INTERVIEW

the press conference with CHRIS EVANS

by Rob McGibbon

No matter how indifferent or impartial you are, it's hard not to have a sound-bite opinion of Chris Evans. More than likely, he's that cocky ginger bloke with the big gob and even bigger wallet who is on the piss the whole time. Evans was in our face and ears for years with his radio shows and ground-breaking TV formats. And, boy, was he in our newspapers. He has cabinets of cuttings, not files. Since his acrimonious sacking from Virgin Radio in 2001, he has been on an extraordinary global road trip, which has been largely documented through long lenses. During this break, he married the pop singer-turned actress Billie Piper, but they separated last year. Evans is finally back at work with the Saturday afternoon slot on Radio 2 and will soon begin a new live show for ITV1 called 'OFI Sunday'. He is 39 now and, although still manic, is undoubtedly mellowing. An interview with Evans is rare these days, but he is relaxed and open when we meet. In old jeans, trainers and a grey shirt with little pink flowers, he is straight-talking, never ducks a question and is mercifully devoid of showbiz puff 'n' gush.

"We all knew about Kate Moss and it was a time bomb. It is tough for her, I feel for her, but you cannot be that high-profile and lead that lifestyle. You're just looking for it"

You are back in business, how does it feel?
It's great to have had the break, great to have had the madness before it, and it's great being back. I feel brilliant and very lucky.

Before, I didn't realise how lucky I was and, although it sounds a grandiose thing to say, I think I have something to offer now. I didn't get either of those things before, but now I know there is a place for me and that I can't fuck around.

I have done my fucking around and I get on with it. It was brilliant and I will always have those scars, but I don't want that stuff now. It is hard pursuing for five years, seven days a week — to relate it out of you.

I always keep an open mind about people, but it's a tough call after going through your cuttings. They're certainly colourful — and full.
Apparently, I was third to Diana and Princess Anne at the height of the madness — '93, '96, '97 and outside. The press does paint a very black picture of me, but I can't do anything about that. You look to the positives in everything and it does more than I surprise people. Before anyone meets me they generally think I am stupid, drunk and a wanker. But I turn up in meetings and they see that I am not drunk, stupid or a wanker, so in a way you thank the press for that.

The stick you've had, is this why you have pretty much stopped doing interviews?
Not really. I just don't feel the need. I can't think what it is going to bring me, or if I have anything specific to say. I did a Radio Times piece. I will do Desert Island Discs and Parky and this week you. That's it.

I don't mind the press, I haven't got a problem with them at all. Without them I wouldn't have the cars, the houses... but then that may not be a bad thing. I am where I am because of the press, but there are other things — like my energy, talent, hard work and my personality — so maybe I would be here without them. You have to have pens of some sort, as long as it's not for something jaffable.

What is it like reading the sort of headlines you get?
I am totally immune to it. I have to be otherwise I would be shaking my worm. It really doesn't bother me. But I read about other people now and I think, God, I bet it bothers them because they're not used to it. Kate Moss, for example. We all knew about that and it was a time bomb. It is tough for her, I feel for her, but you cannot be that high-profile and lead that lifestyle. You're just looking for it.

How close have you been to being really nailed by the papers?
The bottom line is that I've never done anything too bad. I love a drink — there's no question about that. I love going out, love girls, like but can't have strip clubs with a prostitute and I don't do drugs. Never had a line of cocaine. I have had the odd puff on a spliff, and I will do now and again. Other than that, nothing. I haven't actually done that much wrong. If I was trailing the Orange Pose or Kate Moss lifestyle then I would probably be dead by now, but I am still alive. I've got a liver. I haven't got a drug problem and I am fitness rally sound. Yes I am still pained in this wild man, which is fine.

So, how are the legendary booze sessions? Ever get close to an all-inclusive deal at The Priory?
No, not for a second. I am not an alcoholic. I just like a beer. In fact, I like loads of beers, but I have never got a problem — at least I don't think I have. The sessions are great, thanks. But I go to the gym every day, I go walking, I read and I think. I have my quiet moments and that is what keeps me on the straight and narrow, and I love being like that. But when it's time to go off on one, I go for it — and that's when people see.

