university newspaper which we had at the time, and she asked me to go and report on a game for her, so I went along and I reported on a football match between Cambridge United and Sheffield Wednesday.

What year was this?

This would have been the early 80s. It was close to my final year, it was quite late on, and I sat in the press box with a cup of tea in the freezing cold winter, and someone bought me a programme and I had a seat, and I looked around and saw these people who were obviously being paid to be there, and I thought, "This is it – this is what I'm going to do."

This is the life.

That was the moment – it was like a Road to Damascus realisation that this was what I wanted to do, and so I, from that moment on for the next few months before I did my finals, I just bombarded the local commercial radio station, the local newspaper, the Cambridge evening News, with stories, ideas and interviews, and I got a really great response from the commercial station which just covered my patch, which was based in Peterborough, and that was a station called Hereward Radio. It doesn't exist any more – it's a Heart now – but I got on really well with them, they kind of took me under their wing a bit, the guy who ran the sports desk was wonderful, he gave me a lot of coaching and training, and I went in every Saturday to help out, like people do, and I became a little bit more indispensable to them, and anyway, when I graduated they were opening a new station, it was a boom time in commercial radio, I applied for a job and got a job as a sort of trainee tea boy. And I worked at Hereward for a couple of years with a great team of people, I worked in the Northampton news station in Northampton, and Peterborough. I did five mornings of early morning newsgathering, and I did sport on Saturday afternoons, and I did that for a couple of years.

Was sport always your first love though? Was that the bit you enjoyed the most?

It was, to be honest. You know, it was that... I want to work in and around the world of football and the wider world of sport, and Hereward was a great experience, it was a great learning experience, I learnt from wonderful people, sports editor Alan Wolcroft, and a fabulous, real hard-nosed news hack called Pat Percival, who taught me a lot about news journalism, but I always enjoyed doing the sport most, and I got the chance to do it full time when I applied for a job at the BBC. It was a short-term contract as a trainee producer in London at the radio sports department, and I got it. So that was me joining the BBC and joining the world of sport.

So you must have been elated at that point, because you wanted a sports job, and there you are, working in sports at the Beeb.

I couldn't believe my luck, it was great. And I think I joined almost around the same time as John Inverdale. And of course at this time I did quite a bit of broadcasting, and I really wasn't any good, but I fancied the idea of being a broadcaster – everyone fancies the idea of being a broadcaster. And I joined around the same time as John, and I thought, "This guy's good. I may revisit my ambitions here. Maybe the thing to do is aspire to be his boss, rather than take somebody like that on." I realised the quality of the people around, you know, I got to work in those days with some names who... they're not household names, but in the world of radio/sports broadcasting, they are absolute legends – people like Peter Jones, who was a genius football commentator, people like Bryon Butler, who was a wonderful wordsmith with an incredibly rich broadcast voice, and terrific broadcast journalists like Jeff Stelling, who now does Sky's Saturday afternoon football, people like Mike Ingham, Ian Darke, people who've all had wonderful careers, because the radio sports department tended to provide all the greats for radio and television on all channels, and so it felt like a wonderful opportunity to land in a place like that.

Did you feel that you were moving away from being airsiders, as Jeremy Vine called it on an earlier interview, and recognising something that John had that you necessarily didn't, did you see that as you moving onto something equally as exciting, or did you feel a little bit of a sense of loss that your career as a broadcaster might not...

No, I didn't really, to be honest. I've always got a huge amount of job satisfaction from being an enabler – I really do love working with different people; they're not always easy, but I love working with talented people. I'm being a bit facetious, you know, I joined as a trainee producer, there was no great likelihood I was ever going to do much broadcasting, and I didn't really have a huge ambition for it, but when I saw the calibre of presenters... John was the junior kid on the block, but he was obviously so good... I remember when John Champion joined us from Radio Leeds as a football commentator, I thought, "Wow, this guy's good." He was in his mid-20s. It was like a factory of great broadcasting talent, and I was really... I was quite

ambitious, I have to say, in those days, but I wanted... basically, I wanted to be their boss, that's what I wanted. I wanted to run it.

