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File: LR003217 - BARNEY COLEHAN (Interview 15).wav

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START AUDIO

Interviewer: He arrived to join Ray Lakeland, Alan Clarke, the 1950s sports commentator, Ray Martin, the bandleader composer, and myself in Forces Broadcasting Hamburg. I said he was 'Major' Colehan. When he turned up, he noticed that our commanding officer was captain. He just had three pips. The next morning, Captain Colehan came down to the mess, having demoted himself when he saw that the CO was a rank lower. This to me was the essence of a military gentleman.

0:00:36 We were all destined to work together again in North Regional broadcasting from the late 1940s onwards. It was during his time as producer of 'Have a Go' that Wilfred Pickles coined the phrase which became that byword: "Give him the money, Barney," but, if I remember back to those British Forces Network days, Barney, didn't a very young Barney Colehan set out to study a very different kind of alchemy?

Barney Colehan: Yes. When I left school, I would have liked to have been a doctor. My family couldn't afford that and so they thought the best thing to do was perhaps become a chemist, a pharmacist. I got this job in a place called Beckett Street in Leeds, a real broken-down place – not the pharmacy, but the area. I learned a tremendous amount of things there, not just about pharmacy but about life in general.

The one thing I particularly remember was that every Friday night two rather attractive young ladies used to come in who would have been about 15 years older than I was, because I was then about 17. In those days you used to be able to buy perfume. It's called 'loose perfume' because you bought it from a bottle. There were various things, all kinds of strange names then, of course: Shem-el-Nessim, and Phul-Nana, and Jockey Club, those things. They were in these large bottles with grand stoppers at the top, very attractive.

These two girls used to come in. They didn't buy anything; they just said, "Can we have a drop of perfume?" I said, "Yes; yes, you can," and they used to stand in front of me and open their blouse out and say, "Just put a few drops down there." I used to drop this different kind of perfume each week onto their bosom.

I didn't realise, I was a little bit naïve, but I didn't realise that they were ladies of the night and they wanted to go out smelling beautifully. They knew that if they came up to [Swain's 0:02:39] pharmacy and saw me, then they would get what they wanted, if you know what I mean. (Laughter)

Then, of course, I studied that for a long time and then I was not destined to be that. I worked in various pharmacies. Then, when I was called up, I really forgot all about it, but it's very strange, really, because it now runs in the family because my brother became a highly qualified pharmacist and my son-in-law has quite a large pharmacy himself in Leeds. It's in the family for no reason whatsoever.

0:03:13

Interviewer: In the family, yes. How did you come into Forces Broadcasting?

Barney Colehan: As you said, I came into Germany. I went Osnabruck and various places, and I got into touch with a man called Bill Maclurg, who was the Canadian presenter of programmes. He'd done a lot of programmes in England as well. One was called 'Ack-Ack, Beer-Beer', at which I played the piano, strangely enough, yes.

I knew that he was in Hamburg, so I rang him up and said I was interested in doing something and that I'd written various bits of pieces, so he said, "Come and see me." That's how I started. I went to see him and he said, "Do you want to do one or two little programmes?" and I did. You were there, and various people were there that have now become famous.

Then they said to me, "If you'd like to sign on and stay on a little longer, we think we could find you a sort of a semi-permanent job with the rest of us," so I did. I walked in as a major and stayed as a captain.

Interviewer: I remember very early broadcast you did with me. It was called 'A Melody, a Memory'.

Barney Colehan: Oh, dear, with a creaking old door, [was it 0:04:33]?

Interviewer: The old memory chest, yes, with a coin running over it.

Barney Colehan: That's right, yes. As a matter of fact, it's not the fact that between us we sort of started that thing, but nowadays this is the kind of thing that's [done] on radio all the time. There have been various programmes since where people rang in or wrote in and said what their memories were and how a certain tune

brought it back to them. I often think, “Yes, that’s it, ‘[A Melody, a Memory’, here] we go.”

0:04:58

Interviewer: That was about, what, 1946?

Barney Colehan: Yes.

0:05:01

Interviewer: Do you remember the theme, Barney: ‘*Méditation*’ from ‘Thais’?

Barney Colehan: ‘*Méditation*’, yes, from ‘Thais’. Every time I hear that, it reminds me of sitting with you in that cubicle, and the creaking old box that we had. I think it was quite successful, because we got loads and loads of letters in.

Interviewer: Yes, and it ran for quite a time, right up until the time you were demobbed.

Barney Colehan: Yes, it does; yes.

Interviewer: Yes. I mentioned Alan Clarke, who did commentaries on such things as speedway at Belle Vue, soccer, rugby league, all under the auspices of ‘North Regional Outside Broadcasts’, and of course Victor Smythe, who at that time was in charge, but the all-time success of ‘Have a Go’ was obviously the number one outside broadcast.

Barney Colehan: Yes, it was, because it had a listening audience which will never be surpassed, because in those days there was no television, so the competition wasn't quite as great. It had an origination and five repeats in the week. It was repeated on the Light Programme, it was on the Home Service, repeated on the Home Service and went overseas, so it was being heard throughout the whole of a particular week.

It was quite unbelievable, particularly with Wilfred because when we used to travel round with him he was looked upon as a saint almost. People wanted to touch his coat because he was, as the catchphrase also was, 'The Man of the People'. They looked upon him as that.

I was very fortunate, really, Trevor, because I could have been sent anywhere with the BBC. I could also have been given all kinds of programmes, maybe those which I didn't particularly like, but I wasn't. I really enjoyed 'Have a Go'. Because of the programme itself of going round throughout the whole of the country and meeting hundreds and hundreds of people, and working with Wilfred, it gave me a real insight into the kind of things I've done since.

Interviewer: When you first came to work for the BBC in the North of England, you had John Salt as your regional head of programmes.

Barney Colehan: Yes, that's right, and John Coatman was the controller.

Interviewer: Controller.

Barney Colehan: That's right. John, I revered this man because he was the man, the big boss. We'd all moved out from VFM and thought, "Are we going to be taken on or not?" I thought he was an absolutely remarkable man. He was so kind.

He was the one who actually brought 'Have a Go' from America. He saw it in America. It was called 'Quiz Bang'. He brought it across and then we changed it to 'Have a Go' and so on. He always had this tremendous interest in that kind of thing, and also in what I was doing.

