

the press conference

with CHRISTIAN O'CONNELL

For the past five years he has been the irreverent voice of the breakfast show on Xfm — that noisy London station which remains on an untouched pre-set button for those above a certain age.

Although he made an ironic boast out of having the “11th most popular” radio show in Britain, O’Connell has become something of a sensation in recent times. Last year he won three prestigious Sony Awards, including Golds for Entertainment and Breakfast Show of the Year and Silver for DJ of the Year. Now he is about to take over the breakfast show on Virgin, the slot which caused Chris Evans to finally go off the dial. In the run-up to the launch, the hype will begin spinning with a nationwide billboard campaign, relentless radio plugs and national newspaper interviews.

O’Connell’s road to Virgin began with disastrous forays into hospital radio and stand-up comedy and then a miserable job in radio advertising sales. Not only has he now got the key slot on Virgin, he also hosts a morning sports quiz called ‘Fighting Talk’ for BBC Radio 5 Live on Saturdays and writes an off-beat sports column in The Guardian, which also appears on Saturdays.

O’Connell, 32, was brought up in Winchester and now lives in Kingston. He has been married for seven years and has an 18-month old daughter called Ruby. Like any typical DJ, O’Connell is fast-talking, fascinated by the ridiculous and endlessly enthusiastic.

Congratulations on the new job. Why have you decided to go to Virgin now and not before?

I had spoken to Virgin a few times over the past couple of years but they said they were interested in me coming over, but the time never felt right. Then we both hit a sort of crossroads at the same time. They really needed a bigger point of difference at breakfast to go up against the bigger radio stations, and I didn’t want to continue at Xfm with the feeling that I was repeating myself. I’d had a lot of fun there and did a lot of different things, but it was losing a bit of excitement and I needed a new challenge. But what really did it for me was when my wife went out last year and bought us a Volvo. That’s when I realised I was no longer young and hip anymore — not that I ever was — and it was time to move on.

The Breakfast Show at Virgin has done well in recent years, but it still seems to suffer from the legacy of Chris Evans. Are you expected to be the final antidote?

All Virgin was really known for was the Chris Evans breakfast show and it has taken a long time for them to recover from all that fall-out. That was one of the reasons I did not come over before. I didn’t want to



get lost among all the other stuff that was going on. Chris did a great show and he was one of the main reasons that I got into radio. I was in a radio sales job at the time and I hated it. I would listen to Chris in the mornings while ironing my shirt and think, I want to do something like that, not this shirt sales job. That was in about 1996-97 and to think I will be doing that show now is very odd but very exciting.

Have you been in touch with Evans and has he given you any advice?

We have met a few times and he said that he envies the fact that I have not tried right in the middle of town while my career has been taking off. That way, I have not got caught up in all the media parties like he did. I live out of town and I have been married for seven years, so I am very settled and have a better sense of perspective. It was tough for Chris because right from the beginning he was at the centre of everything and stopped being the outsider commenting on things to being the focus of attention.

He told me that he lost his sense of perspective very quickly and that’s when things started to slide. The main advice he gave me was to look after my dad. He says it is the most important thing and don’t be side-tracked. He is still a great broadcaster

CHRISTIAN’S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers: I plough through every newspaper every day. I am a speed reader and I flip through very fast, looking for headlines. Anything with money or midget in the headline and I am straight onto it.

Columnists: I was brought up with *The Guardian* because that’s my dad’s paper, so one of the main columnists I like is Hugh MacKenney. I particularly like AA Gill’s television review in *The Sunday Times*. He is fantastic with words and makes you want to think about how you say things. Not that I see actually do anything about it! Jeremy Clarkson annoys me and is deliberately contentious, but he is still a good read. Vanessa Feltz in the *Daily Express* is also good.

Magazines: I read tons of magazines, especially the music ones. *Q* and *Mojó* are major favourites. I also subscribe to the American editions of *Esquire* and *GQ*. It’s nice to know who might become big over here six to 12 months in advance so I can give the listeners the heads up. I also love the long interviews in *Rolling Stone*.

Television: For news, I watch BBC News 24 and Sky and for entertainment, I watch CNN and Fox. They are so bad

quickly. But the best shows are when all the stuff you have prepared gets dumped and things happen naturally. We can easily scrip on item and move onto something new and it’s that level of freedom which makes me love radio so much. After the show we go through what worked well and what didn’t and what needs to be developed for the next day.

Which papers prove to be the most fruitful for you?

The tabloids are definitely the best for us. *The Sun* is great and the *Bizarre* column always throws up some items, so we are all straight into that. *The Mirror* is also good and the *Star* has a different approach to some stories which can be fun. In terms of the broadsheets, *The Times* is good but *The Daily Telegraph* is the best because it has this knack of picking up on the oddest stories and giving them amazing coverage. At times you can’t quite believe they are covering certain things.

You have a weekly sports column in The Guardian. How did that come about — had you been interested in journalism before?

No, I have never wanted to be a journalist because it always sounded like too much hard work! To be honest, a sports column is not journalism, so calling me a journalist is pushing it a bit. I certainly would not make any great claims like that.

The sports editor of *The Guardian* had been listening to my show on Radio 5 for a few months and he got in touch last summer and asked if I could write as well as speak.

I wasn’t sure I could but I leapt at the chance. One of the things I said from the outset was that I didn’t want to put myself up as some kind of sport expert or commentator. He wanted a column for Saturdays and by that stage of the week it would be impossible for me to offer anything new in the way of sport analysis. I am not the type to get into theory or statistics, so I said I was only happy to write loosely about sport and he was up for it.