So what was the next rung on the ladder, then?

Well, I got really lucky because... I told you I wanted to work in football, and I was given the chance to be their football producer in sort of 1989 and in the run-up to Italia '90, which was one of the great World Cups where England were one of the big stories – so I had a wonderful experience as football producer working with Peter Jones, who was one of my great radio heroes. Peter tragically died young just after he had formally retired from the BBC and never made that World Cup, but it meant that there was a new team with Mike Ingham and Alan Green, who have both been wonderful colleagues of mine over the years, and friends, really, and are both... and I think formed the best radio commentary partnership I've ever heard. And I spent a couple of years working with them, and I got given the chance to be the departmental sort of number two, and then when I was about 32 or 33 they made me head of radio sport. That was a great landmark moment for me.

Presumably you were elated.

I was very pleased, but it was a great time to do it. Because this was at a time when Five Live was just launching, and a time when the internet had really started to take hold and the BBC was thinking about its continuous services like the news channel, News 24, which launched while I was running that department. So it was a time of great expansion.

Breaking new ground.

Sport had never had it so good, in particular having its own news and sport radio station, so it was a good time to be the head of radio sport.

How did that work in terms of your responsibilities for Five Live? Because you weren't controller of Five Live at that point, were you?

No.

Were you responsible overall for the sports output but not the news side?

That's right, yes, I was. And as I say, it's easy to imagine that Five Live was always there, there was always a continuous sports presence on the radio – it wasn't, and there wasn't. This was a time of real expansion in radio sports broadcasting in the mid-90s, and we had to create new programmes, new formats.

Was it daunting as well as exhilarating?

No, it was just great fun. We believed what we were doing was really important and valuable to the audience, and so it was. And so it was a fun time to be around the place – we were able to bring more talent in, we needed more people to cope with all the demands, it was a real boom time, yes, for radio sport. It was also a time of great change, because the BBC changed around then, radio and television in news had been really brought together into a single division, BBC News, and it was kind of decided that we should do something similar with sport, and when the head of television sport left the BBC, Brian Barwick, he went to work for ITV, they gave me the job of running radio and television, and this fledgling online sports thing, which was really small, just had a couple of people who worked on it, it was not deemed by the sports team to be terribly important, and how ironic now, when you look at... the first thing, you know, you look at on your phone is your app, and how it's become so central to the BBC sport offer. But back then it was all a big cultural change, it was about bringing TV and radio together, and growing this online thing and building a brand – BBC Sport – which is not a million miles away from what we're doing today in Music.

I imagine that was quite a challenge then, in terms of the logistics, and also the different cultures – radio, television, like you say, the 'fledgling online'. Was that quite a challenge, bringing everyone together and uniting them under this new umbrella?

Yes, it was. Because you're right – the cultures are very different. There wasn't a great deal of – apart from the fact the subject matter was the same – there wasn't a great deal of crossover between radio and TV. A lot of the presenters moved from radio to TV, either to BBC Television or ITV, Jim Rosenthal was one of the greats of the radio sports department who became a great ITV anchor; Desmond Lynam, of course, came through radio sport... there are many, and if I keep listing I'll miss people out, and that would be a shame. But it was a real pipeline of talent, but in terms of the way they were organised, the way they were ran, they way they behaved with one another, there wasn't a great deal going on, so I had to begin the process, which to be perfectly honest, has sort of continued over the next 15 years, 20 years, of growing a new, single BBC sport culture, and I think everybody feels now quite... it's quite natural to think in terms of a multi-platform brand like sport. It wasn't always the case then, but it was the start of it.

In a sense, you've been at the cutting edge of the BBC organising itself around a thematic concept rather than a network dependent, because like you say you're director of music, and that cuts across television, radio and individual channels. Do you think that's the way the BBC's going, long-term?