When the vacancy came in Leeds and I applied for it, I'd been doing this kind of programmes with them, and he knew of me. We had quite a number of interviews, as you had to do in those days, and I was fortunate to get the job.

I've always sort of known his name so well, looked upon it with so much pride because he comes from a very famous family, of course, the Salts family, who Titus Salt must have been his grandfather, I think.

Interviewer: Sir Titus, yes.

Barney Colehan: Sir Titus Salt, who built Saltaire, which was the model village at one point. It's a strange coincidence that one of the early television programmes I did, we used to do live documentaries and I did a documentary called '[The Wool Story 0:08:38]'. We did it from Salt's Mill, so all the time I had in mind John Salt.

On that programme, 'The Wool Story', there were two people making their first appearance on television. One was [Brian Johnston] and the other was Jean Metcalfe. So the name 'Salt'

has kept quite close because, in a strange way, nearly all the programmes which I have been associated with have also been associated with ordinary people. I mean that in a nice way.

'Have a Go' was people, 'Top Town' was people, 'It's a Knockout' was people, and even 'The Good Old Days' depended on its big audience of people, so practically everything I've done – unwittingly, maybe – has been members of the public.

0:09:29

Interviewer: Yes. You took over the production of 'Have a Go' from Philip Robinson, didn't you?

Barney Colehan: That's right, yes.

Interviewer: He relinquished the show as producer when he went to Manchester to take over the Outside Broadcast department when Victor Smythe left.

Barney Colehan: When Victor Smythe left, Philip was one of the senior radio producers, and he was in Leeds. I worked with him, you see, to begin with because, whilst I was working there as a freelance and various things and eventually coupled up with 'Have a Go', I did a programme called 'Singsong' with Philip, which also it didn't tour outside the region, but it went all the way round the region every week. We went to a different place. It was purely a fact that we had Jack Jordan's orchestra and they sang all the kind of songs of the period, and also old songs too.

We also all had a guest singer, Donald Peers; Tessie O'Shea was another, and we featured various people. At the same time, it was purely... It was a bit like 'Sunday Half Hour', except it was popular songs. Philip did that with me, and then, when he left, we gave up doing 'Singsong' and I concentrated purely on 'Have a Go'.

0:10:46

Interviewer: You mentioned Jack Jordan Orchestra. They had been used in 'Have a Go', but, when you took over, you dispensed with the orchestra and started the idea of having a pianist.

Barney Colehan: Yes, I did, because when I took over there were two things that changed. The musical accompaniment changed, but the main thing that changed, really, was that when the programme started it was a quiz show, because in those stayed spelling bees/quiz shows were the great things to have. This was a quiz show in which you got people to answer a lot of questions and then maybe sang a song, or somebody sang a song in the end.

Wilfred proved to be so wonderful in being able to interview people and get the best out of them that it seemed to me that the quiz was incidental. So, what we did, we almost turned the whole thing on its head and the interviews were the things that mattered. The quiz at the end was only a way of saying, "Goodbye" to them, getting rid of them, because the quiz itself had no competition, because we used to give half a crown, five shillings, ten shillings, and a pound. That's what they were given.

Even Wilfred, I remember on one occasion, one chap came to the end when he was asked these questions, and he couldn't answer anything and so Wilfred said, "Well, we'll give him the

money for not knowing,” which was silly throwaways, but that’s what made the whole thing.

What we also found by doing this, quite a lot of people then, as they came along and were going to be interviewed about all the things they’d done in their life, might say... [Wilfred would say, “We’ve got some things. We’d like to ask them 0:12:29] some questions on songs,” and they say, “Yes, right,” so he’d drag out this list of songs, which Violet knew what we were going to do, but, if we’d had an orchestra, we could not have done that, because you can’t. A 15- or 16-piece orchestra can’t play impromptu straightaway.

Interviewer: You can’t busk it.

Barney Colehan: No, whereas if you get a pianist, just one instrument, it’s easier. Violet is marvellous because she had perfect pitch. Although I would say to her before we went on, having gone through the list of the people who were going to take part with Wilfred, I’d say to Violet, “There’s a young man coming on who’s going to sing ‘Granada’. I’ve no idea what key he sings it in. He has no music,” and she said, “Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter, just tell him to sing,” because she had perfect pitch and straightaway she would go into it. By doing that, we streamlined the whole thing of ‘Have a Go’, and that’s how it developed.

0:13:29

Interviewer: Did the producer have any embarrassing moments?

Barney Colehan: Yes, I had quite a few in some respects because of Wilfred, really. The one thing that Wilfred always wanted was to have a Rolls-Royce. He worked very, very hard for it and he eventually got this wonderful Rolls-Royce, but it didn't seem right that he should drive in this wonderful Rolls-Royce up to a working man's club as a man of the people.

I had a little Morris Minor and he said, "We'll leave the Rolls here and we'll go in your car if you don't mind," so we all trundled up in this peculiar old car. He'd only had this car about a week and he said to me, "Before we do the programme, we've got a couple of hours spare." It was in Windermere. "I'll take you for a ride in this thing and you will know what this is like," he said, "Motoring for the first time," he said, "This is."

I got in the front, and Mabel got in the back and off we went. Up these winding roads we went, and he kept saying to me, "This is motoring for the first time." We came to a very sharp bend where another car was coming down, and he jammed his brakes on and the car got past. He then could not disengage the gear. He had been so strong in trying to make sure that he got the brake on, everything on, that he jammed the whole thing. Mabel and I had to get out and push this Rolls-Royce back down to the bottom of the hill, motoring for the first time.

The remarkable thing was that it went back to the Rolls-Royce factory and they said they had never, ever come across anybody who could have done this thing. It had never happened before that the gearbox had been jammed purely by the ferocity of which this man did it.

On another occasion when he got the Rolls back, we went to the launching of the Ark Royal with the Queen, who is now the Queen Mother, which was quite a wonderful occasion. On the way back, again we came to a big roundabout just outside Liverpool. As we went round the corner, there was a bit of a

bang and he'd gone over a big nail and so the Rolls again: down went the tyre.

