

Part One

A: What's your first memory?

R: Crikey. My first memory.. I remember a lot about the physicality of our first house. I was probably only three or four. I remember going to hydro at the hospital when I was probably three. Then I remember what the hospital smelt like, even now. And I remember my little sister coming home, who is four, not quite four years younger than me. And I remember things like bonfire night and when England used to get cold in November. It'd be minus three outside and still wanting to watch Dad light the fireworks and he didn't want to go out. And we did.

So kind of, because we moved house a number of times, there are specific sets of memories that are located to those properties. So the first house that I was born into I left when I was seven. So I guess, I can certainly time some of the later bits of that, but the earlier ones not necessarily exactly how old I was.

A: Try harder. Give some detail.

R: So it was a semi-detached house in a place called Earley in, which is just outside Reading. It was a cul-de-sac, it had a big bend in it, we lived on the corner, so our garden was triangle-shaped. But then at the back of it the main Reading to London railway line ran behind it. It was noisy. And making the perfume out of rose petals for Mum. And having the baby in a pram with a cat-net on it and not knowing why there was a net on it. I thought 'why have you put the baby in a net, you know, thinking of it the wrong way round, as a capture rather than a saving device.

I remember, there is a story, which is I remember, I was probably only four because I think it was before, definitely before I started school, because I couldn't walk till I was four, and I could swim before I could walk. I remember that em being in the front garden with the baby-walker, you know like we used to have with the bricks in the front and seeing a snake, which I'm sure was a grass snake, but running into the house, and I remember this, going 'It's a nake' and

running into the house leaving the baby-walker behind and then my Mum bursting into tears. And it wasn't the fact that there was a snake in the garden, and of course this came to me at some point, you know, later, it was the fact that I'd just run in without using the baby-walker. And that was sort of, it was a big thing I guess. I mean, I haven't got any better at walking since, but at that point I couldn't..I did walk independently.

A: What are your memories of swimming? You could swim before you could walk.

R: Well I know, because I used to have hydro. And I just, I was doing, kind of, just had some kind of natural er affinity with water, which has stayed with me, I'm sure we'll come back to that but, well not necessarily open water, but water and the suspension that it gives you, the freedom that it offered and I think I just found that freedom, again not that age understanding it but the liberation that the water was giving me and I remember that my, I mean I always say that it was twenty lengths, it might have been three or four, I don't really know but .. I seem to remember that the physio said if you can do twenty lengths of the hydro pool then she'd buy me this truck, she'd buy me a present. Bribery always works, obviously. And doing it, and it being okay, right, I've got a truck. Sweet! Again, no real comprehensions other than that the water was just where I loved to be. And that probably is what put me on my career as a swimmer, it was this affinity with water, I've never had to try to be able to swim. There's a big difference moving on, bit I mean, you know, I've got friends, Chris Holmes, now Lord Chris Holmes of Kingston is he or Richmond. But, yeah Richmond, saying to me he had to, you know who I mean, don't you, Chris Holmes?

A: No, I don't.

R: Well he's another paralympic swimmer and he's blind and he was a bigwig in the London 2012 organising end of it, the ILOC or whatever.

A: Yeah. (06:12:9)

R: Anyway. I mean, we trained together in Birmingham and he lived actually

with Josie and I for a bit as a, not in a menage but as training partners and er I remember him saying to me, he had to, even though he was an amazing swimmer, he had to learn to swim on top of the water. I've never had that problem, it was just, did it. I could talk for.. I remember silly things like I remember them, you know where my Dad used to park his car was originally broken bricks, you know like drives used to be a sort of rubblely thing. And I remember him and some other person concreting it and I remember I could, I remember watching them how they did it with a big long piece of wood and like, it's probably got a technical term but plopping it to settle it like up and own the drive and it leaving ridges and.. You know it's amazing kind of, the specificity of what those little things that you've remember, phone number was 62109, there you go, how I know that and I didn't use a phone probably for another five years, but just things, typical.

A: I know how you know. I can remember the first number we had when I was six, no seven or eight. The reason is with those old-fashioned land-lines people would pick up the phone and then give the number. 810761.

R: My dad still does it I think. It was a typical three-bedroom semi, I don't know when it was built but probably between the war, but you know, so it had a proper hall, it wasn't a parlour lounge, it had a proper hall and the stairs went up and the toilet, bath at the back, Mum and Dad's bedroom the bigger one at the back, mine and my elder sister's bedroom at the front, then the baby bedroom was the one above the stairs, the boxroom as it was. I remember having to wear, they used to, I think they still do it stupidly, put you in casts so, so, it could add a lot of spasticity. And I can remember being put into the casts, both legs from toes to knees, not further than that at this point, this was.. I remember spending six weeks wearing these.

A: Plaster casts?

R: Yeah. You know old days, plaster of Paris things, you know that you can barely lift your own leg wearing them. And the horrible, and um how heavy they were and how uncomfortable they were. But then to make up for it my Dad made a chest of drawers and painted the colours red green and orange and blue I

think. I think we've still got that chest of drawers. I haven't, it's in my parents' house. It was a good bit of work, 'cause it's still there. And then, that *is* fifty years ago. (0:09:49)

A: He actually made it himself?

R: Did he make it? He certainly painted it. I mean by trade he was what they called an instrument maker. Which was a metal-working thing, but he could build stuff. He was handy at that sort of thing. What else? It's a strange set of memories. Probably my first real sense of sadness came out of not living there any more, because we went to, my Dad got posted to Hong Kong. So he wasn't.. He'd been in the army, but then he worked for the Ministry of Defence, which could have been anything from actually really truthfully designing things for doing some kind of anti-terrorism work, because just little things that indicates that it wasn't simply, wasn't just using a drawing board, let's put it that way, even though he worked for what was called the Military Vehicle Engineering Establishment in Chobham. But, so we went to Hong Kong for three years. But the people that were our neighbours, I suppose I remember it quite, reasonably well, because the neighbours had become my sister's, my younger sister's god-parents. So then we did go back, but I remember going back and sort of arriving on a, I don't know, a Tuesday afternoon or something and the, the people who I would have been friends with three years ago were there and not having the cahunas to go and knock on the door and say hello I'm Robin, cause I was, you know, ten, bit strange.

I remember summers being endless, I don't remember it raining in summer ever, when I was a child. But then, but yeah, real winters, real cold winters. Literally like having to dig channels in the snow. (And) stuff like that. Park. I can remember the first.., walking like I do, I used to fall over a lot. And I can remember, if you think of memories and things that shape you, but remember falling over in the park and the first time I put my hands through dogshit...It was called Sol Joel Park, I'm sure it was. Yeah, falling and landing in dog crap because I was (..) falling over. And never liked dogs since. Just one of those things I think. I think coupled with the fact that, because I'm(..) certainly when I walked in those days had a really jerky um inconsistent walk that a dog couldn't get the measure of, so it used to freak dogs out and then they would bark and

jump or whatever. I was unstable and then I'd get knocked over, so me and dogs, it's not a personal thing, it's more of a physical thing. (0:13:37:7)

I remember spending time in the park, and it had a really good slope so that when it did snow, and again Dad built a toboggan that we would then use on the hill in the park, where it was always hard work getting to the top of it. Then I started school there, went to a school called St Peter's, it was probably a primary school, because it had infants and juniors.

A: When you say 'there', where have we got to now?

R: Still in Earley, Reading. Earley. Again I don't.. It's.. One of those things about childhood memories is how much of it is you remembering what you've been told as our own memories.

A: Yeah.

R: Certain bits I do quite clearly remember. I mean I do remember I used to, I had a trike and, a tricycle. I couldn't walk to school, way too far. Cars weren't available like they are now, you know. And so yeah I had this trike. I used to go to school and it had a big orange bin on the back, big metal bin with a sliding lid, which was really really cool and then one day one kid, we weren't supposed to be in the classroom in playtime and the kid went in and then fell over and scratched his eye on it and I found a piece of skin of his eye. It was alright, he survived. I remember finding a little tiny like scraping of whatever it was, eye skin on the back of the trike. And then.. And it had a pool, it had an outside, it had an outdoor pool, which was probably quite, I mean for a school to have a pool in the sixties is. . I suppose it would have been sixty-three to sixty-eight probably, sixty-seven, sixty-eight, and it was fenced off and I remember winning the swimming races even those days. Because most people couldn't, most children of five and six aren't particularly good at swimming. So it's, you know, as you get older, able-bodied swimmers start developing, the swimmers start developing, differentials increase, not the skills or the quality but the speed differentials. I remember winning (in the...) If you won you got a pin badge the colour of your house. It was green, green badge.

The school milk. School milk was the worst.. I've never liked milk. I've never ever liked milk. Ironical, because both of my kids adore milk. Emily's lactose-intolerant, so she has lactose-free milk. They can drink it by the cowful. I just remember that there was always at least one bottle that was off. And there was at least one child that was really, not necessarily the same child, but someone would be sick after drinking milk. And then, and then in those days, I remember that the school, can't remember that, if it was always, if it was the classroom or just the corridors, but I remember the floor, the floor as being like sort of a deep rustic red tile, probably what all school corridors were made of, but then how fast it goes when it splashes on you.

A: So was this a mainstream school?

R: Yeah.

A: How was that?

R: The bit I was going to say was about what are my memories and what are my recollections of what I've been told, but the story goes anyway that, that, because I've got an elder sister, who's eighteen months older than me but a school year above, that you know, when it was time for me to be looking at schools they went 'well he'll have to go to a special school'. And me Dad's like 'why?' Well because he's, because the child is a spastic child would have been the term. And sort of my Dad's like well he's just as clever as his sister, why does he need to go to a different school? And they went because he's blah blah blah. And anyway in the end the story goes that my Dad said look, he's coming here. And then they put me on probation. Four, four and a half or whatever it was, I was on probation. One morning in the P.E. lesson the Headmaster came into the school and was looking into the hall. 'Where's Robin?' And the teacher went 'up there'. I was hanging with one hand, you remember you used to have those big thick ropes, you're probable not allowed them any more in schools'

A: Why not?