I think it's both, you see. I mean, you're right, I've been at the beginning of BBC Sport, I've been at the beginning of BBC Music, and I've worked very closely with BBC News throughout my time in the BBC, but I've also run stations, you know, I've run half the BBC's stations, so in a way you have to live in both of those worlds. We have to make the most of what we've got, we have to not just be very precious about our own patch, but on the other hand, our audiences do love our platforms, they do love our radio stations, they do love our TV programmes, and you've got to be mindful of that – they are the people we're doing it for. We're not doing it for organisational neatness, so I feel like Radio 2 is really important for the Radio 2 audience, but BBC music is really important, because we're maximising everything we're doing in music across the BBC, so we've got to live, I think, for the foreseeable future, in both this sort of genre-led world and the channel-specific world, and that's actually what my job is at the moment, I've got one half of me about being a radio station leader, and the other about a genre leader across platforms.

Tell us about your time at Five Live. How did you come to be appointed controller, and was that a challenge as well, because you've moved from wholly exclusively focusing on sport to injecting an element of news into the schedule?

I was quite keen to do it, to be honest.

Is this something you sought out?

Well, I applied for the job! I mean, I always wanted to get to run a radio station, a national radio station, and Five Live was the obvious place for me. And it was a great challenge because this brought me into the world of news, which although I had been a junior reporter in commercial radio, it's not the same thing as running the BBC's continuous radio news service, and following in the footsteps of people like Jenny Abramsky and Roger Mosey, who was... well, they were born in the Today programme studio, so that, in a sense, was another...

Was there a slight feeling of what they call impostor syndrome, as it were?

I've had that all my life! I mean, wherever I go I'm never quite qualified for it.

It probably makes you better in the job, frankly.

You can imagine what they said when I got to the Asian Network.

Yes!

You know, but... television sport, I was the bloke from the wireless... it actually said that on the headline in the Telegraph actually. They said it was Year Zero because

they had appointed the bloke from the wireless to run television sport. Same when I was at Five Live, I was the man from sport, not news, you know, when I was at Radio 2 I was the man from Five Live...

You're used to this now, aren't you?

Well, I don't think you can move without having a little element of that leap, and to be honest I've always loves that.

It brings a fresh perspective, doesn't it, fresh ideas? You don't want to be the same as all the others.

I celebrate that range. For me, the biggest wrench in a way was leaving radio sport, because there are so many people who never left it – it was the vocation for their whole career, and they're still there now, actually. They were there when I was there, and they're still there, and I understand that because they're happy, because it's what they want to do and what they want to be. For me, there was a moment – actually, it was even before I left radio sport, it was when I was the football producer – when a colleague of mine called Robin Bailey, who is a very good broadcaster, said to me, "What's the shelf life of a football producer?" And I hadn't thought of it like that before, and I was only in my late 20s, and I thought, "Yes, what *is* the shelf life? What do I do next?" I suddenly thought, "Well, I'll *have* to give up the thing I always wanted to do, or I'll be doing it for the next 40 years." So I realised that giving up something to do something else and take your experience into another area is a great pleasure, and so I've moved from radio to television, from sport to news to music... I've left the BBC, which was another really good thing to do...

You've pre-empted my next question, so please carry on!

Because I think variety is really valuable, and not enough people seek it out.

Certainly it seems to be a good career move to get that fresh perspective, doesn't it, that you can then, if you come back to the BBC, like people like yourself, mark Thompson, you know, go to Channel 4, then come back and they've learnt a lot... what did you learn at Channel 4?

Well, Channel 4 was enormous fun, but it was quite scary because what I think I learned was... I remember walking in to the floor where Channel 4 Radio was going to be, and there was this huge bank of empty desks with PCs.

Because you were the launch controller, weren't you? You were the guy who was going to start this from scratch.