I said to him, "We'll have to get out and repair this, put the new other wheel on." I have no idea how to do it. I don't know. There's a big, thick book of instructions." I said, "Get it out and we'll have a look." He got hundreds and hundreds of fan mail over a period of time, and he used to put it all in the enormous boot of the Rolls, so, when we opened the boot, it happened to be a very, very windy day, and we opened the boot and it was almost like confetti. All these fan-mail letters shot up in the air, blew across the roundabout. Everywhere was covered with these fan-mail letters.

Eventually, there was an old fellow in a garage across the road from where we were. He came running across. "Oh," he said, "It's you, is it? It's Wilfred." Wilfred said, "I'm in a hell of a mess. I've lost all my fan mail," and he says, "We've got this tyre." "Put it in here," and he repaired it for him, but whatever happened to those letters I don't know. They just disappeared. It was very, very embarrassing for a man who's the man of the people, plus the fact that we had top hats and morning coats on as well, which made it more ludicrous than ever.

0:17:10

Interviewer: Interesting you should mention Wilfred and his Rolls up in the Lake District. The last time we spent together a holiday, my wife and myself, Wilfred and Mabel, they came to stay with us on Windermere. He suddenly said, "I'd love to go and see Noble Bland." I said, "Noble Bland?" He said, "Yes, Noble and Amy Bland." He said, "They were in 'Have a Go'," he said, "About 20 years ago." He said, "I think I remember where they live."

He didn't, as you know, like driving once he gave up the Rolls, and so he said, "You do the driving." We were driving along and he said, sort of, "Left here, right up this farm track." We dropped down into this farmyard, Barney, and there was a girl – well, a woman – with a baby. He said, "You'll be Lucy," and this woman said, "Yes." She said, "It's Mr Pickles," and he said, "Yes. Are your mother and father in?" He said, "I haven't seen you, Lucy. You were only a baby and now you've got one of your own." That man had the most incredible memory, hadn't he?

Barney Colehan: Yes, unbelievable. Wherever we went, we always stayed at the best hotels, and, wherever we went into the foyer or the reception, he knew the man who was there. He knew the head waiter: "Hello, George, how are you? Hello, Fred, how's things?" Wherever he went, he knew them all. The majority of us [have to] remember the name of the hotel.

0:18:40

Interviewer: Yes. How did you get on with management herself? (Laughter)
"It's on the table, Mabel."

Barney Colehan: Yes, it was rather like walking a tightrope, in a way, because when I was doing it, you see, Mabel was nowhere in it. She was always there and she was the wife of Wilfred. She resented the fact that a lot of people thought that, because Violet Carson was on the stage, that was his wife. Mabel went out of her way to make sure that everybody knew that it wasn't. But she sat in the audience and so she did have no influence on the programme itself until then, when I left, they made sure that there was going to be no giving [them all money Barney's style of thing 0:19:22].

The one thing I used to find, I would talk to Wilfred, say when we'd finished a programme in the evening, and we'd say, "What do you think about next year?" I might mention a thing like, "Let's go to [Oswestry]," because I might have had some feelers from there. He'd say, "Yes, okay. [Do you think it'll be alright 0:19:43]?" I said, "It's going to be great." "Right, we'll go there, yes," so that was it and "Cheerio," off they went to bed.

The following day when he came down for breakfast, I'd be there and he'd say, "You know the thing we were talking about last night? I think it might be a good idea, Oswestry. I've been thinking it over," but he said, "There are just one or two things I'm not quite sure about. I'm not sure about this. You may be right, but it worries me a little bit." I knew what had happened.

Violet always used to say, "The trouble is that Wilfred is a wonderful little man, but what a pity his wife sleeps with him," because it was the bedtime story because she would definitely [put it into 0:20:23] his ear and say, "I don't think Oswestry is a good place. What do you want to go there for?" and we would change it. But he was very clever. He never said, "I don't want to go." He always prefaced it by saying, "You may be right," and we were wrong. (Laughter)

0:20:38

Interviewer: The 'Have a Go' schedule certainly kept you busy, but at the same time you had other radio shows on the air. You mentioned 'Top Town'. When did you launch that series, Barney?

Barney Colehan: On the 'Have a Go' thing, you see, I left 'Have a Go' in 1953 and then it carried on for a long, long time after that. The strange thing about it, backtracking on what we've just said, is that, although I was only with it for about six years, this phrase,

“Give him the money, Barney,” people still shout it out at football matches now. It was in that short period of time that it became established.

I started this programme called ‘Top Town’, which I thought was an idea in which, instead of having a competition where one comedian competes against another, or a panel give points or whatever it might be, that you say to a town – say Blackpool – “I want you to form a team of people who are entertainers.” Then Morecambe will also have a team of entertainers, and the two towns will compete against each other, not giving points for the best soprano or the best this, purely on their overall 20 minutes of entertainment. They had 20 minutes each and it was up to them.

I used to audition the things with them and help them with them. You might open with a choir, and then close with a little band, and in between have little singsong things and everything. As a matter of fact, in one of them, in the Hull ‘Top Town’ team, the excellent tenor they had then was David Whitfield. He was a plasterer’s labourer and just went on.

We always had a panel of people who judged them – purely on the solid entertainment. We got people like George and Alfred Black. Everybody you could think of came along to do the judging.

Interviewer: Some of the top people in light entertainment.

Barney Colehan: Yes. Then when I left radio and went to television, then I more or less took this with me. It became easier and more interesting because it was visual. There were things that you could do there that you couldn’t have done on radio.

0:22:43

Interviewer: Red Letter Day for you, and for the North Region, was October 1951, when the Holme Moss television transmitter opened. The ceremony itself from the Town Hall Leeds, as you remember, Barney, was televised, but that same night I think you produced the North's very first television show.

Barney Colehan: Yes, that's right, along with a man called Dickie Afton. We had Gracie Fields, Jimmy James, Archie Andrews, Donald Peers. As it was the first programme, I don't make many appearances, but I had to walk down a long staircase, which we had specially built for all this great collection of stars. I just walked down, looking as smart as I could, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to 'Variety from the North'."

That was it, that was my contribution, but Donald Peers was at the height of his fame then and he always liked... He said, "It would be a good idea if I could introduce somebody that I think has got star quality. Do you know of anybody?" I immediately thought of a man called Frank Abelson, who was at the university in Leeds. I'd come across him on the RAG review, where he used to do impersonations of Al Jolson.