R: I don't know. But anyway, that aside, the big thick rope like they use for tug of war and I just pulled myself up hand over hand, you know and was just like 'Yo!'. Apparently at that point the teacher said well fair enough, if he can do that then why are we worried about him being in school.

I mean going to a mainstream school there's things went on, presented particular issues, more so at secondary than primary. I left there when I was, so we went to Hong Kong from there. (0:19:42) Um Hang on, I'm just trying to think of any other particular thing, it depends how detailed you want, I could spend probably, the minutiae of what you remember.

A: That's interesting sometimes, don't be afraid to give me detail if you want to.

R: I'm trying to think. Obviously, I was aware of being different, but I was.. And so I did the swimming, so that was the thing, that was my thing, I swam, and then so you know my parents were tennis players, my sisters became tennis players, I didn't. But then I'd got this whole other thing going on. But I was, I mean I think um I mean in fact I'm not going to say I'm cleverer than my sister, because I think that really would be wrong. Cause we have different intellectual capacities. She's studious, and erudite, whereas I like to think that I'm quick-witted and mischievous. I did once join Mensa, I got in, I've got a piece of paper somewhere with my IQ of 157 or whatever it is written on it, you know. The point of that being, you know, is what I use whatever intellect I have for is generally making merry rather than academia. So school was a place of constant, I was always in trouble. Not so much at the first school, but then I think that for anyone who's moved schools, changed schools, when they've moved house or they're like forces kids or whatever. When we went to Hong Kong we were in a forces school, that's a different dynamic, there's always people coming in and out, so the cohort sort of sieving, ciphering, whatever is a much different thing, it was very used to it. And of course when you come back to a mainstream non-forces school, forces-based school and you move, you're always the outsider. So then being an outsider and having an impairment is kind of, right that's your double whammy, you know. I think you could quite easily become the stranger, l'étranger in situations like that.

I always found myself in a sort of no-man's land a lot of the time. It's interesting about not necessarily fitting in to the camp of the non-disabled, the able-bodied, but also not necessarily the camp of the handicapped. I use that word quite deliberately in this context, because that's who you were seen as. And if you weren't cap in hand, you weren't asking, you weren't looking for help, then you were being rude or whatever. So I do identify with this group of people who had things done for them, but then didn't really identify with the majority of, you know eleven/twelve year olds at this point. (0:23:49:3) I'll come back to Hong Kong, but I'm sort of the transition when we came back from Hong Kong was six months to go into secondary school, into a new school, all the boys are starting to get testoner, testo, puberty, testosteronised, we make up words in our house. But you know all would have football prowess and stuff like that and you came back and didn't have that, but was always very good at talking to girls, which always got me in trouble, because it was... and they never understood that, because the girls, whether it was simply because I wasn't playing football, I certainly learnt how to talk to girls in a way that girls like being talked to, if that makes sense.

A: Yeah, absolutely.

R: And in a friendship way, not in a manipulative way. Older, story changes, like with everybody I'm sure but you know at that age it's about well you've got to make friends with somebody and actually the girls were in those days a lot less morally or socially judgemental. I would have said at ten to eleven. I suppose yeah so really, the first primary school I was aware of my differences but I just did whatever, because the people that I was friends with I'd grown up with, so I was just Robin. If I needed help climbing through the bush because they'd locked that park gate, then they would help me climb through the bush because they'd locked the park gate. It was just brothers in arms as it were. But yeah, I think, d'you know when we went to Hong Kong, I'm rambling a bit now.

A: Tell me a bit more about the climbing through the bush stuff with a bunch of mates. What sort of stuff did you get up to?

R: I think what every other six or seven or eight-year old wanted to get up to. I

read Swallows and Amazons, and there wasn't a lake so we had to, there wasn't a, there wasn't a broad in the middle of Reading, so we had to make do with the park and stuff. We had a railway line we weren't supposed to go near so we always did. Trees to climb that you were not supposed to be able to. So we did. Just you know, I've got I know this is an audio thing but I have, I mean you know I'm fifty-six next weekend and I'm still quite broad but probably my power to weight ratio isn't what it was, but as a child cause I used my - even though I walked, I used my arms for everything, even in walking. My shoulder (27:08:4) I'd (..) Myself from my shoulders and then all climbing, everything was done moving around the house as a child, you know I used to, because I couldn't walk I used to just walk on my hands. Imagine a press-up, but just dragging your feet behind you, kind of like a seal, hopefully slightly more gracefully maybe. But that was it. So I had this, you know, so my shoulders at, even at eight, nine, ten, my shoulders were twice the size of my width. That's what the girls like to see! Blond hair and muscly arms. But I had, and so I had all this strength, so actually I could do that kind of stuff and haul myself up walls that other people, if I could reach the top I could get up it. If I could reach the branch I could get up to the next one kind of thing because there was just all power. I mean I don't, we weren't, you know in the Swallows and Amazons sense we weren't naughty kids, not that way, I've never been, certainly at that age, particularly naughty, just mischievous. And I think it was, I think the change, you know, and I can probably be honest and say that there were points in my time where I was quite rebellious. But I think it was that kind of, the transition from going to first primary school to the army school and over that period of time when people began to really not understand who you was, because at six and seven it was fine, their expectations of a six year old child who walks funny and another six year old child aren't, don't manifest themselves in the same way. But when you get to nine and ten they think that you're stupid because you walk funny. And then the whole expectation of who you are and what you're gonna produce change. And then I became badly behaved (..)

Not having my capacity recognised. There were certain teachers who did and then they'd get really annoyed, but generally the whole, my whole schooling career was based around not having my intellectual capacity recognised, so getting bored and then just taking the piss.

I mean where do you go from there. I mean I spent three years in Hong Kong, we moved to Hong Kong when I was seven, I mean that was just an adventure from beginning to end really. I mean I can't, I was thinking on my way here driving through London why on earth would anyone live in London. Then I think back to my childhood and think why on earth do people live in places like Hong Kong. Although, current climate, current econo.. Current political climate aside, you know being whatever it is, twenty-second anniversary of Hong Kong going back to China and all that going on, but you know I remember leaving and packing up the house, not really having any consequence that my parents were selling the house, which proved to be a bad move because house prices did one of those rockety things in the three years we were in Hong Kong but.. And then going to Brize Norton, which is where they used to fly the RAF passenger planes out of, I'm sure they flew them everywhere but that was, you know you went um, going to Brize Norton and staying in a hotel overnight before going on this plane and it was second of March 1971 and we left and it was snowing. The next place we arrived was three o'clock in the mornig in Bahrein. And it had been like forty-five degrees, you know. I mean my Dad, had, because my Dad had been in the army he'd been in the middle east and all sorts and my mum had travelled, but for us, you know, you literally, you're worn out because you don't, never flown, never been anywhere else and then you spend eight hours or whatever it was to get from Brize Norton to Bahrein and they open this door and you're just like hit in the face with this heat. (0:32:15)

I've been to Bahrein. For all of four hours. But (I've jammed there?) And similarly Singapore. That was the next stop, because in those days RAF planes had to take circuitous routes, because there's a million military lines it couldn't fly over various bits of air space or through rather than over. And then arriving in Hong Kong and it just being another world. And it kind of staying another world in the most positive way. I mean again I could have probably written my own book about three years of childhood in Hong Kong, just the stuff that you did, the way of life. I guess in some ways, you see my dad if I think about it logically rather than romantically, my Dad was, is sort of parallel ranking or whatever, was like a major and we lived in this apartment block in a place called Repulse Bay which is a great big bay on Hong Kong Island where the Repulse Bay Hotel is,

which is this six star thing or whatever it was, I dunno but all very posh,

So we lived in this block of flats and , whereas a block of flats in the UK that you think of in modern parlance had got five or six flats on each floor or more, whereas these blocks of flats were two apartments to a floor and it was like three double bedrooms plus, living, we used to have an amah. And that was just what people did, it's difficult to say that's what people did, they had amahs which was effectively a female Hong Kong servant. And er, where did I get to . I'm losing my thread a bit there. So we went, we ended up there, there was a transition period we had to live in a hotel for a bit and it was horrible, but then, Hong Kong, the centre of Hong Kong ((0:35:38:3) Wan Chai is it? Wan Chai? and Victoria which is where the harbour is, that area and then there's a place called Happy Valley Racetrack and gambling's a fairly big thing in Chinese culture and er you could never move anywhere on the Saturday afternoon, there'd be end of races, it's cause Hong Kong they used to have these things called light buses. They're a bit like a caravel sized thing, a minibus, like images of London, images of New York and having loads of yellow taxis, this was like the Victoria and (..) part of Hong Kong would become a complete sea of these sort of cream coloured light buses. (0:36:04:1)

But I spoke a bit.. Ah yeah, because all the sights and smells, when you see pictures on telly of like markets in Hong Kong or Africa or wherever, they are so like that, you know, everywhere, like all the produce is alive in bowls, and the fish maket was amazing, and then, we'd have, we used to.. So we lived in this big apartment and then we had the amah and then they'd have like, we used to call him the chewing gum man but he was actually the fish salesman, but he always had chewing gum, the chewing gum man came around selling fish. I don't know how they kept it frozen but they did. But then he would, for the boys, and it was for the boys but he would have a bag full of frozen fish-eyes which you could play marbles with till they thawed out. It was just a thing! But of course they're not completely round, so they don't roll the same either. The things you remember. I mean, talk about naughty, so we lived in these twenty storey block of flats. And we learnt that you could get on to the roof of the twentieth storey and then climb over the wallv on to the roof of the verandah of the twentieth storey flat and look over. That makes me quiver even now, thinking about it,

cause I hate heights. I can't even drive over the QE2 Bridge in a car. I never, I always say to people, I never, when I drive I don't ever suddenly veer one way or the other. But driving over high bridges just completely freaks me out, weirdest thing.

So Yeah,. Hong Kong, yeah. It was interesting. Again, I suppose my swimming career, I started my swimming career in hydro, but then we went to live in Hong Kong for three years and fundamentally you went to school, for as little time as possible, and then you went in the sea or a swimming pool. That's what we, you know, when we lived, during the summer, the summer term or, I don't remember the exact breakdown, but we used to have two timetables. There was a winter timetable but then the spring, summer, autumn whichever it was timetable used to start early, start at eight and finish at one.