And I realised I had to basically come up with the plan. I realised I had to... I thought to myself, "I wonder why they've asked me to do this?" And what I learnt was that they asked me because they thought I could do it, they thought I could build a team, they thought I could design a schedule, they thought I could compete with particularly the BBC, but also the commercial radio sector. They thought I could do it to fit in with the culture that is a very strong and clear culture of Channel 4, and so what I learnt was a bit of self-awareness – I had to learn quickly about what I was good at. So that's quite a good thing to have to do every now and then, and so although ultimately the whole Channel 4 Radio experiment never quite came to fruition – and that is a huge sadness, and maybe one day somebody will pick up the baton again – I actually got a lot from it because I learnt a lot about what I was able to do, and also I am pretty convinced that after seven years at Five Live, had I not left, and had the vacancy at Radio 2 come about, I'm not sure I would have been as strong a candidate, and I'm not sure I'd have thought myself as strong a candidate, and as I say, that seeking of variety is something I've always been interested in. After all, Channel 4 Radio was one of the most exciting things going on in radio back then, and I can't begin to tell you how excited everyone in the BBC was about it, and also how it put the BBC on its mettle. Because the BBC is very respectful of Channel 4 and what it can do, and they were concerned about what it might do. There was a famous story that Mark Thompson told at Jenny Abramsky's leaving do – Jenny, who was one of the great leaders of BBC Radio – and she sort of said, "Great news, terrible news – Channel 4 Radio is closing." And it was great news in one sense in terms of the competition, it was bad news because it would have been so good for the radio industry that Channel 4 was a player.

Why do you think it didn't work out?

Oh, because of the crash. It was the latter part of 2008, and...

I suppose you can't fault Channel 4 for its ambition though.

No, no – I don't fault it at all. And the economics suddenly didn't stack up any more because Channel 4, like everybody else, was massively impacted by the issues around revenues, so it was a shock, and it was sudden, and it was a shame, and I wish we could have continued it, because I think Channel 4 would have contributed a lot to the radio sector with its ethos and its culture, and it would have done different content... but it wasn't to be.

When Lesley got into difficulties over Sachsgate, I actually felt quite sorry for her really, as I'm sure many people in the industry did. But was there a sense that her days were numbered, and the Mail started to whip up this ridiculous campaign?

Well, I have to be completely honest with you, I didn't know it was happening. Because it was almost the same time as Channel 4 was getting out of radio, so I had no idea this story had happened, and in fact the first I heard about it was while I was on a golf course in Scotland, and I just heard Lesley had resigned – and that was the first I knew anything about anything.

That was almost unheard of, wasn't it, why a controller of Radio 2 would have to resign?

Well, Lesley is an old friend of mine, and I had kept in touch when I had gone to Channel 4 because she was a fellow controller, but you know, we go back a long way. And I have to say, she was one of the people who really encouraged me to go for the Radio 2 job, and when I was thinking about it and preparing for it, she was incredibly helpful to me. I mean, I kept ringing her up and asking her questions, and she was the perfect coach, because obviously it was a station that she'd spent her life building. And when we were talking about the success about Radio 2 before, everything that I'm doing I've always felt is really just a continuation of a strategy that was began by Jim Moir in the mid 90s, and then continued brilliantly by Lesley, and there was nothing wrong with Radio 2 except there had been this big, horrendous editorial cock-up, but strategically it was still incredibly strong, so I always made it my mission to continue their good work.

What do you think is next for the BBC? It's currently got quite a few challenges on, and I know you could say that in any BBC controller interview at any time of year in any decade, as it were, but it does seem to be that the BBC at the moment is facing a particular set of difficulties, with the EQF and the licence fee renewal.

Of course. It's a fairly challenging time for everyone in the BBC. I think it's always a challenging time around charter renewal, and it feels particularly so now to me, but that's probably just because I'm in a more senior role, so therefore I'm a bit closer to the challenge.

You're feeling it more acutely.