I said, "Frank Abelson is a wonderful singer. He's going to be." He said, "I only want him to do a thing with [The Toppers 0:24:11]," so I said, "Alright," so I rang Frank Abelson, who, as possibly people will know, became Frankie Vaughan. I rang Frank and I said, "You can be on television, but you can't choose a song. You have to sing a song called 'Lucky You, Lucky Me.'" He said, "I don't know it." I said, "You'll have to learn it." He learnt this, and he came down, he looked really smart, and Donald Peers introduced him as one of the up-and-coming stars.

The funny thing about it was we hadn't given a great deal of thought to this, because it was just sort of a throwaway – stick it in at the end, as it were. The Toppers were doing this routine and afterwards, even in those days, he had a small fan club and I got lots of letters from people saying, 'It was a good idea to give him this opportunity, but we couldn't really hear him, because The Toppers were tapping all the time in the background.'

Of course, it was their routine really, and Frank was sort of incidental to it, but that's how Frank started. From there he went on to become a big star. That was all because of the programme we did from the Theatre Royal, which no longer exists.

Interviewer: Yes, on the opening night of television in the North of England.

Barney Colehan: The opening night, yes, having done the first variety show from Leeds, concentrated on doing things from Blackpool because Blackpool was the home, as it were, of entertainment during that period of time. All the big stars were there, so I went there and did a programme called 'Stars at Blackpool'.

We used to do it every year and it was live from the Palace Ballroom, which some people will remember was a building which housed three forms of entertainment. There was the Palace Ballroom, the Palace Theatre and the Palace Cinema, all three one on top of the other, as it were. The Palace Ballroom was at the top. Incidentally, it's Lewis's now.

We used the ballroom as the place to set up all our sets and do the whole thing. I used to arrange with all the various managements, the George and Alfred Blacks and everybody

around the place, to maybe change their running order on that particular night so that, for instance, if the Beverley Sisters were closing the first half on the North Pier, I might get them to say, "Could they close the second half?" because then I could have got them in that time down to the Palace Ballroom.

That evening, everybody was rushing backwards and forwards to get to do this and do it live. The only thing about it which I solved in a fluky kind of way, really, was that I had a man who introduced it called Billy McComb. Billy McComb is a conjurer very famous in America now. You see, because if you had a straight man, like a David Jacobs or anybody who I used a lot afterwards, they would have to keep talking and talking until the Beverley Sisters arrived. If they would have been delayed because of traffic, they had to tell another joke and another joke.

It's not easy, so I used Billy McComb, who was a wonderful chatter, an Irishman, and had these lovely little tricks. He would start to do the trick, and he'd get halfway through it when the floor manager would give me a signal and say, "The Beverley Sisters are here." He'd say, "You can see how this trick is going and it's very interesting, wonderful finish. I'll show you the finish after you've seen the Beverley Sisters," and they came on. When they'd finished, he would go back and say, "Now, concluding this trick." (Laughter)

0:27:44

Interviewer: When did you start not only to produce the programmes but also to direct the cameras yourself, Barney?

Barney Colehan: Right from the start, really, because in those days you didn't have vision mixers and you didn't have directors. The BBC thought, I think, in some ways quite rightly, that if you are a

producer, you should be able to direct the programmes as well. It was only until commercial television came in that that system was adopted, which had been taken from the film industry, and so you really had to learn to use the equipment.

It wasn't very difficult really, just pressing buttons, but the thing I found was easy because to a certain extent I always found – and nearly all the things I was doing were variety and music – is you've got to cut cameras on the beat. If you're giving the information to somebody else, that beat has gone before it's got there.

The same applied on 'The Good Old Days'. When you've got a camera looking at a girl who's listening intently to what Ken Dodd is saying and then he cracks the gag, at which she laughs, you've got a second in which to go to the girl. If you've got to give directions to the vision mixer or to a director, it's gone, that moment has gone.

0:29:00

Interviewer: You did your own vision mixing?

Barney Colehan: I did all my own vision mixing and all my own directing. As a matter of fact, the first programme I ever did was from when I was on attachment, having moved out of radio, was from Alexander Palace, with a girl called Shirley Abicair, who used to play the zither.

Interviewer: Her zither, yes.

Barney Colehan: A very, very beautiful girl, always known because she was very well endowed and she was very attractive. The script which I

had was written by ___[0:29:34], [who was just starting],
(Laughter) so you go along back a long way into that first one.

0:29:41

Interviewer: All our early television programmes were, of course, done as outside broadcasts, but I remember 1954 as a landmark. That's when the BBC acquired the Dickenson Road studios from Mancunian Films. They'd made the 'Old Mother Riley' and the Frank Randle comedies – a burp in every scene – from there. Dickenson Road became the BBC's first television studios outside of London. What were some of your early shows from this converted chapel, Barney?

Barney Colehan: Everybody in those days, they were looking for new ingredients into programmes. Eric Maschwitz and Tom Sloan, who was his assistant, used to travel round the regions and look on little shows, see what they had to offer.

I devised a show called – I didn't devise it to begin with, I was talking to Jimmy Savile, who was the premier [light 0:30:37] entertainments manager for Mecca. He won all the competitions for the best manager for years and years. His ballroom in Leeds was in County Arcade. The arcade is still there, but the ballroom has now closed some years ago.

He said to me one day, "Will you come down and have a look at this show I'm doing called the 'Teen and Twenty Club'?" I said, "Yes, I'll come," so one lunchtime I went down and there's all these girls jiving around to this music, and there's Jimmy Savile putting his own records on and doing [various things 0:31:08].

Interviewer: With his tartan hair in those days.

Barney Colehan: In those days he used to always have his hair dyed strange ways. On this particular occasion and for quite some time, he had it done in tartan squares. Everybody thought it was a wig. It was not a wig; it was actually done by a local lady hairdresser.

I went in and saw this, and it seemed to be quite an interesting proposition, so I said, "Let's do a pilot in Manchester." "[Right 0:31:33]," so we took about two or three coachloads of youngish people over to Dickenson Road, and they got some from Manchester as well.

Jimmy Savile took all his own equipment and assembled it, and then we built scaffolding, like sort of home-made grandstands, at the sides, all the way round. All the kids were sitting all the way round, and then jiving around on the floor and doing those things, and he had put all his discs on and everything, because the following day I was going to do this, which I'll tell you in a moment, called 'Make Way for Music'. This was on one day, this was, so Eric Maschwitz and Tom Sloan saw this thing.