A: Right.

R: And the, which meant that you went to the beach. I mean and it wasn't like going to the beach in Bournemouth, it was like going to the beach on the edge of the kind of jungle kind of thing, or tropic, where the trees grow into the beach and there're all these billions of places to go and play action men in, you know and sail your action men and take them diving and have them climbing trees and falling off rocks and.. Action men were big in my life, it's gotta be said. There was always something else you could get for an action man. I had a tank. Scorpion tank it was called. And then the deep sea diving one. And of course, being a swimmer that was great and I could always hold my, I could always hold my breath longer than most people, so I mean that I could take my action man down deep and talk to him under the water and do all sort of underwater actionmanney things as well. And then there was a, we used to, where we lived, because of where we lived the beach was ten minutes by however I got there in those days, I can't remember, took a trike or mum helped carry me or was you know. I'm sure I didn't go in a pram in those days, might have ridden on my sister's um but sort of you know. I remember the school they had to paint the, silly things like they had to paint the playground green so it would reflect heat, because it's very very hot. And then they had, talking about safety they had the great, massive climbing frames built, because in army they built it like adventure. I remember

at least one person falling off and staining the green red where he cracked his head open and bled all over the playground. They never stopped us climbing on it though, it's like you were never told to be careful. And they used to have, we had a tuck shop and they used to sell fizzy drinks and fizzy drinks, I don't know if it happened in this country cause I was in Hong Kong, they used to, you know if you opened a fizzy drinks bottle, we didn't have cans in those days, on the inside there's like a rubber, sort of the mech that seals it, well they came up with this wonderful plan to make people buy more drinks obviously, which was that they put smiley faces on the inside of those. And then, you know, like the most common one was yellow and that red and then there were some really really rare ones but if you, literally if you collect, it stopped people, I think from the positive side it was a collection, stopping rubbish thing, because at that time Hong Kong had a real, real issue with rubbish cause they had to introduce a character called Up Suc Choong, which was a rubbish eating dinosuar/dragoney thing. Again it was a cultural thing, they sit a lot, so then they made, spitting was a really, finable offence. But anyway, so maybe it was about making people not throw their bottletops on the floor. But then so they put all these smiley faces on them, and so you'd collect all the smiley faces and you know if you got ten yellows that was worth you know a free bottle of coke or something and if you got the purple smiley face then that was probably a Coca Cola T-shirt or Schweppes or whatever it was. So we always drank probably far too much pop based on the fact that we wanted to get, you know it's cause we wanted smiley faces. And then you'd end up seeking out smiley faces on the floor, much to your parents' disgust, picking up bottle caps as you walk round. But I also, actually do you wanna pause here?

Part Two

A: We were in Hong Kong, weren't we?

R: Right, so Hong Kong. I was just talking about school and smiley bottle-tops wasn't I? I remember um I remember I got to play a tree in 'Alice in Wonderland'. And then a knight. I got bumped up to playing a knight, I think a tree was just too staid for me even at that age. Must have made machinations

about it. I also, I remember, so. I walked as a child, a lot. Physio, and the damage physio has done to me is a long-term effect as opposed to a short-term goodness perhaps. It's a major issue when it comes to my politics but um.

A: Tel me a little bit more about that?

R: I remember at school, so how I walk is, I've got this, I can give you a picture, if you imagine I was walking down the road and every step there was a bollard that I had to swing my legs round, that's about my walk how it used to be, but as I did it I would turn my feet over so I would scratch, so I would almost, I'd walk across the top of my foot and before it came through, I mean it was, I defied the doctors because doctors said I'd really even now don't actually know how you walk. Mechanically it just shouldn't happen. So of course, Clarks' Commandos, other shoes are available, were the school shoe de rigeur and er I would wear them through in two days. Cause I would just literally scrape the top off the shoe. So my Dad managed to somehow, I don't know where he got this idea from, but a way of attaching, making like fibreglass resin toecaps on the outside of my shoes. And I just hated it cause I looked such a twat. Cause I had these big things like bits of resin on the outside of my shoe. And yes it did stop me from ripping my way through shoes, but that was, I remember that being a thing, I hated it, absolutely hated it. But I can't walk in bare feet because I would literally scrape the top of my feet off.

A: Yeah.

R: Even now if I go, you know, well anything, bare feet just doesn't work for me, if I do have to step anything I have to be, it's just a nightmare. Yeah. And then, but then so when I was in Hong Kong I actually, there's a place called the Duchess of Kent Royal Orthopaedic Hospital. It was local, you know in Sandy Bay, it was I can't remember why, and it was this incredible, you know I think, as a I have a gazillion questions around disability and medicine and repairing versus not repairing. But I think the issue is, for me the issue is the attempts at normalisation. For me that's the biggy, that's where the big problem lies. So | I had some operations that were at this hospital, and this hospital was world-famous, because that was where they did, this guy I can't remember his

name but he um pioneered this operation for straightening out spines. There's a lot of children in Hong Kong got polio and it resulted in um curvature of the spine. And then they invented this operation, kids'd be in hospital for two years, they'd have sort of a metal hoop, literally, bolted on their hips and a metal hoop that was screwed on to the skull and then bars joining them vertically which could be, a bit like a rack really, you know sort of, so they would be unscrewed every so often to make the bar that little bit longer to pull the back out. I mean, I don't know any of these children now because I've just, you know forty years, forty-five years ago in Hong Kong to know what the long term effects of it were. I mean, it was horrible, you know the pain that people went through, cause you'd have to you know, try sleeping wearing two metal rings. And stuff like that. Although one night in the hospital - the wings were L-shaped, the boys' wing was one leg of an L, you know there's a big sort of nurses'/doctors' stationery thing and then the girls' wing was the next shape of the L. And one night there was this massive bang, you see these things, you almost get a premonition that something's happening and you look I saw this bang, because they've got these massive ceiling fans being in a tropical hospital, this ceiling fan coming off the roof and it chopped the legs off about three beds. Good job it didn't hit anybody! Exciting times! That's where I learned to wheely a wheelchair. In those days they used to hate it as well, cause they'd be like you're not supposed to (049:31:9) (..) Your wheelchair. I mean, my kids, both have gone through school, obviously I've got one who's still at school,. Being told they're not allowed to push fast in their wheelchairs. Do you tell the children off for running? In the playground? No. So why on earth are you telling my children to not go fast in the playground? Corridor, different story. You can't tell them they can't go fast they might run someone over. What about the kids that run into each other, you know on those grounds what you going to do if a child collides into another child.

Anyway they let me sort of, just physio, for me I, the operat.. I can't really say if the operations were a good or a bad thing really. They were good because it meant that I didn't have to go to school, that was the good bit about it. And had a girlfriend, that was nice, I was only ten, or nine but.. There was no sex involved, obviously, I was only nine. But er um I just, I, I do there's old stuff I remember..

A: Were you having this straightening operation?

R: No I had tendon lengthening operations, which again ended up being in casts for ages and ages. Basically, if you imagine a piece of liquroice or something, what they do is, they don't cut it in half like perpendicular to the length, they slice it down like a runner bean would be sliced and then slide the two halves apart, so they would rejoin at the bottom but then they'd be longer. Then you'd be in casts, so it would give the tendon the chance to rebuild itself. It's kind of like splicing. So you'd get a thin bit and that would then have to rebuild to give it its strength, it's been months in cast. And then lots of physio. And I just hated it. It was just, it was so obvious that it wasn't really ever gonna make any difference. Not in the, so what was the point of it, to make you walk more like everybody else, well fuck that, really. You know.

So then as a child, although my parents were liberated and really did get me into mainstream school which as I said has a very kind of issues in terms of identity and stuff, I'm still much, I think I'm happier that I went to a mainstream school emyou know as I went, Until my sporting career I met lots of people who, you know in competitions, so when I was still at school but we were competing there would be competing against Treloars for example, which is down in Hampshire, Paul Darke went there didn't he? Paul Darke went to Treloars? Anyway which is to think, because they were just as naughty as us, and it would have been really great, that kind of St Trinians rose-tinted version of what it might be like to be in boarding school and have loads of fun. But anyway, back to the whole normalisation thing, so in the end it was just a lot of pain without really any gain and I think, I think that for me that some of the - it was about trying to make me walk better, but (LONG PAUSE) morally was that the right thing to do? Would be the question, and not one I aimed at my parents actually, I don't have any, my parents are fab actually, they're extremely patient I think, you know, so I don't have issue that they, it's not like oh they were allowed to operate on me, they allowed it to happen, I don't see it like that, I see that they were part of what was going on, it was just, there wasn't a collusion or anything negative like that, it was well we think this can help, they thought it would and they're told well actually it'll make him be able to be more like his sister or whatever, I dunno, that'd be really

good blah blah blah. Whereas I, I kind of pretty early realised that you know physio was just.. I think, you know, I'm wandering, I'm meandering here, so good luck when you have to listen back to this. But um I dunno, sure you will. Physio as a rehabilitative tool is great. If you've broken your leg, if you've pulled your back, whatever, so you're going from a state, you've gone from a stable position, something's happened and the you need to get back to that stable position, cool. But I don't need rehabilitating. I've not been unhabilitated, or inhabilitated or whatever the fucking word is. You know, I've been me. And any need to habilitate is no, is really not based on any physical need whatsoever, upon I know, moral, philosophical, political or socio-economic maybe. But actually from the physical perspective none.