How much do you actually drink in a full-on session?
It depends. I had two glasses of red wine and three glasses of champagne one night recently and had a hangover all the next day. Then, last Sunday, I drank for nine hours. I drank pints — solid. Lords, at least a dozen — then some Sambuca and some wine and whatever else. Monday morning, I felt OK. Nice great, but off right.

Can you give me some of the worst examples of stories about you?
Not really, there have been so many. How do you generally which piece of the pie of shit is the shittest? I mean, it's all a pile of shit, isn't it? There have been so many that are untrue and bad — literally thousands. I don't want to specify because then that would be The One, when none of it matters.

But how does this dark image play out with the public?
The reaction depends on what papers people read. If it's a Star reader I get, "Oi-oi Chrissy-boy. You fire on the lines, eh? You back on it tonight, give it some?" I get much the same from Mirror or Sun readers, depending what year it is. It's fine at the moment. Daily Mail readers have a million opinions about me and I get looks that say, "Oh, no, there's that awful Chris Evans man," and they don't talk to me.

You're a favourite paparazzi target — what's it like living with them on your tail?
It is all part and parcel of it and I have no problem with them. I live in a village in the country, not London, and I go about my business five days a week without pups. I come to London, go to certain places and get done. I could change my routine, but it doesn't bother me and I've got nothing to hide. I have a place in Belsize Park and I had seven pups outside there this morning, three there outside the gym. Four did me while I had a coffee in Primrose Hill. The only interesting thing I did today was look at a Rolls-Royce at Jack Barclay's (a Rolls-Royce and Bentley dealership) and the pappy weren't even there. They're not that brilliant.

But how do girlfriends cope, especially when they're snapped leaving your place in the morning, clearly after a heavy night?
Well, there are three kids in our house in London, so the girl might not have been with me. Again, the press do me a favour and I think that because I can tell a lot by how a girl reacts to photographers. It tells me about the integrity of the person. Do they like it? Or do they secretly love it, while saying they don't? If they say, "Sorry, but can we meet somewhere else next time?" OK, cool, great answer, genuinely not interested in the fame thing. Then we have a grown-up conversation for about two minutes and sort it out.

While at Virgin, you were in the frame to buy the Daily Star. What happened?
A deal was put together for £25 million, plus £32 million to get it going, but our venture capitalists said no. Basically, we had over-performed with Virgin and were ahead of our exit plan, so the board didn't need the risk. It would have been a gamble, but it was nothing for a national newspaper and you can't really go wrong. It was a bit like buying a house in the 1980s — and there aren't many of those left conversions available any more. I wasn't bothered because I am not a businessman. All I cared about was the TV and radio shows, but looking back I wish we had done it because it would have been exciting.

Which papers do you read on a daily basis?
I read the Telegraph every day. I started getting it because of the crossword and now I love the reporting. The news pages are the best in Britain. It's also so pro-Tory. I have always been Labour — quite staunch — so I find it fascinating from writing about themselves and how they come up with positive spins.

I've just started with The Guardian. I couldn't get on with it before, but I like the new format. Reading both of those properly every day is a lot. I've still got to live a life. But I can read newspapers actively because I can spot agendas and soft-soft. I don't read the tabloids unless I see one lying around.

How are things with Billie and how do you feel about her success in Dr Who?
Fantastic, we got on extremely well. She has just bought a house next door/one to me in Belsize Park. Considering we are apart, we couldn't get on better. We had three great years, then freaked ourselves down and went off. She has got a lovely boyfriend who was a friend of ours before, and we all get on really well. He is much more her type and she is very happy. I am very proud of what she has achieved.

I've heard about you writing books in the past, how come nothing has been published?
I have written poems, a couple of books and a couple of scripts, but I've not wanted anything out there. The first book was my autobiography. I wrote 120 pages and a very nice lady from HarperCollins said "It's great ... you have got a real voice ... we want to do this ... we will give you 100 grand."

I said, "Look, I will write the book and then we can sort out the money."

She said, "No. We will give you the money anyway."

I can't remember the exact deal, but 100 grand went to the bank.