0:32:14

Interviewer: This was a try-out, the pilot programme.

Barney Colehan: This was a try-out, a pilot programme to see what they thought about it. We went through this and they said to me, "This is absolutely fantastic. We've never seen anything like this, how these kids can enjoy themselves and you get this music in at the same time. They're all dancing around and doing things. Very, very good indeed, but where on earth did you get this idiot? Where did you get the man with the funny hair?"

I said, "That's Jimmy Savile. He's a Mecca manager." "Crikey, we can never use him. It's just nonsense. It's just too way out, is that. You've got some good ideas, but how on earth you could have him I don't know." They said, "Right, we'll take it. We'll have a look, we'll think about this." They took the tape away, and six months later they reproduced the 'Teen and Twenty Club' and called it 'Top of the Pops', which was produced by Johnnie Stewart.

Interviewer: Stewart, yes, from Dickenson Road.

Barney Colehan: And the presenter of the programme, who had shot up to the top as being the best disc jockey in the whole of the British Isles, was Jimmy Savile. He presented it. That was the preface to the following day because the following day then I decided to do a completely different programme called 'Make Way for Music'.

At that time, the Northern Dance Orchestra was being looked on by every producer who anybody could think of, to try and find a method of presenting them. Johnny Ammonds did various things; all kinds of people did all very smart uniforms, different things, different things, but it didn't work. It was just like people sitting on a stage and seeing nothing.

I said to Alyn Ainsworth, "Why don't we do it like you do your radio programme? I've seen it so many times in which you just put them out in a big circle and they all sit there, all dressed differently, shirtsleeves, belt braces, whatever it is, and you record it. Why don't we do it that way?"

He said, "I don't mind," so we set this out on the Dickenson Road floor and it was in a complete circle. We had black

drapes all the way round so you couldn't see off anywhere, so, when we looked at it, all you saw were just the musicians sitting there. They had their music stands and everything, and Johnny Roadhouse wore a funny old pullover with holes in it; various people wore [different 0:34:30] things.

We had, for the first time, this thing called a transatlantic crane, which belonged to Bernstein. It belonged to Granada. It took us all our time to get this enormous crane through the dock doors into the studio, and we used this swinging around all over the place. We had Roger Moffat introducing the programme, and Sheila Buxton singing.

Everything was so informal and different because on one occasion we did 'Singing in the Rain', and Sheila used to wear slippers, a beautiful dress but slippers. She would stand and be introduced by Roger, and she would start to sing 'Singing in the Rain' beautifully, with a verse and the chorus, during which time we would see Roger put a little stepladder up at the side and climb up with a big watering can. On the second chorus, she would put the umbrella up and she'd carry on singing, and it was a nice effect of the water running off and trickling down everything.

When she went into the last verse and chorus, she'd taken the umbrella down to do the verse. Roger had the thing up again, but we'd fixed the umbrella so it didn't go up, but the watering can still worked. She was absolutely sopping wet, dripping down her. It's such wonderful shots to see her like this. She was tremendous. She was quite prepared to do any kind of stunt you want.

Interviewer: A marvellous trouper, yes.

Barney Colehan: Even with the transatlantic crane, we sat her on it on one occasion behind the camera, in front of the cameraman, and we just zoomed it all over the place and she sang 'It's Nice to Go Travelling'. All we did for the whole song was just look at this. It was just full of all kinds of impromptu things and it had a tremendous audience. We had [Cecil Cora 0:36:23], who introduced it. He used to have little brushes with Roger.

Interviewer: Cecil Cora the floor manager?

Barney Colehan: Floor manager, yes. Roger used to say the most outrageous things, and I remember on one occasion saying to Cecil, because he [was 0:36:39] ___ [saying] to him, "Cecil, get him going, get him off. We're overrunning. We're going to run out into the news, actually." So, Cecil was waving his arms at him, and he turned round and said, "I can see the bloody clock."

That's the first time that anybody had ever used language like that on television – or on BBC at all. There was a bit of a hoo-ha, and he was taken in and given a good wiggling and a telling off, but, typical of Roger, the following week when we did the programme, he brought out the dirtiest, muckiest-looking mat you've ever seen, and shook it. He said, "I've been on this all the week." (Laughter)

He used to say all these outrageous things. He said, long before Wogan ever used to attack things like the DG when he was doing radio, Roger used to say things: "The DG thanks you very, very much indeed for your letters. He will be writing to you, but unfortunately he writes so slowly." (Laughter)

0:37:41

Interviewer: Of course, until that point, Roger was a very sedate BBC announcer working in continuity in Manchester, reading news bulletins. You brought out a totally different side.

Barney Colehan: Yes, because he did have this because, when we did the programme, he used to do the introductions during the rehearsal, but he never used the same script. He never did what he would be doing in the evening, because he didn't want the orchestra to know, because he used to insult them so much that they used to laugh, and cheer, and carry on, and do various things. In that way we got this very, very informal approach – not just from the programme itself but from all the lads who were in the orchestra taking part.

We got enormous fan mail. I remember on one occasion Roger was sent for by the Head of Programmes, Bob Stead, who said "I understand that you've been writing to Princess Margaret." He said, "Yes, that's right, because she's a fan of the programme. She thinks it's wonderful. She always makes sure that she's going to see it." He said, "Do you realise that you're not entitled to write to royalty? Any requests to royalty have to go through Peter Dimmock."

He said, "So, in future you'll be in serious trouble if you do this again. Do you understand that?" He said, "Yes, I understand it," so he said, "So, you will not be writing to her again?" He said, "Yes, I will," so Bob said, "What gives you the idea or the authority that you are entitled to write to Princess Margaret?" He said, "Because my sister is her lady in waiting." End of interview. (Laughter) We just carried on the same way, actually.

0:39:31

Interviewer: Roger, of course, when they were the two young princesses, he had a relation in palace service and he was considered, he told us once when he was staying with us, that he was a safe young man to escort either of the young princesses to the occasional dance.

Barney Colehan: Really?

Interviewer: Hmm.

Barney Colehan: He was. We had a real style about him. He had this lovely voice.