You know, don't get me wrong, if, if there was a cure for my hereditary spastic paraparesis, and it meant that I don't have to put up with the discomfort. Fine. I would probably be there. But not for any of the reasons that other people think, that you know because you need to be able-bodied, you need to be like that, you need to be productive in this way, that's all, that's just bollocks, You know, and I don't need be, I don't need anyone to feel sorry for me or, you know, because I'm not, I don't need to teach you about understanding the equality model of disability. I don't need power relationships in my life that are based on other people's interpretation of what they think I can do in my life. You know, I've got the police to tell me that. And I think that a lot of, I think a lot of children have missed out on childhood by being made to do physio. And been made to take drugs that have dampened their cognitive capacities on the grounds that it.. I remember, when I went to uni, big jump here but this was, I'd avoided all of these things and I went to uni and I was having really really bad back problems. And my back problems are actually, stemmed from how I was made to walk, or from walking shall we say I mean (0:58:00)

The biggest issue of my life is back pain, right now. Has been since I was a teenager. It's not about how far I can walk and all that shit, it's the pain and what that does to sleep patterns and all the rest of it. And I'd just started uni as a mature student and I'd kind of got switched over to the doctors in Birmingham, ah well we'd better see you at the orthopaedic, and they went well, maybe some Baclofen. I felt stupid for three days, if that sounds offensive I apologise to

anyone. It's so, I was, it was like someone had put like a sort of you know a not quite opaque plastic bag inside my head so that everything was distant and like a fog, but not a fog on the outside but a fog on the inside, so that, you know, and I remember, I just, I can't do this, you know and I don't even remember, I don't, I can't, I think what it did was probably made me forget that I was in pain or not be able to recognise that I was in pain, because it didn't do any, there was no reparatory constituent of it at all it was just, I think it just dulled your, who you were. I thought naah. But if that's what they're putting kids through in school. Well I know that they do, you know they wonder why kids, you know you see lots of kids dragging round special schools looking like they're vacant cause they've been drugged up, not because of any you know, and we know people that have been through that, you and I, not going to name any but I mean we know people who are creators of great contemporary work who as kids were like seen as not able to think properly. And it was down to the fact that they were drugged up to their eyeballs. This is really really sad.

A: It seems to be a big issue for people with mental health issues.

R: Yeah.

A: That there are some appalling drugs that people get given.

R: Yeah?

A: And then people choose not to take them because they just don't feel themselves. Or they do take them and the long term effects can be awful.

R: Yeah?

A: Do you know Joe Bidder?

R: Know who he is.

A: Yeah. Joe's had to have a kidney transplant really recently because of damage cause by Lithium, which is a drug that he was on for a long time. Colin could tell you a lot more about it. But I can't help wondering, is it just that there's not

enough money there for the drugs companies to be bothered to develop better drugs, that can have the same effect without having so many, without having side effects.

R: What I hadn't realised , I've been prescribed a gazillion different pain-killers over the years, you know. And I was taking Brufen, or Ibuprofen before anybody went, that might be bad for your tummy.

(PHONE NOISE, STOPS ABRUPTLY.)

A: We don't use that phone now. So if it rings, it's cold calling.

R: We have call blocking on our phone. People have to tell you who they are. Anyway but I think, I got prescribed Tramadol and I remember taking it, now, jumping around a bit, you know, I had as mis-spent a youth as anyone who didn't end up a drug addict, but, and I remember taking Tramadol and then having like horrendous lucid dreams and waking up after the first time taking them, and my body going, 'Have another one of those!'. Literally. And I'm like, it ain't right, this can't be right. So not taking any more but the next night being in pain, you know I've had, I'd had some reparatory surgery on my shoulders from all the swimming and pushing the chair. So I still believe in that end of things. But then, and then during that time, and I didn't, and then going whoah, I'll have to deal with it some other way. Em. And I'd just, I didn't actually realise that, until only the other day because I was watching Designated Survivor, cause all truth comes out of fiction, the Tramadol's actually an opiate, I didn't realise it was an opiate-based painkiller, perhaps I should have looked, but that makes so much sense to my heqd, because Co-Codamol I do the same, which I know is codeine-based. And I'd recognised the thing. But they give you them and they don't go 'Be careful!', like you know take as many as you need to keep the pain away. Hullo! If you have the propensity to have an addiction of that sort, then you'd be so easily down the Swanee.

A: Co-Codamol's a dangerous drug. The codeine makes it addictive, people can get addicted to codeine and then like, they shop around, but then get paracetamol overdosing.

R: Yeah.

A: And if you're gonna die, if you're going to commit suicide that's *really* a nasty drug to do it with, not the way to go. (1:05:25)

R: So where are we? We're still in Hong Kong. Blimey. I suppose. I do remember, and again I know other people who've had this experience and you look back on being really a disconcerting ways, the amount of photographs I had taken of me in underpants. And sometimes you wondered why. I would not want to malign any doctor but it still, you know if I think that somewhere there are pictures of me in my pants, it's a strange one really.

So. So Hong Kong was, yeah basically so my swimming career started properly in Hong Kong, after hydro, because I lived all the time in the sea. The particular bit where we were, where the school was a swell, was within an army barracks called Stanley Fort. And then that had its own swimming pool, like in school holidays we would go and get swimming lessons from the PTI's, we did all like the personal survival stuff. Rather than lengths as such you learnt how to go in in jamas, and then it would up to being fully dressed, if you were ever on the Nile and your cruise ship sunk or whatever, we would be able to swim with clothes on, take them off, how to make a float out of them, all good stuff, I mean you know as a now swimming coach, occasionally we'll do that, just because it's fun and different and it's a good kind of cross-section of skill to have. But, in terms of formative stuff, we swum, and rather than lengths we used to swim round the pool, round inside the pool, cause it was, I don't know quite how they worked it, it was easier somehow for them, but I just, all that time just swimming, swimming, swimming.

And er I loved it. I still love swimming, just don't get, I coach now so don't get to go in as much as I should, I'm fat and unfit.

A: When did you first start doing it competitively? Or am I jumping ahead there?

R: Well I mean in Hong Kong you also had, going back to this thing about having

ahmas, you don't recognise it as a child, but certainly you're living this sort of privileged existence, so we belonged to what was called the United Services Recreation Club. And that had tennis courts and squash courts and, all the pools were outdoors, a learner pool, a medium pool and a big pool with diving boards. But that's what you did at weekends. But that's what you did, that was I suppose like expat communities almost in the sense that you've got your, your shop when you need to shop, but I spent all that time swimming, and there would be club competitions, and a little gala and I would always do okay, even though, you know I was swimming against kids that could kick and whatever, I did okay. (1:09:19:6)

And then we came back to England, we came, we left Hong Kong when my Dad got a two-year posting to Northern Ireland. And we were there just six months. It was not a nice time to be there, '74. It was a difficult time. Talking of experiences, I can remember being spat in the face at by a child who knew I couldn't chase after him and kick the shit out of him because, whether I would have or not, I couldn't. For being a Protestant army kid, and that's, the, the things that kind of, I married a Catholic but I got over it, but I mean the things that you remember, you know is going there, I mean I remember Ireland being a beautiful country but then going into Belfast and then people with machine guns and things you couldn't drive through with a car and sentry post, I mean I dunno if you've ever been to Belfast, but it, you know some of that stuff is still there and still quite prevalent, still quite obvious you know, I mean the wall art is amazing, you know there's some of the paintings, incredible paintings, what they depict is a bit more contentious but the art as a pure base of expression is amazing. But actually, at that time, I don't think I can remember having any negative experiences strangely enough, from a disabled perspective or as a disabled child at that point, it was, I just don't have that in, you know we were there for six months so then we came back to England and that's when the whole business I was talking about earlier about that change of you know coming in as an outsider, so again, I suppose in Ireland everyone was in this you know there were local kids in the school but a lot of them were army based children who didn't, there's this very strange situation in Northern Ireland and of course most actual military postings were only there for six months on tours of duty, whereas my Dad got two years cause it was (..) (1:11:50) whatever it was.

And it meant that, some of this might not be publishable, but then

A: We can think about that at a later point,

R: But then, but the point, so then we came back after we'd been there for six months, My Dad's like I don't want you here, you know, like the bits you don't put in like a kid's, there was a kid down the road, whose Dad's leg was blown to bits by a pillar-box bomb, and thing like that, I don't want you staying here. So he commuted to Belfast on, I suppose you'd call it a dormitory basis wouldn't you, so he would fly out to Belfast on the Sunday night and then fly back to where my parents still live actually in Camberley in Frimley, Surrey, and so he'd fly back to Heathrow on a Friday. So we came back after six months from there.

So then we were there and we joined, my Dad was(...) Again I suppose I've got to thank, both my parents were sports people um and then my Dad had already done lifeguarding or whatever and decided we needed to go to somewhere that offered me some more swimming than just hydro or whatever was available. And then we joined a club called the Rushmore Mallards, which, at the time the majority of disability sports clubs were held on Sunday lunchtimes, cause that's when no-one else wanted to swim. But, you know, for me it was only a good place. And then I did my first nationals when I was twelve, first junior nationals when I was twelve. I could already swim really really well. I didn't have you know, it was from then on in was learning to train. (1:13:56) I'd got this amazing kind of fitness and stamina base. I'd been taught to swim by army instructors and my Dad who also learnt how to become a swimming teacher and then coach and then umpire, referee and everything else you could be in the world of swimming to support the club that we were then part of.

So I then, I almost from then lived this parallel existence. There was Robin the - can you have a tripart existence? - so there was Robin the swimmer, Robin the mischievous schoolboy cum fisher person and Robin the hating schoolboy. I hated school, so, so much. And it was a combination of so many things. I mean school wasn't particularly accessible but I made my way round it and you know, I did, I learnt to ride a pushbike. Again, it's the most unsightly version of

riding a pushbike, because it was all from my shoulders. I would literally go down the road by pushing one shoulder down to make the other knee come up, so then the bike would go forty degrees one way and then I'd use my shoulder to literally, you know like when you see them doing the mountain climb on the Tour de France. That was like that but worse on every single, my Dad used to say If I go past you in the car I think how bad this must look for any other driver on the road. So I had, I mean, so fishing and.. As a child fishing was my relaxation. Along with writing. So I started writing as a, as an angst, twelve, thirteen year old was when I first thought about using words and then punk happened which was like an epiphany. So I had this swimming career, which I kept going through all of the things I shouldn't have done in my life. But I think actually if it hadn't been for my swimming career I probably would be dead by now.

A: Why's that?

R: Why? Because I still managed to do a lot of things I shouldn't have done. But I had this swimming as an anchor.

A: Tell me some more about the things you shouldn't have done.