I carried on writing and then I stopped because I was getting quite angry and I am not an angry person. I was opening a can of worms and I started to bring things. It was like, "Urgh! I didn't like him, or him ... and now I think about it, they really fucked me over." And then I thought, "It took me five years to get over that, why the fuck am I bringing it back up now?"

I finally called the publisher and said, "Sorry, this isn't going to happen. I need to send your money back."

They said, "No, no, we don't want it."

"But you must do."

"No, we don't."

"Why?"

"Well, we believe that one day you will write that book."

"I believe me," I said, "I am never writing that book."

Anyway, about two weeks ago, my agent told "Remember that money from the publisher? Well, they want it back!"

What has brought you back to TV and radio? Was there an epiphany of any sort?
I did have an epiphany — one in fact. The first came at a memorial service last year. It was for a very close friend of mine — Andrea Wonfor (Andrea was a legendary TV producer who died aged 50 from breast cancer in September 2004). There was a moment pictured of her in Newcastle Cathedral and she was looking at me and I felt as if she was saying, "Come on, what are you doing with yourself? Get on with it."

And I thought, yeah, I had better go back to work. Literally, a day or so later I put things in motion.

The second was when I drove the Pacific Highway on my own and stayed in a rest house for seven nights. I was doing a lone walk one day, that's what I realised I have something to give and that I should go back and do it.

You sound pretty together these days. Have you been in therapy or something?
Unfortunately, I have always been together. I go to the gym every day and I meditate and I get calm. Everybody should find calm in their life.

I definitely did lose the plot during '96, '97 and '98 because I was really tormented, really sad and having an amazing time. I did have some therapy once, but that was years ago. I wasn't even famous then. I was a normal person who had a few problems, just about life. I did six weeks of talking to this woman and she was brilliant. She taught me how to think and open up things. I still use that.

I am approaching 40 and everyone changes with age. I love my life and have a good time, but I don't go to mad as I used to. I am more interested in learning about things these days. I want to come up with programmes that bridge the gap between popular entertainment and things that matter. I am never going to be perceived as someone who knows about things, but hopefully I can drop-feed stuff in that makes people think.

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CHRIS' NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers
Daily Telegraph and The Guardian. At the weekends I read The Observer and I get the Sunday Times, but only for the crossword.

Columnists
I don't have an affinity with columnists. It is hard to do that every week and they all struggle. Nobody has got that many opinions, unless you naturally go around judging the world the whole time. I have been offered columns, but I would have to do it every week and I don't have that much to say.

Magazines
No, not bothered.

Television
I am a radio and print person. I watch Newsnight every night. After reading the papers and listening to the radio during the day, I don't need TV news.

Radio
I love World At One on Radio 4. Nick Clarke is bloody awesome. In the mornings, I listen to Terry (Wogan) and when he's not taking I flip over to Today.

Website
I don't have a computer. I don't go on the web and I don't use email. I don't even have a mobile phone. I had one for two weeks about five years ago, but I threw it in the lake on a golf course.

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For the fourth year running we will be doing Christmas mass every Saturday and Sunday in December outside the Whitehouse pub in Hescombe, Surrey. All the money goes to the Chase Hospice for kids in Guildford.

I think you.

Chris Evans' FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the fantasy headline of the story you would most like to read?
"All Prisoners To Be Given Anything They Want. Where They Want". That would be nice.

What would be the fantasy headline involving yourself?
I don't know. I am so not bothered. I have such a lovely life. I do not aspire to things. I have got everything I want.

What would be the headline you most dread?
Again, nothing. I don't care about headlines. Oh fuck, now this is a bit tricky for you. Why don't you make one up and surprise me — everyone else does? OK. "Evans Lost Lifetime Ban From Talking, Driving, Drinking and Shagging"!

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask that they had to answer truthfully?
The Duke Louis. I would ask him, "What should we do? Please tell us what to do because we don't know."

What question would you never answer?
You can ask me anything you want.

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?
Same, nothing. It is called "nose" in Japanese when you don't have an opinion on a question. I could come up with an answer, but I wouldn't really mean it.