Interviewer: Yet his father, you know, came to see Bob Stead and said, "I take exception to the fact that my son has been seduced by the BBC," and so Bob said to Mr Moffat, "Do you mind, sir, would you just like to rephrase that?" Mr Moffat said, "No," he said, "I mean it." He said, "I didn't expect ever a son of mine would come into this organisation and do these sorts of things." His father, you know, was head of Bovey Tracey pottery works.

Barney Colehan: Was he?

Interviewer: Or the owner of.

Barney Colehan: Everybody always looked upon him as being, [as 0:40:31] people used to say, rather well placed.

Interviewer: Yes, but father didn't think much to the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Barney Colehan: No. Strange, that, because it's usually the reverse, isn't it, where people want the...? The mothers want to get their daughters in.

0:40:44

Interviewer: Yes. You mentioned the fact that you did the pilot for what became 'Top of the Pops' on the one day, Barney, 'Make Way for Music' the next.

Barney Colehan: Sorry, because I got carried away with this because what I was saying was that, once we had done both the programmes on both days, they said to me, "We can't understand you [and 0:41:04] can't understand how a man can have such varied tastes, how you can do this kind of weird programme, which we think is very clever but with this idiot with the hair, and then you can do this remarkable music programme which is absolutely fantastic." I said, "I don't know." Eventually they said, "We'll definitely take 'Make Way for Music'," which they did. Then, as I said to you, six months later they also took 'Top of the Pops'.

0:41:32

Interviewer: We both had dealings with Eric Maschwitz and with Tom Sloan. How did you get on with those two?

Barney Colehan: Very well. I had a great admiration particularly for Eric Maschwitz because the very fact that he had done such a lot of things. He wrote the words for 'Goodnight, Vienna'.

Interviewer: Yes, 'A Nightingale Sang'.

Barney Colehan: 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square' and all those kinds of things, so you had to look; you had to respect a man like that. Unfortunately, I have found in my own career sometimes you find people who are in charge of certain departments, and they pontificate on what it's all about and they don't know anything about it really. They've just been appointed into it, but when you get a man like Maschwitz it's different.

With Tom Sloan, one thing about him was that he sent 'The Good Old Days' to [Montreaux 0:42:23]. He had great faith in it being there, and he was always wanting me to go to London. "Why don't you come and produce the 'Ken Dodd Show' from here instead of that stupid chapel up in Manchester?"

(Laughter) I always resisted.

0:42:39

Interviewer: In view, Barney, of what by any standards is a remarkable track record, did you go through the normal procedures of selling your television ideas through regional management, or did you go straight to Lyme Grove, subsequently to Television Centre? How did you go about the selling side, because this was often a stumbling block, wasn't it?

Barney Colehan: It was a stumbling block to a lot of people, and much to the dismay of a lot of people, as well. I knew people. I was

fortunate in this respect that I wasn't a producer who came in from [whether in from 0:43:13] a theatre or from somewhere. I came in from another media, which was radio, in which my name was so well known, so everybody I went to see said, "It's Barney, yes," you see.

They'd never met me before, but simply because of "Give him the money, Barney" and with Wilfred Pickles. That's why I owe so much to Wilfred. It was a lever. I was in straightaway. I got to know them all so well and so I could deal absolutely direct with them. I dealt direct with Bill Cotton in latter years; I dealt with Paul Fox, with Bryan...

Interviewer: Cowgill?

Barney Colehan: Sorry, yes, I'm thinking of Brian Tesler. Brian Tesler was with us at that time, but Bryan Cowgill, yes. I could go to them all and talk to them without any trouble at all. The other remarkable thing – well, two remarkable things, I think – is, one, that the whole of my career has been very, very varied. I have done programmes which have taken me all over the world, programmes which have been seen all over the world, and I've still retained my office in Leeds. I never moved. [That 0:44:24] was a little office at the back of the Friends Meeting House, which in itself is quite unique.

Interviewer: You and Dorothy.

Barney Colehan: With Dorothy.

Interviewer: Yes, Dorothy Bickerdike.

Barney Colehan: The two of us.

Interviewer: What a team.

Barney Colehan: Because the odd thing about it too is, Trevor, that the three most important programmes for many, many years that the North Region had was 'Rugby League', 'Have a Go' at one point, 'Top Town', 'The Good Old Days', and 'It's a Knockout'. They all came from Leeds, where as you would think they ought to have come from London, or at least from Manchester, but they didn't.

That is why, to a certain extent, the very fact that I wasn't in Manchester and might have been influenced by all kinds of other people and departmental heads who were around, we were on our own. We just worked on our own and, therefore, were able to go direct to the people who mattered, really. See, because had it not been for Paul Fox, 'It's a Knockout' would never have occurred, would never have happened and never continued.

0:45:31

Interviewer: Before we come to 'It's a Knockout', after your attachment to television in London you had the idea of doing a music hall show, with the audience dressed in Edwardian costume as they watched various performers from those 'Good Old Days'. Tell me something about the beginning of that, [how you got it launched 0:45:51].

Barney Colehan: I knew the City Varieties through for radio, from going down to see various things, and knew what a lovely theatre it was, so, when the idea came, like I said a little while ago about 'Stars at Blackpool' and various things, we had to go and look for things that were available.

Derek Burrell-Davis worked alongside me. He worked in Manchester and I worked in Leeds, and it was our duty to try and find programmes which would be of national interest although they came from a region. I thought, "'Stars at Blackpool' is that one thing."

Therefore, in Leeds itself there was this quite unique theatre which had been running variety for years, and years, and years, and had people like Charlie Chaplin and Marie Lloyd. They'd all been there, so I thought, "Let's do a programme in which we tell the story of the music hall." The idea was that we would start in the Victorian era and move through in little phases, right up to the present day – the present day then being 1953.

I needed to use something which gave the passage of time and so in a box I had a family of people who were dressed as Victorians, and we had a Victorian act onstage. As the period of time changed, they became Edwardians. Then they went into the Great War and they became soldiers and soldiers wives, and then [they came 0:47:23] ____, and so it went on, and on, and on until we came up to the flappers in the '20s and brought up to date.

The first part of it was like it was eventually, an old-time musical introduced by a man, our chairman, called Don Gemmell. He was from the Players' Theatre I took him, because that's where I'd seen a lot of this, at the Players' Theatre. We had sitting in the centre box, dressed like an old actor, was Deryck Guyler. He was called the 'Spirit of the

Theatre'. Deryck told the story as it went along, and we came up to 1953 with a big variety finish, as it were, and the top of the bill was Stan Stennett and Joan Turner.