R: I suppose probably, yes, not everybody experimented with drink and drugs, but I, is it the right word but I, less so now as a parent, a fifty-six year old or nearly fifty-six year old. I think I've always had a fairly, I think the word I want is a visceral existence. How I feel and how I feel with how I engage in the world both physically and psychologically, mentally Tracy moans at me, Tracy being my wife, because I still smell everything, I say wait a minute I need to know and I sort of put it on my top lip to see what it feels like, because it's the most sensitive part of my body. And it's just that sort of, it might sound really really strange but, so I do have this engagement with the world, really strong sense of smell, strong sense of taste, which is now not quite as good as it was because, so I have all this, while I had this swimming career in the autumn of 1987., when I'd just gone back to college, so I'd left school at fifteen, had lots and lots of really crap experiences of employment and who I was as a disabled person and why I couldn't get on because I never got, you knew as soon as you walked in the door. Oh have a seat, do you need a glass of water, you weren't getting the job. Kind of, you

know, and again we could talk time immemorial about how that makes you feel, that kind of trying to engage in an able-bodied world, but I ended up having a kind of brain bleed which was a result of a combination of probably slipping over on ice while drunk and banging the back of my head and drinking far too much and probably some other things that I can't say publicly as a sports coach, cause you never know what comes back to bite you. But being, growing up and experiencing things that were on offer to experience. I think the bit about falling over and banging my head was had too many beers, didn't think about it, I just remember it hurting, then woke up with my head stuck to the pillow and then about four days later my mum came into the lounge to find me swallowing my tongue. Got rushed to hospital and then to Atkinson Morley which is, whether it's still there, is a hospital in Wimbledon for brain injuries. And I can remember it being so annoying, being in a really ungrateful way, because every hour they'd come and wake you up and go who's the prime minister, what's the capital of France. It's still Margaret fucking Thatcher who d'you think it is? Unfortunately. And then being back in the pool three weeks later because I had the Paralympics to swim in 1988.

So all kind of (...) (1:20:22) so you know I'd got all this and I did, and I'm like, because I haven't even really talked about that part of it because it's, if I look

A: which part?

R: The actual high-level competitions . I mean people think that going back to what you talk about, what people's expectations of who you are make you, most people's lives look like dreary puddles compared to what I've done. I've traveled the world as a child, I traveled the world as a swimmer, I've competed at the highest level, I've been awarded by the Queen, whatever anyone's perspectives on royalty are actually and I got awarded the queen, not just for winning medals but for being the only person at the 1988 paralympics doing any live sports coverage of the paralympics. And I was an athlete. And I think it was Elizabeth Townsend, or was that who wrote Adrian Mole.

A: That's Sue Townsend..

R: Maybe it was Elizabeth Townsend then. She worked for the Independent . She was the only other genuine journalist who was in Seoul doing stuff. But anyway, I've swum in three paralympics, couple of World Championships, umpteen world records, don't want this to come across as immodest, I have a this collection of things that I did. But also managed to be badly behaved, enjoy sexual freedom of being a teenager and a young adult, coupled with being in a band and touring in a band and being played on John Peel, which was, back in the day, was amazing. We never got a live session but he played our music, you know, playing stages and to now, I still now I'm it's kind of full circle, I'm coaching, and I'm coaching my daughter who is a would-be paralympic swimmer, I do arts and equality training. And yet I still perform, and I still go out there and I still take no prisoners, less so now, I've ended up, latest recording I've released I made with some friends who are session musicians, but then wanted to be able to play the album live so put a band together and put an advert out for other disabled musicians. It turns out it's four guys, but that was just who came, and over time we've had other musicians come in and do bits and pieces. But as a foursome there's me, my drummer is a blind guy in his seventies , the bass player has got one leg and plays from his chair and the other guitarist, in fact he was thirty on Saturday, has autism and dyspraxia. And their impairments are relevant to them because of who they are but not about judging them. But it's about, as a band we all turn up at anywhere that'll let us play and don't compromise on what we play we write songs about rights principally. Rights, wrongs and lives, that's what we write about. And just play it and don't, you know , because it's music first.

A: This is Angryfish?

R: Yeah.

A: Is that all one word?

R: Yeah One word. So I became Angryfish. I am Angryfish. So there's a lot of poetry and things I've written, that're Angryfish aka Robin Surgeoner.. So Angryfish the band is me in the same way that Fleetwood Mac are .

A: Let's come back a little. (1:25:00) Tell me a bit more about, in terms of the swimming you were kind of swimming in the sea in Hong Kong. What's the trajectory from there to the Paralympics

R: I suppose the trajectory of that is coming back to England, joining the Rushmore Mallards and then starting to compete in local inter-disability sports clubs. One of the, I think one of the casualties of the changes in, positive changes around inclusion is the loss of some segregated activities. And where the segregated activities gave people the self-esteem and um confidence to go on to other things, people who would never even now would be able to simply go to a public swimming session or join a local swimming club or local archery club or a local table-tennis club because the differential would be so big but there is no compen, there is then no competitive differential for allow to allow them to be able to take part to then get to the point where you can become a, as good an athlete as you can be for who you are. You know the principle of the paralympics is the same as the Olympics, faster higher stronger, is the Paralympics is exactly the same, all it does is it takes into consideration that you are being the fastest or highest or strongest that you can be and then there's gotta be some kind of strata to allow that, you know to categorise so that it's then fair. What used to happen, there was this, every town used to have a disability sports club under the auspices of what was called the British Sports Association for the Disabled. (1:27:33) I could not swim for the Rushmore Royals, because if I joined Rushmore Royals, which was the, and still is the able-bodied swimming club in Farnborough, you couldn't really, I could never have competed for them because although I was, ended up being a very good swimmer, with no leg kick I'm a very very good swimmer for a swimmer with no leg kick. But then you put me against a twelve, twelve year old, who's a trained swimmer with a leg kick, it's not gonna happen.

That being said, I coach an able-bodied club, and my daughter swims with able-bodied swimmers. Just. She's able, she's a better swimmer than I was. My honest, hand on heart, not just because she's my daughter, I think that because when I started and I worked hard and as I went through my career, training changed, and disabilities. I was part of the change to the professionalism of disability sport and although I'm not part of the glitterati of disability sport now, because I've always been outspoken and people don't

always like having critical friends. I was, I know, I can hold my hand on my heart, I'm just part of what made that change. But I'm still outspoken and they don't like that..

Anyway so we had, you know so we lived in Surrey and there was Farn.. We had our club so that was in Farnborough, Reading had a club, Basingstoke had a club, Windsor had a club, Woking had a club, Croydon had a club, Guildford had a club, Southampton had a club. So you got, Wantage had a club. And they were all part of this, so that's where, so that, you know, the Paralympic, what is now British Paralympics came out of that setup. But that setup doesn't exist any more in the same way as it did. I actually think, I mean and but I will be critical because British Swimming are now finally taking it on board. But if you look at who they took to the last two or three paralympics, they were the swimmers that were as able-bodied as you can get. They were the top four, three, four classes. So swimmers that, when they swim, they approximate to able-bodied swimming. Forgot all the people that, you know, people like Tara Flood, who you probably do know, and Pete I've forgotten his bloody name. Anyway. But you know who were people who were children born after their parents had taken Thalidomide. I don't know exactly, but that kind of thing, no arms and legs or little bits of arms and legs or whatever, who were the best in the world themselves. And we've still got swimmers who are just completely left behind because they did not fit the perception, because it didn't approx.. So this is my conception that disability sport, certainly swimming, and even track stuff went through this normalisation of you're good if you look. So yeah Tanni Grey uses a wheelchair, but she looks like an able.., she presents as someone who's acceptable, if that makes sense. And again, this isn't about Tanni, we're very good friends. We've had differences, like you do in political arenas and sport and stuff but I think she's now doing some really good things. She's learnt who it is to be a disabled person, even though she grew up. But (..) But anyway, because this is not about Tanni Grey. But as I was saying, actually I invented, I went through, I went, so all these clubs existed and then we did this and then we were able to compete every second or third week there was something going on. So we trained and we trained and we trained to, as much as we could, and then I, my best mate who became my best man, we're still best buds, is a guy called Andy Gilbert, married to Tanya Meti, who you may know (1:32:40) And so we were at

Mallards together through our teenage years. And then he went off to uni (..) And I went off a bit later, because I was a mature student and then we were each others' best friends. But we trained together. And then at the point when we both knew we could drive that gave us much more autonomy in terms of the training we could do. We became full-time swimmers in effect although there was, in those days there was no financial recompense for disability sport. We were still, I managed to get us free membership to the new leisure centre in Camberley which had a pool and a gym and a sauna and jacuzzi. Which were liberating to us! They were great things to have as part of your training, you know. When you've not had em particularly, So that was, through school really, through school years, did all that training and then came out of it. So I went to my first proper international in 1982, so I'd have been nineteen then, did lots of nationals and things before that and then went to Paralympics in '84. And then '88. And then '92. I was old and tired by '92. '91 I did great, '92 was just, '91 the Europeans I did great, and then I think it was just a year too long

I mean I still swim, I swam on and off for the next thirty years. Twenty-five years. What the sport gave me, I suppose it gave me as I've said an anchor, to go back to it, I had this anchor, but it also gave me this massive opportunity to be educated around the world and to see things from different perspectives, to see different cultures, but to see who I was. I often, in the early days anyway, I wasn't always comfortable when I was away on squads. Because although they were good sports people, a lot of them still were in the old school version of things disabled people should be. Not through any fault of their own, but because of how they'd been institutionalised. And they'd end up as institutionalised sports people. They got to do it, but they were still incredibly dependent and had to do everything, couldn't do anything autonomously. I'm not talking about the physical side of it, but, you know, the decision-making side of it. And I'd end up, so we'd go away on team things and I'd actually, although I'm a massive believer in team within the competition, I sometimes, I'll be honest, I would struggle, and I would be back to being that, like l'étranger. Again, because I didn't fit into being told what to do by non-disabled sports administrators. Because they used to, if anything they got on my tits. When I stopped swimming and being part of the GB setup, it was because I absolutely detested the woman that got the job in charge. Because she had no respect for

you as a person. In my opinion, you know, she was nice to school, and nice to them, yeah well that's because they never said anything to her, whereas I'm like they don't do it like that and don't treat people like that and you know and of course you're not supposed to do that. So that was my falling out with the sports world. And when the B.P.O. was formed, me and my friend, well we've got to do something in this country, we've got to do something to bring it all together. This was after Seoul. And all of a sudden, the British Paralympic Association was formed by a load of fucking able-bodied Chief Execs from the national governing bodies. You know. And some of these people were, I don't have a problem with any one of those given individuals, but it always struck me as fundamentally wrong, so I then became part of the first Athletes' Committee. I'd be going you can't do this without, how can you set this up, we've been talking about it and you then foist this on us and there is no representation of the disabled athlete in this. So then we got the Athletes' Committee. Which I was a part of for a bit but I just got so pissed off with it. (1:38:06) Being nothing but a table to talk around really.