And also because if you've got popular radio stations and big popular output, like we have in Music across all platforms, then it has an impact on others outside the BBC and they want to voice their concerns. And it's also a time of challenge because the BBC has to be held to account, and we have to be able to explain why we do what we do, and make sure we're doing what the public wants – and I think what the public wants is at the heart of it. What's the future for the BBC? Well, the future for the BBC is to provide great content for the people who pay for it. We're not a government-funded organisation – whenever I go overseas they think we're a state broadcaster, we're not a state broadcaster, we're paid for by the people and we're

for the people – and the BBC will always be okay as long as it's doing content that the people want and love, particularly love. So the future of the BBC is to carry on doing that. Periods like this, we're always under the scrutiny, competitors get the opportunity to vent their spleen, but in the end I think it's important everybody listens to what the public think about our content and our services, and I'm certain the future for the BBC is about making sure it continually reinvents itself to meet the needs of the public, which we have done going back over decades.

It must be frustrating for you though, as a controller, where you are asked to do more for less? Because the more money you have in the pot, the more resources you have to do things with, and yes, you can innovate, and yes, it can be exciting, you've got to roll your sleeves up and get on with it, but there must be part of you that goes, "Tut."

I think everybody's in the same boat. Obviously we'd all love to have a bit more, but I know we have the great privilege of the licence fee. I know that the radio stations that I run are really well-funded, and that I am in the lucky position of being able to spend the money I'm given by the BBC on content, because that's what we're about, providing content. I know what we've got this year, I know broadly what we'll have next time – our competitors don't have that privilege, so actually we're all living in a world where we've had to do more for less, and yes, sometimes it can be quite difficult, and there are times when you say we can't do something when you would like to be able to it but you can't, but we've managed it – Radio 2 in the last getting on for seven years has gone from having an audience of 13 million to getting on for 15.5 million, the audience appreciation is still just as high as ever it was, the hours of listening are very high, I would argue the distinctiveness of the output is even greater now than it was in the past, I think the importance of Radio 2 to the BBC and to audiences has never been greater, I think 6 Music has become a jewel in the radio crown, I think that everybody believed that 6 Music is an entirely unique proposition, the Asian Network is a fantastic way for the BBC to reach a growing an important audience, that it has always struggled to make content for in a relevant kind of a way, I think it's a great fortune for us that we have a DG that puts so much stall by music because of his own belief in its importance as a fundamental way of serving the public with entertainment and pleasure, and so it's my absolute mission to make sure that BBC Music remains a core foundation stone of the BBC going forward into that future, which is a little bit uncertain.

Final two questions then, Bob. First one: what is the best day you've ever had at the BBC? We've talked about all your various achievements and outcomes, but when your head has hit the pillow one night, when have you thought, "That's the best day I've ever had? So that's my first question. My final question is: what's next for you? The old open question.

Haha. Best day. Oh, well I can tell you the best day was when I was in Istanbul in 2005 for the European cup final, the Champions League final, where Liverpool won against all the odds against AC Milan – I've never experienced anything quite as ecstatic at work as that! But I didn't really play or contribute, so that's a bit of a cheat. I must say, when there are two big landmark moments quite recently when we did the music awards, Chris Evans and Fearne Cotton did the Music Awards, and we did this show from scratch, and I felt an enormous sense of satisfaction that we'd done that on the three big BBC networks – BBC1, Radio 1, Radio 2 – and it had gone down really, really well with the audience. That was very satisfying. And if you want something even more recent, the Adele show was a coup, and I want the BBC to get noted. I want what we do in music to be noticed by people, and I want people to think that that's where you go for great musical moments, so that was very satisfying too.

The final question is: what's next for you? You've done a lot of roles where people have said, "Who is this guy? He's never done this bit of the Beeb before." In a sense, you've got very few areas left of the BBC that you haven't done. You've done a lot of sport, music, news... you really know what you're talking about across a number of areas. What's left for you to do?

I still feel right now... this is the question everybody has to avoid answering, but I actually genuinely think that there's a lifespan in jobs, but the thing I'm doing in Music, I'm right in the middle of it, so you need to come back and ask me this question again in a year or so's time.

One of the pleasures of doing this podcast is I get to meet really interesting people and ask them all the questions that are on my mind – I'm a bit of a media geek, as you've probably seen. But thank you ever so much, it's been a great pleasure and I really appreciate your time.

Likewise.