It worked beautifully, so much so that the powers that be, as they say, in London said, "This is marvellous. What a lovely idea, what a lovely theatre. Can we have some more? We want some more." I said, "You can't tell the story of a theatre more than once, really," so they said, "Take something like it."

I thought carefully about it and thought, "Perhaps to get away from the modern day and not too far into ancient and modern, as it were, I'll take the Victorian/Edwardian," which I did and started doing that, again with the same setup but not with a Deryck Guyler but just with a few people sitting in the boxes and in the audience. Not many, but it became so popular that, programme, by programme, by programme, more, more, more people wanted to come. It built up and built up, and it built up really from nothing until we had 20,000 people on a waiting list, waiting to come.

Interviewer: I remember trying to get in.

Barney Colehan: It sounds ridiculous, but it's true. It's been checked: 2,000,000,000 people saw the programme over 30 years. It's a world record. There was over 600 artists took part, and there was about 50,000 people who wanted to come dressed and came, bit, by bit, by bit.

When the programme was taken off in 1983, we went from 53,000 to 83,000, making it a world record. When it came off, there were still 20,000 people still waiting to come to see it. I could never have envisaged that we would finish up like we

did, with all those people and all those records, when we just started off from this simple little idea of the story of a music hall.

0:49:50

Interviewer: One link you will no doubt remember, with the Leeds City Varieties with us in Hamburg in Combined Services Entertainment, was a young soldier named Stan Joseph.

Barney Colehan: That's correct, yes, Stan came and he – well, his father – bought the theatre. They came from Blackpool. In the first place, Harry Joseph owned the Lewisham Hippodrome, which was the largest theatre – largest variety theatre – in the British Isles. He bought the smallest, which was the City Varieties, and his two sons, who were Stanley and Michael. The three of them worked together.

When the father died some years ago, Stanley and Michael still carried on with the same tradition. They retired, or sold the theatre, about four or five years ago, but it's still carrying on as a musical. It's a strange coincidence, really, about the whole thing, isn't it, because Stanley was in Hamburg? Never did I realise I would work so closely with him. You were in Hamburg and now we're closely working together as well. (Laughter)

0:51:01

Interviewer: Yes, recalling old times. Barney, you opened Dickenson Road Studio with a televised version of 'Top Town', I see, looking at the records. This was the idea of competing teams from different towns, and it led to a European success.

Barney Colehan: Yes, because whilst it was becoming a great success around the country, it became known to people abroad. Two producers got in touch with me from the French television service and said, "Could they come over and see it?" with a view to taking part with us. They spent nearly a week with us, seeing different things, and how we did it, and the programme itself.

They thought it was absolutely marvellous, but the one thing about it was, when they went back, they spoke to me afterwards when they had thought about it. They had no sort of mechanism in which to get acts together. They felt that politically in France, if you're not very, very careful, if you don't use one town against another town, then you're in trouble. You can't just be independent and say, "No, I don't want that town."

They said it would cause a lot of friction to do it and that they wouldn't be able to get the artists unless it was on a different method that we had. But they said, "Your idea is so good that what we're going to do – and we hope you will take part eventually – instead of having the teams of singers, and dancers and various things who take part, we're going to have funny and silly games."

Interviewer: [This would] get over the language problem as well.

Barney Colehan: That's right, "And we're going to call..." To begin with, they were going to do it purely in France and it was to be called 'Interville' or 'Interville'. That's what it was called to begin with. When they'd done it for a couple of years, Robin Scott said to me, "Your idea is tremendously successful. Let's go over there and see if we can't do something about it, because in London they say they will take it and they will do it."

So, we went and we sorted it all out, came back, and the first programme we did, Robin and I, was from Morecambe: Blackpool versus Morecambe.

Interviewer: 1966.

Barney Colehan: On the sands, where we had quite a bit of trouble. There was a man who had a little roundabout that was concreted into the sands to make it safe. It was [only a youngster's 0:53:23] roundabout. We said, "It could be taken down, of course," and we said, "Would you take it down?" because it was interfering with all the games.

He said, "No, I'm not taking it down," so we then appealed to Mayor and the various people at Morecambe: "Can you get him to take it down?" He said, "I don't care who it is. That's my roundabout. I've paid the rent for it and that's where it's staying," so we had to build the games round this roundabout, which you couldn't use, of course. It just looked like a piece of a disused prop. We couldn't use it.

The other thing was because I was directing the programme and it was live. In those days people will have forgotten. Some of them were done in Lancashire and the others were done in Yorkshire. Therefore, we had two compares, Charlie Chester and Ted Ray, and the judge was Eddie Waring. I was thinking he might have been presenting – eventually became a presenter, but I chose him because he knew so much about rugby, and various things, and how games... I thought, "And he's a name, he's a suitable person," so he was the judge.

Whilst the programme was going out live, one of the cameramen said to me into the scanner, "Don't you think it's

time that I moved?" I said, "No, the game is not finished yet. You have to stay there until this game finishes," so he said, "Oh, I see." Within minutes he came back; he said, "Do you think I shall move now?" I said, "I've just told you." I said, "Why do you want to move at this stage?" He said, "Because the water, the tide has come in and the water is over the wheels of my dolly for the camera."

Interviewer: For the camera.

Barney Colehan: "It's getting to the bottom of the camera itself." What had happened was that we'd checked the tides very, very carefully, but tides are affected by wind as well. We didn't realise and so we had to wait until the tide went out. We went to other games and we finished it, it worked.

It was from there, from doing that programme and doing the series, which was live on a Sunday afternoon, I think about four o'clock – [we changed it to 0:55:35] different times; it got a remarkable audience – that Paul Fox said to me, because he was the controller then of BBC1, he said, "This idea is too good to throw away. If you will do it, carry on doing it on a Sunday. I will record it and I'll put it out Wednesday nights."

We did it that way and on the first I think we got 16 million viewers on the first time it went out as an evening programme. [There were the strangest 0:56:07] slight repercussions from the board of governors and various people, who I believe at a meeting said, "Is this the kind of programme we should be doing? It's not for us, this. It's the kind of programme that commercial television should be doing. It's lowering our standards." Somebody said, "Yes, you may be right. Have you

seen the figures: 15/16 million?" "Well now, then, perhaps," you know. This was the idea. Eventually they got used to it.