I'm not sure things I hope it's moved on a bit, but I know, thing again, I mentioned Tara Flood, do you know Tara?

A: By name.

R: I remember her being told that she couldn't have a job at the B.P.A. because as a disabled person she wouldn't have the skills needed to be in them. But again, you'd need to get a qu.. If you wanted to pick that up you'd have to verify it. Going back to 19..95 or whatever it was, you know, and so she's part of the alliance for inclusive education, and I think she was on the Equality Commission.

A: That's where I know her from.

R: And she got to go and see the bloody Stray Cats last week and I didn't because I saw it on Facebook. But anyway. I'm still very passionate about everything.

It's a strange thing, so actually the, the, the disability sport, the paralympic sport has given me so much and also my kind of angst of how people are treated and

set aside . And then probably back in 989, something like that, probably, when I was still riding on the crest of a wavy and big paralympian , yeah, so I set up this award called the Yardley Parallel Gold Award, because there was no, so they had all these disability, all these sports awards were going on and then we went to the sports writers' do. And I got the sports writers disabled sportsperson of the year in 1988 and I used my acceptance speech to berate them for not doing anything real about disability sport. And why are they giving prizes, not why are they giving prizes to, cause they used to do this thing called Yardley Gold which was a sports thing and I think that year Adrian Moorhouse, Colin Montgomery and um Lynford Christie got one, these are like bursaries voted for by the public who bought Yardley products. And I'm like and why aren't this going on. And they went actually, Lenthric, who own Yardley, Lenthric and the Daily Express who sponsored the awards went 'well, tell us what to do'. And actually they brought me in for about three years and we created this thing called Yardley parallel gold. And Tanni Grey was the first recipient. Joint first recipient of the Yardley parallel gold award. I don't know if she knows that I set it up. Don't care. I know I did it. But then, I was doing some work with B.C.O.D.P. And then there was this thing which you may remember called the London Disability Resources Team.

A: (Laughs) Worked for them! I was taught to be a trainer.

R: And me! (1:41:33) And me, that's what I was gonna say. So then I went and then.. So I'd, so prior to this I joined committees and I was always (bulsh?), I wrote things, you know we haven't even talked about art really but I was writing and expelling my demons through at this stage, I wasn't playing guitar but through the end of a pen or pencil before computers um But yeah, so I went on London Disability Resource Team training. Where was it?

A: Ashwellthorpe. In Norfolk.

R: No. No, it was Stanmore, I think it was Stanmore. In Watford. It was a base anyway, ironically. It was a hospital that they used but probably because it was accessible. It's a rehab place, Stanmore, isn't it? Spinal rehab place. So er

A: In my time they used a place called Ashwellthorpe Hall in Norfolk, which was a place belonged to the Disabled Drivers Association.

R: Oh yeah, yeah, that's where I know the name from. Back in those days, I remember that I think Frances Hasler was on the course with me or something like that. Going back, there was this real nebulous of, of who the people that then spend fifteen years being the movers and the shakers around. I didn't know any of them that intricately, or only very tangentially.

A: I taught France Hasler that she was a disabled person.

R: Cool.

A: She used to work for the Spinal Injuries Association.

R: Oh right.

A: Being someone who had epilepsy.

R: That's be why they used Stanmore, then, because the S.S.A. were at Stanmore.

A: It's like, working with all these like, very physically disabled guys, she didn't really think of herself as having the right to say I'm a disabled person. So one evening Kirsten Hearn and I took her out for a drink. And a couple of weeks later, I think, the director of the Association, said, 'What'd you fucking say to Frances? She's completely changed.' Sorry I'm...

R: Yeah, I suppose training. I was always aware of who I, I've always had my own sense of who I am but not always able to posit it in the right place I suppose, or utilise it, I did that GLAD (LBDRT?) training. I was using the social model of disability before it, before I had a name for it, I always saw it that way, you know, I've had conversations about that with Mike Oliver. That's how I saw things, it wasn't what I couldn't do, it was how I, you know I always saw it that way. But then,. So the sport then kind of the differences in sport, the lack of awareness, the lack of representation, the lack of, what's the.. appreciation sport as opposed to rehab or whatever. All part of that politicisation, so that by the time I went to

uni in 1988 as a mature student..

A: Studying what?

R: Philosophy. Yeah. Can't remember any of it. I'm sure I can but anyway. And, you know I was a fully fledged lefty. Not a socialist but just a humanist, left humanist I think I'd describe myself as. There are too many problems with political structures to even begin to discuss them. But certainly, rights and responsibilities. For me, that's what it's all about. All this politicisation for me the two things that come out of it are rights and responsibility. You have to have both. There are lots of non-disabled people who don't understand rights and don't understand their responsibilities and lots of disabled people who do, and then there's this middle ground of disabled people who want rights but don't understand the responsibility that comes with them. And that's often some of the ground I've had to do a lot of work in, you know. And I took part in lots of protests, I mean there's a great picture of me as Lady Godiva going through Coventry, you've probably seen that one on Facebook, have you?

A: I'm not on Facebook. I'll ask Colin to send me a copy.

R: It's on Facebook. There's me and Tom Cumerford. At the front of a march through Coventry in our chairs but wearing, they had these wigs made out of yellow wool. It was a kind of joint protest, it was a disability thing and it was at the same time as they were bringing in pension charges, local authorities charging pensioners for care. And we managed for once to actually bring another body of disgruntled citizens, it was a joint thing so for those that don't know listeners, Lady Godiva's protest was about taxes, that was why she rode through the streets of Coventry naked, as a protest to her husband. And so myself and Tom Cumerford Lady Godiva-ed ourselves and headed this march through Coventry naked except for you know woollen hair and marched to the Council House and then blockaded the Council House. But interestingly enough, at this particular point in my life I also worked at the Council, which was a bit strange. I worked for C.D.P., Council of Disabled People at the time, working for the Council of Disabled People, Warwickshire and Coventry but still doing lots of work in the council house. (1:48:52)(...) unexpected behaviour, or not what you're expected to do

kind of thing. And that kind of, so all the sport, the worldly education. And then having the LBDRT training to help mould it into something deliverable both in terms of being able to work, but, I then did loads and loads of work because BSAD, British Sports Association for the Disabled then went out and did loads of training with leisure centre staff. Again that stuff doesn't happen any more. There was this whole swathe of great stuff that went on that's got lost in the inclusion. But yeah, so that .

A: A funding question as well, I think.

R: Yeah. And that, sort of all of that , from my teenage experiences, I mean being a very sensitive child, not crybaby sensitive but being very resonant to other people's emotional states. Again I..

A: Can you give me an example of that?

R: I used to cry when they were horrible to Godfrey on Dad' Army.

A: (laughs)

R: Well that's nice, isn't it? Thanks, Allan. But for me that wasn't funny as a child. Dad's Army was funny, most of it. But actually, Godfrey, well why would you be mean to him, he's just an old man who's a bit dodder. This is an eight, nine year old and that used to really really upset me. Even now, I watch programmes with Emily. So Emily's twelve, and you know and she's getting into watching teenage soaps. And I'll be sitting watching telly with her, blinking a tear back, because I can't stand it, you know. I'm not violent, I've never been violent, physically, but my god emotionally and psychologically I can, you know, my capacity to use words, I've learnt to have the capacity to use words creatively to, not only to then if you like as my way of reliving my own stress but actually of outing that anger and that anxiety and shouting at people, shouting at people through creative writing. Can we stop for a minute just to get me breath back?
(1:52:08)

So we've been through how I got politicised in the kind of formal way through the

training. But I guess, as I was saying about, that, my emotional understanding or my emotional relationship with the world as I encounter it and as I see other people encountering it is kind of really the start point for who I am, how I became and who I am as an artist. I mean the art, I was forty before I actually was able to say I'm an artist, before I sort of made that as a, you know, I outed myself. Because I don't know..

A: What were you doing before that? What was the development?

R: It's a strange thing. A lot of my work became known, came under the banner of permission to speak and then permission to perform. I'm really pissed off with so many people who've used it since, because I definitely was using it as an origination, as original to me, not having heard it in tht context at all. But anyway.

So I started as a poet, just trying to write things about , poetry seemed a way to express what I was feeling , I didn't want to hit anybody, I didn't want to break stuff, but I found that actually I could get really passionate, you know, and I can be writing and make myself cry, actually be that upset by what I'm writing. The context of what I'm writing about, or really cross. That fuels the creativity, you know. Sometimes words then come out at a gazillion and you can't write them fast enough and other times you kind of, you do, you've got to metaphorically bang your head on the wall to find that word, cause the word matters. So you know, and I was doing that and then punk came out and I would, I would sit upstairs in my bedroom and I didn't play an instrument at this point, I'd done a bit of classical guitar learning and hated it, hated the structure, hated the sound, hated the, well I didn't hate the teacher but I hated the teaching, cause It's just not me. My dad'll tell you, I've never read an instruction manual in my life, probably not quite so true, I've now built IKEA furniture. But he would get so annoyed because he would buy these really expensive Meccano sets and I would just build stuff, but not what was on the instruction sheets to build and how to build it. (1:55:51)

So I started writing about how things made me feel. And then punk came along and I'd sit in my bedroom and I remember getting told off so many times because

I had a metal wastepaper basket, which came from the BP garage, and I know that because they did all this series of things with petrol tokens, coins that you used to get when you bought petrol, that my dad would get and it was like vintage cars or veteran cars, there'd be veteran cars on it, there you go, that's something I remember, I still had that as a teenager, so you can imagine hitting that with a pair of drumsticks. And I would put on first of all Deep Purple, because although that's heavy metal, or metal as it was then, just before punk came out, but there were certain things, not talking about 'Smoke on the Water', but much more punky, aggressive, 'Speed King' and stuff like that that you could lose yourself in.