The first column I did was in August and was about sporting movies that make you cry — like *The Champ* and *Rocky*. I am a real sucker for those kind of films. My wife had to take over the driving after we saw *Million Dollar Baby* because I was blubbing so much. I also wrote a piece about the World Crazy Golf Championships in Hastings.

“The Daily Telegraph is the best because it has this knack of picking up on the oddest stories and giving them amazing coverage”

I always aim to write something off-beat and *The Guardian* seems to be happy with the column. I am on a rolling contract — which I think simply means they can sack me any time they want.

How long does the column take you and how much of it gets subbed or re-written?

I usually write it on a Friday and it takes me three or

four hours. I have to deliver 700 words, but like a typical radio DJ who loves the feel of his own words, I usually write 800 or 900. They don’t seem to mind and run the lot without changing too much. They only seem to take out the illegal bits.

Radio:

To be honest I don’t listen to lot of radio, otherwise I would become a tediously boring Radio Geek and my wife would go nuts. I like Jonathan Ross, and Terry Wogan is the master. He’s a big inspiration. I also like *Drive* on Radio Five with Jane Carney and Peter Allen.

Web:

I love the web and I’m always dipping into American sites like www.mimiherald.com, www.fart.com and www.thefuton.com. I regularly pick up fantastic human interest stories from those sites which are brilliant for the show. For more serious stuff I go to *Media Guardian*.

I guess anyone who gets into broadcasting has done hospital radio at some stage. What was your experience of that?

I did six months of hospital radio while I was doing my A-levels at college. I shouldn’t really knock it because it was a great training ground but it was horrific. A lot of very strange 40-50 year old single men seem to work in hospital radio and they enjoy hanging around the younger fresh talent coming in. I worked on WHK-FM (Winchester Hospital Radio) and there were some odd creepy old guys there who were seriously thinking that the controller of Radio 2 would call at any moment and insist they come in because Ken Bruce was ill.

I was 18 and I started off as a sports reporter and I was atrocious. I knew I had to give that up when I pronounced Eric Cantona’s name wrongly, so I became a DJ. It was really boring and no-one really listens to hospital radio, so I started taking the piss and mucking around. I just played what I wanted and pretended they were listeners’ requests.

One day I read out a request for a woman called Elsie who was 79. I played some heavy punk and interrupted the song halfway through and said, “I’m sorry but Elsie has just passed away and no longer wants to listen to that... her’s so-and-so...”

I appreciate that was in pretty bad taste. A few minutes later the manager stormed in screaming, “How long has this been going on? Get out!” And he sacked me.

A month later I did college radio, but I only lasted a week because I took the piss out of the teachers with my own version of Simon Bates’s ‘Our Tune’ in which certain teachers had supposedly written in to explain about their crush on various students. The students loved it, but the staff thought it was, erm, inappropriate.

I presume that the profile you will achieve through Virgin will open up television. Is that a primary motivation?

No, not at all. A lot of people seem to do radio simply as a stepping stone to TV and bigger bucks, but I’m not one of those. I have done some small bits for TV but they were not very good. The only thing I am going to do soon is a documentary of me entering the World Crazy Golf Championships which will be great fun. I have been having some meetings with a well-respected production company which wants to develop some ideas, I am interested, but also quite laid back about it. We will wait and see what happens. I certainly don’t feel an overwhelming need



by Rob McGibbon



to be on television. Most of the television ideas I get offered are right at the shiny end of the stick and it’s obvious there is a long list of people who have said ‘no’ before they get to me.

There’s a lot of cold mustiness on television these days — like tricks to humiliate members of the public — and producers hear me being irreverent on radio and think, ‘Oh, yeah, he’ll be up for it’. But I’m not bothered.

Television is totally formatted and you lose all the freedom and control you have with radio. I’m proud of what I’ve done on radio and I plan to take it further and to a bigger audience with Virgin. If I could spend the rest of my life doing radio shows, then I would be happy.

Are you at all concerned about the attention you will get once you launch on Virgin? The tabloids could get busy and people may come out of the woodwork...

I pretty much keep in contact with all my old friends — or, more accurately, they keep in contact with me. I am a good friend to have because I get so many free gig tickets. Who is going to stich me up when the Rolling Stones are paying Wembley this year? But, seriously, I don’t think there is too much dirt out there on me and there are too many bigger names to worry about. The biggest scandal about me is that sometimes I don’t clean up my dog’s crap after a walk in Richmond Park. If there’s a story in that, then OK, I’ll take whatever shit the papers throw at me!

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Christian O’Connell’s FANTASY FILMS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

“Wald Peace Begins As O’Connell Joins Virgin”. If people listened to my show and realised that war is futile, then that would be, well, pretty good...

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

“O’Connell Gets the OK From David Hasselhoff”. When I interviewed Hoff on Xfm I told him about a movie idea I had. It’s about a DJ who solves crimes. It’s called *DJ PI* and Hoff loved it. It’s an Oscar cert.

What would be the headline you most dread?

“Wag Breaks Out: The Day After O’Connell’s Show”. No. It would be something like “Robert de Niro Signs To Film Another Year: The Pickers Flick”. He is such an amazing actor and it saddens me when he does those films. He should do *DJ PI* instead!

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask?

Bill Murray, but I’m not sure what I would ask. I love his films. He is so funny and has an extraordinary minimalism. It can be hard to interview your heroes because they can be such a let down. It has happened to me before, but I can’t mention any names.

What question would you never answer?

“Is Damon from the *Chad* real or made up? Anyone who listened to the Xfm show will ask that, but I can never reveal the truth and I will take the secret to the grave.

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?

It should simply say: “I won’t be back tomorrow at 6am!”