The only thing that they never got used to, and we had to stop it, was Huw Wheldon was a great addict, he thought it was absolutely marvellous, but the thing that he didn't like was the piano smash where we used to break up old pianos. He said, "It's sacrilegious to do that." I said, "They're broken-down things; they're [finished 0:56:54]." "No. You can break a sideboard, you can break chairs, but you can't break a piano. It's a piece of artistry."

Interviewer: I think I agree with him in a way, yes.

Barney Colehan: Yes.

0:57:06

Interviewer: How long altogether were you with that programme, Barney?

Barney Colehan: My record generally on figures is that I was... Just answering your question in a roundabout way, I did 'Have a Go' for six years, I did 'Top Town' for twelve years, and I did 'The Good Old Days' for thirty years.

Interviewer: Thirty, yes.

Barney Colehan: And I did 'It's a Knockout' for sixteen, so, if you add them all together, it's quite a lot of things. As a matter of fact, I checked

a little while ago. I have actually done over 1,000 television programmes.

0:57:45

Interviewer: Besides doing the programmes, you've been one of the BBC judges at Montreux, British judge at the Monaco Television and Film Festival, besides receiving an MBE for your services to broadcasting – in other words, a very large number of successes to your credit. Any failures?

Barney Colehan: I don't think so, really. I think the only place, the only time we really got near to failure was with the Jimmy Savile thing. In a strange way, it was a successful failure because it failed in my imagination and my ideas of what they said about it, but eventually it succeeded.

It's presumptuous to say you haven't had any failures, because with all the ones I've just told you, the years they've run, there wasn't much time in between to have failures. I was lucky in that everything I was doing was, "We're improving it." We were improving it, so I'd got past that stage where somebody said, "Would you like to do a programme?" and you say, "No, I'm too busy," because that's when you start to do experimental programmes and you do have lots and lots of failures, yes.

0:59:00

Interviewer: Unlike some of our colleagues when working amongst the public, especially in latter years, Barney, I've never seen you wearing jeans or dressed in a pullover. You, if I may say so, always dressed like a successful city broker. You look like a successful city broker at the moment. (Laughter)

Barney Colehan: I've always liked to dress smartly. I've always felt that if you're a sloppy dresser, then eventually you'll have sloppy programmes because everybody else feels they can just do what they like. They have no standards.

It was proved right to me, if I had any doubt in my own mind, in that when we were doing 'Jeux Sans Frontières', usually on the Monday lunchtime, we used to get there on the Sunday and do four days. Sunday was just assembling, and then we used to do rehearsals Monday, Tuesday, and live on a Wednesday. On a Monday lunchtime, the local mayor and the dignitaries used to give a reception for the production teams.

Of course, they would come off their rehearsals in the scruffiest kind of jeans, and pullovers and everything, and go into the mayor's thing. I used to say, "We don't go that way." I said, "Collar and ties, smart suits," because then that sort of gave them our standards all the way through, because the one thing about 'Jeux Sans Frontières' which I found fascinating, really, was the way in which all the continentals had tremendous respect for the BBC. Maybe because of the war years and so on, but it doesn't last forever.

It was purely because of the standards which the BBC always attain, but the one man who had a claim every year, year after year, of all the eight presenters – more sometimes – that all the continentals had was Stuart Hall. They said that "Stuart is the finest presenter that we've ever seen."

1:00:57

Interviewer: Barney, was there ever a point where somebody said to you in the BBC, "Now, come along, Colehan, you've done a lot of programmes; you must now take a management position"? Did they ever suggest that to you?

Barney Colehan: Yes, it was suggested. Tom Sloan was the one who wanted me to come down and work in London and from there, perhaps, progress and get promotion. Whenever vacancies in Manchester occurred, [people would 1:01:22] say, "You will be applying, won't you?" and I said, "Not really. I'm very happy doing what I am."

I think, in a way, I don't think I would have got any promotion, in a strange way. I'll tell you why: because when I was due to retire, the [balloon 1:01:43] went up in London and Bill Cotton said, "He's not retiring. He's not old enough to retire." They said, "Yes, he's retiring in six months' time." "He can't retire, because we've nobody to do 'The Good Old Days' and we've nobody to do 'It's a Knockout'," so the very fact that they... It's strange is this, but I became so involved in it that it became a personal thing.

You can hand over a test match or you can hand over an opening ceremony. Somebody else can do it and maybe they do it slightly different to you, but I had become so involved and personalised with both these programmes that no-one knew how to do them. I think if I come to an interview [to 1:02:20] become an assistant head of this [or something, they'd say], "Yes, he'd be very, very good, but we're going to lose these two programmes."

Because of that, in any case I said, "I much prefer doing what I'm doing, actually. I enjoy meeting people. I enjoy doing the programmes." I was doing things, Trevor, that a lot of people would have paid. I was paid for doing them. A lot of people would have paid money just to go and do them themselves and meet the people.

1:02:44

Interviewer: I know the feeling. No regrets?

Barney Colehan: No, none whatsoever as regards my career as such. I feel that I'm very flattered in some respects, if that's the right word, that I ever got to do what I'm doing. I could never have thought, when I was dropping perfume down ladies' bosoms as a boy of about 17, that eventually I could become somebody who was very, very important throughout the continent, producing programmes. I am indebted to the BBC for giving me the opportunity.

When we were talking about had I regrets [on 1:03:38] various things, I've really got rather an embarrassment, Trevor, in that when we were looking for programmes and outside influences knew – writers and so on – that they might be able to get certain programmes on the air, I had a letter from a man called Tony Simpson, who is now known as Tony Warren. He wrote to me with a script which he said, "I wonder if you'd be interested in this domestic comedy, which I think has a great future and would do very well with the BBC."

I looked at this. It was called 'Florizel Street', and I wrote back to him. I said, "There are two things about it: the BBC are not into this kind of programme at the moment of doing situation comedies, except things like 'The Archers'." [Then I said 1:04:26], "Secondly, it's not a very good title, because 'Florizel Street' sounds to me like some disinfectant." I wrote back and told him that, so he said, "Oh, well, if that's what you think about it, that's too bad." Eventually this became 'Coronation Street', which I understand has done rather well since.

[Silence 1:04:49 - 1:05:08]

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