A: Sorry, what was that last thing.

R: 'Speed King'. 'Spee-eed King, dum dum dum dum' A Deep Purple Track. And of course then when punk came out, you could swear as well. Whoah! And then, so I probably had, I hardly ever swear in writing now, unless I think it, I've been through gratuitous swearing. Now I have to listen to bloody songs that my daughter puts on, why are they swearing, it adds nothing. But anyway.

And then, so I left, so this was, it was always, and then, so the Disability Sports Club has a newsletter, and I would write a poem and ask them to put it in it and they would sometimes. Then I became at a later point when I was probably twenty, twenty-one maybe, I became the editor of the newsletter, so I could put as many of my poems in there as I wanted and write completely uninterpretable editorials and things like that. But er. I wasn't a performing poet as such. I was a, just a productive poet, because it worked for me. And then I suddenly thought d'you know what I should.. So I left school at fifteen, became an apprentice, went to live in a place called Titchfield, between Southampton and Portsmouth, or Fareham. I must have spent three, mostly really unhappy years as an apprentice in the factory, killing myself physically, because it was what you had to do, either that or you joined Thatcher's army, the unemployed millions, but it was, I mean whilst I have never been diagnosed as having a mental health issue, I am very aware that I have managed my mental health a lot of the time through writing. And at certain points through alcohol, but then that just proved to be disruptive as we all know, but it's easy to say that in hindsight. It didn't ruin my swimming career, but it could have ruined everything, you know. Even now the

biggest driver for me is emot.. Is psychological. Yes I can sit down and write about anything, if you asked me to go and write about that orange tin, I can do it. But that's not really what I do, I'm an obsessed writer by what comes through me. So when I...

So I had all these poems. One I don't have an avenue to read them and two I wanna be more organised also and I went back to how I'd listened to punk and what people could say and I thought well okay I could do that in my own way, so then I got hold of an electric guitar and decided to learn to teach myself to play it, very badly mostly in those days, I'm a bit better now. And then made a band and just started doing stuff. So that was um, but I wasn't, although I was doing what I would, what is disability art in the sense of it was, it is art that expresses my experiences of life as a disabled person and my interpretations of other people's experiences, not in a vicarious way but in a, in an understanding empathetic way. But was able to do it and so I did that, you know and then we'd be doing it and then I'd get this band together and we'd do things in local pubs. And in those days I was being looked at really really strangely. A bloke in a wheelchair playing guitar (2:02:22:9) or if I stood up and looking really odd because I stand really awkwardly. But then.. So I did all that and I got better and better at playing the guitar and kept writing. And then. I was putting stuff out in newsletters and things like that, I mean I've still got practically everything that I've written somewhere, folders and folders of things. I keep threatening to put them all together, to make a compendium, actually publish something properly. So I have this store of things that I can read and share with people, going around. Sitting around sharing poetry in community, not a community arts way but as a sense of who we were. And I did do some little poetry things, but it wasn't really who I was at the time. (2:03:39)

So then I gave it up. Then went back to uni, where I did the year conversion, got four A levels in the year, it was the very beginning of them starting to accept non-A level students as such going in what they would call access courses. So I did this four A level courses in a year and went to uni. And then I had to choose where to go. And I ended up with offers of three places. My reason I went to Birmingham had nothing to do with the fact that it was a red brick university, or Russell Group or whatever it's now known as. It was that I'd got a place as a

guitarist in a band. Cause my mate had, Andy who I talked about earlier had gone to Birmingham and his best mate, best uni mate, was a drummer in a band and it just so happened that his mate was staying on to do an MA and the band he was in, which were called Dan Dare's Dog had just got rid of their guitarist and wanted a new one. So I then auditioned and got in there. So then I spent four years playing in the band but not really, I was writing poetry but I wasn't, we were an indie band. It wasn't a disability arts thing, I was just a musician in a band who happened to be a disabled person. I actually think it did hold us back because we were really really good and had so many great reviews but I didn't look right and it was in those days in the late eighties, early nineties when how you looked was so important. I couldn't ever say that that was genuinely the case, but the music we played still holds up now. I've got recordings, people are that was great who's this. Well that was us in 1989. We were the forerunners to, can't remember what they're called, Nirvana. We were doing stuff like that before it was big over here. But we'd all grown up listening to more left-field kind of anarcho-punk alternative music.

Anyway, so carried on doing all of this stuff, carried on playing in that and writing. And then we split up as a band, just that's what happens with uni bands, and didn't, apart from writing poetry didn't do much. But was much much more involved in the disability rights scene by this point. And again was writing for the newsletter, was writing prose and I used to write, they used to be called Rob's Rants, a bit like Millie Tant out of Viz magazine, it was Rob's Rants, whatever was the, we were never short of topics to rant about. So I would write those and some poems. And that kind of, that ticked over, really. Somewhere around there's this big stack of things that I wrote in those days. And then a really good friend died in hospital when he really shouldn't have. And there was never a, but then yeah he'd gone in for an operation. I mean he was a tetraplegic, paralysed from the neck down, twenty-four hour care and stuff, but he was still really active in the disability rights world. And he'd gone in to have something and died of like an infection. It just shouldn't have been allowed to happen, but it did. And then I was asked to do something at his funeral and that was what rekindled writing and playing. That was 1995, I think, cause Joshua was, it was '94/'95, something like that. So I'd had this bit of hiatus of doing public arty things other than writing in the book. And then I'm like okay, I can do this, get back into it.

And at that point, things, that sort of mid-'90s to you know the early 2000s were a big time for disability arts, so I was on that thing. I never did a lot in London, I never did Jackson's Lane, I think I might have done one GLAD thing. But I was in Birmingham and communication was different in those days, you know, and you had Alan anyway. Alan was dominant. He wasn't the only one but as singer/songwriter they didn't need anyone other than Alan, because he was just there, you know. And Alan's great. But I was sort of , but then we did a lot of, there was I remember going to Hull for a DAN action stroke BCODP meeting and Alan playing and me thinking I could be doing this as well. I'd met Alan years ago, because he'd done something for 'One in Four'. I'd done some sorts stuff for 'One in Four' if you remember that TV programme.

A: Yes

R: And that guy was good . Chris Hutchinson was a good guy.

A: Yeah.

R: I don't know where he is now, if he's still alive actually. I think he went to Bristol or somewhere.

A: I think you're right.

R: And so, and so I

A: Retired on a BBC pension by now.

R: Probably. Although he was always, he himself was always a bit kind of , he had his own way, kind of stirry-up kind of guy. Anyway.

A: Anybody that's willing to give Chris Davies a job as a television presenter.

R: Yeah. Chris Davies of course, yeah.

A: Is clearly willing to take risks.

R: Yeah. And so I'd been kind of re-engaged with art as a performance thing through DAN and the BCODP stuff. And then kind of went on from that, really. Then wrote a lot, lot more, did a lot of stuff as a singer/songwriter, different to Alan's. He's very good at that anthem mixing alongey thing whereas mine's much more, I tell stories, so my songwriting, particularly my songwriting, all my songs are like, I don't know what the smallest version of a novel is, the novelette or something. But is like, if you look at any of my songs, they're, not every one of them obviously, but a lot of them are little stories that have a beginning, a tail and an end. And usually it's some kind of long dilemma, disability rights, which turns into an educative, if you're a non-disabled person hearing this it's telling you what you should be doing, if you're a disabled person hearing this it should be edifying. And then at the end happy ever ender or not, depending how the song goes. But so each, and so that's how I write songs and that's how I like doing the short stories. So if you ever do see me live, even the stuff we're doing as a band now, that structure is there, but it's trying to couch it so that you don't feel you've been preached to. And that's kind of, so I suppose I've tried to do that, I tried to create these stories and poems that sometimes are really quite grim. But hiding it in story rather than, you know, the choices and rights as everything that you get thrown in your face. (2:12:16) I dunno maybe I suppose it's weird because I don't, you're interviewing me predominantly as an artist and I've said I'm an artist and yet I don't really know what recognition I've ever got as an artist. And now, I'm well out in the cold if you ask me, because I can't get an Arts Council Grant because I'm not avant-garde enough, you know everything has to be innovative and different and not be understandable from what I can gather, you know. Liz is the only one who I've seen producing anything that actually vaguely speaks properly. And Jess. But a lot of stuff that's out there...

A:Liz Crow, you're thinking of?

R: No, Carr. I haven't seen anything by Liz Crow for a while. I'm not saying she isn't, I'm just you know. It's an off one. But that's the writing, and I'm, you know, so I suppose, so I then, I mean I got a grant, so I did lots of stuff and also, so I did get some recognition and then I got an Arts Council Grant and then I wrote my, my Faust I call it, which is, it's called 'All the Things We Could Have

Been', which I put on, it's a stage show, it's a one-man show, is just over an hour long really, but it's a monologue with some songs. Which I then, I did it with, back in, it was, so at that point it was avant-garde because I'd got video running, pre-recorded BSL.

A: When was this?

R: 2009/2010 probably, it was when I was giggin it. But then, and then I've done, I've now used that, I then used that piece as a centre for doing commission to perform and the Why Festival, which is where I did get, I did get more Arts Council money and it was to use that, to run series of workshops with a cohort of people who would then, as it progressed would then engage with the text of 'All the Things We Could Have Been'. As it progressed, would then engage with the text of 'All the Things We Could Have Been', introduce new characters and fit them in to the tale. So the tale starts and finishes in the same place, which is from me as a teenager through to full-on, don't ever give up, we will make, we will get to where we wanna be sooner or later. But then all the... so the play has characters within it even though it's a monologue. But then these groups of other disabled artists come in and - yeah - develop a piece and then slot that in so then, and then do it, there's a show, so the last one we did was two hours twenty or something like that. So it's still got me as the narrator, only because that worked. It wasn't because I had to do this, it was practical, practicalities, that was how it worked. Because I was still playing the guitar. And I'm the driver, the motivator behind it, I can use the whatever. If I have any dramatic skills or engaging skills I can keep that kind of going in, if the other artists.. But that worked really really well. It's a, an odd thing, but what I found, what trouble I had was that, so I got this piece and it was funded by the Arts Council. But because nobody knew who I was I could not get it, I couldn't tour it. Who are you? I'm doing this Art Council.. So what? We don't want some disabled bloke coming in and telling us things that we don't want to hear and neither do our audience. Bye. So yeah, a little bit, I found it all quite frustrating and I don't quite know what I don't do right to make me liked more by the, and I'll be honest here, I don't mean liked at an individual level, I mean but liked by the people who make decisions about what happens in disability art events and festivals and things. What do I do wrong that I don't get called up? Because

when I do, people love it. And I don't mean, I'm not, people like what I write, my written work, Colin does, loves what I write, you know and the songs, People go oh shit this is great. Why wouldn't it be? Bit I mean, I don't know, its, again I don't fit in the right camp. I don't know why. If I did I'd be earning more money and working a lot more. (2:17:45)

But I'm also not a very good self-publicist, either and I think that's, you know if I think about the differences between me and Alan, Johnny Crescendo, is he never ever stops self-publicising. And that's why he's always got work and exists how he does, you know, that's not a criticism, you know. We go back a long way, you know we've been to America, shared space, it's not, you know, that's the difference, he can, he has that and I'm just not.. Whilst I have every belief that what I do is valid and artistically has some (...) (2:18:25) to artistic merit, creative merit, I'm just shit at self-promotion.

A: Yeah, setting up the Tragic but Brave Show was a clever marketing...

R: Yeah.

A: Thing. He'd admit himself he's not the greatest musician in the world. He says that. What he does have, is he's got a really good sense for, or he certainly in his early days had that, really good sense of what to make work about.

R: Yeah

A: Like in the 1980s, for a disabled guy to be going up on stage and reading a poem called 'I'm in love with my body'. That was something that people hadn't heard before. Disabled people hadn't heard before. He's got a sense for things like..

R: I learnt a lot from Alan. I mean one of the reasons, he always gave me a lot of work when he could, because..

A: He's good at supporting other disabled..

R: Because what he recognised was that I had trod the boards, I've done all the time, one, you know, we might be coming from different places but recognised that, I think he recognised that we had this, you know, that politically we were on the same perspectives, you know, disability politics and stuff. But that I also wasn't just come out of the woodwork and expecting to be paid five hundred quid because I'd come down on the train from somewhere and done a poem. He knew that I'd spent fifteen years playing in bands and doing this and doing that, you know. So actually getting paid for something was an absolute revolution, you know. I remember getting paid for my first, the first ever disability gig I got paid for as an individual artist was like Wow! It was incredible. It was like, that sense of value. It's not about how much you got paid. And it's gone so far back from that now. People want everything for nothing. And they think that you should be pleased, it's gone back to well you should be pleased that we're letting you in. (2:21:20)

I'd love to be, I've been writing a book for a long time, a kids' book, which is called 'who needs legs'. And I still can't manage to finish writing that because every time I get upset like I was saying earlier, I'm writing it, I'm writing a book from the perspective of a girl who's lost her legs to meningitis, don't share that yet 'cause the book isn't written, but.. I didn't want to write it as an autobiography but I wanted to switch it all around, understand things and also I have a wife who is a disabled person and a daughter who's a disabled person and a son who's a disabled person. So I've got lots of the things and I really want to finish that but I'm thinking so all the things I could have been, 'All the Things We Could Have Been' is a fantastic piece of work, I think. And people who read it go shit this is amazing, why isn't it out there? Dunno.

And another one. I wrote a piece called, it's had read-throughs but I wanted someone to make it like a mini-film, you know short. It's Called, 'A Life in the Day Of'. There used to be, my mum and dad used to get Reader's Digest and there was always at the back of it 'A Day in the Life Of..'. And so I wrote this short piece and it was called, it's called 'A Life in the Day Of'. And basically it tells the story of a disabled man with CP and how when the carers come in in the morning, he's treated like a baby. And then through the day things get a bit better but he's always at somebody else's, someone else is always controlling

what he's doing until at the end of the day he's put back to bed as if he's an old person. That's why it's a life in the day of. And it's great. And people who've read it, now this is fucking amazing. But I tried to get money for that, but it's film, we don't do film funding. I don't knooooow anything about making film, you see I couldn't pretend to be able to go out there and make a film. That's not a, you know, I can hold a camcorder or a phone and make some pretty shocking, shaky images. I don't want, I'm not good at, you know, I can make my own music recordings, but .. (2:24:12)

So there's still so much I've got. And actually as an artist, I'm actually probably more frustrated. And now, I've had to, because work is so short, don't get me wrong I love what I'm doing, but I now coach swimming six days a week, six evenings a week, five evenings and a Saturday morning. Which means I can't bloody do, you know when am I going to perform, I have to take time out from coaching to go and perform if I ever get offered a gig. We had a gig last week and we gigged in this amazing bikers' pub, so (2:24:48) almost nobody but played fucking amazingly. But it is difficult. Ju and I have talked about this, that so many disabled artists are having to not be artists, because they simply can't afford any more, you know, so a lot of my work, what enabled me to be a artist was that I got a lot of work as an empowerment trainer, and arts and empowerment trainer. And of course, the arse has fallen out of being an arts and empowerment trainer because there's, it's not that there isn't the call for it. I could give myself away twenty-four hours a day for nothing. But ask for some money for it, we can't pay for that, and it's not really important enough, cause you know. And how do you argue, we haven't got enough money to pay for personal assistance to change people's, you know grown adults' pants when they didn't get to a toilet in time. How can we justify therefor paying for poetry? Now, I know it's a very utilitarian perspective, cause actually we all now know, I think, I can't remember who it was, astonishingly a conservative who conceded the other day that the lack of art education in schools is starting to affect society. Did I hear that right? Because it is. We know that, because we're artists. Like people say whern we can't afford, why are we, like Birmingham, Birmingham has a really big thing about spending money on putting flowers in the middle of the streets. But actually, it must cost thousands for all those flowers when you could be dong this that and the next thing. But actually, is those, do those

flowers, it's not putting tarmac in a hole in the road, or it's not paying for a park keeper to keep the park open till ten instead of seven. But it is doing something very different, by uplifting the spirit of the people

A: It may be reducing crime, health benefits..

R: Absorbing the carbon out of the cars because there's flowers at the edge of the road, whatever.

A: I think it's really bad that hospitals don't allow flowers.

R: Because people might be allergic to them.

A: No, it's because they start to get rotten and then. But all you need to do is have a system for fucking changing the water. That really isn't the biggest thing. And it's such an important thing for people to be able to bring flowers to somebody when they're in hospital, you know. And it's like, they've taken a health excuse because basically the nurses don't want to faff with it. And it's made hospitals a less human place to be.

R: Just checking in case my wife has tried to phone me..

A: When Vicky's in hospital for a long period I always fight to, I try to take in pictures and put them up on the walls, and like sort of fight for the space. Because I always feel, when the nurses ask you to step out and pull the curtains round, that's partly a privacy thing, but it's partly also nurses saying 'this is our space'. On that one, I'm prepared to fight them.

R: (laughs.)

A: Particularly, When there was a time when as a result of some really horrible drug that she'd been put on for a while, it bugged Vicky's liver and kidney function as a result of which she got an infection and she fell asleep one day and didn't wake up for a fucking fortnight. You know, all that time she was in hospital, in the High Dependency Unit and I didn't know whether she'd actually

wake up at all. I had that conversation with a doctor, you get taken into a side room, it was a hopeless fucking doctor. Eventually *I* had to say to *him*, you know, are you trying to tell me she might die? And he said yes I am.

R: Just say it!

A: At least we've got that straight. What I was going to say, I took in there a photograph of her, looking her best and looking really professional, as someone who ran her own business and put it by the bed. While she's there, tubes all over her, . Not having her hair washed ever, looking really manky, I thought it was really important to have something in there saying, look, that's who you're dealing with. Fucking get her back to that, you bastards. Interestingly, I discovered that when Jane Campbell was in a similar situation, Roger Symes, Jane's husband, Roger did exactly the same thing, he took in a photo of Jane, he took in Jane's graduation photo actually, put it beside the bed. One of the best things, actually, I found, was um, a friend of mine commented that when she visited her in hospital she commented 'she runs her own business, you know. The first night that she was in resus, and they ask you these questions, they're trying to establish what sort of mental state they're trying to get somebody back to, in terms of establishing normal functioning. And I said well, she runs her own business. And that went down in the records. And it kept coming back, 'Oh, she runs her own business, does she?' I thought wow, that was a good thing to put, that one.

R: I've never really used it, in my writing, or not in any direct form or even probably quite indirectly, is about my what's the right word for it? Malaise over living with a person with a degenerative condition, having two children, one of which has inherited that condition, both of which have inherited my condition which wasn't even meant to be inheritable, you know. I wouldn't change anything about my children. We make the decision, anyone can have a disabled child, any non-disabled child can become disabled at any point. But it is such an interesting relation. It's something, if I'm brutally honest, and again if Tracy reads this I don't know what you might put in about it, it's something that I do my best not to engage with. In the sense that whatever's inevitable's inevitable. I think, she was really active in disability rights but got so pissed off with it all. I

think the trouble is, sometimes it's better for people who I think are, sometimes having disability rights workers who aren't disabled people is an advantage, in that they're not going to get worked down by it, you get to that point of for fuck's sake, you're fighting everybody else's fights and your own all of the time, all day. And then when you get home you're living with the fact that you're just living, d'you know what I mean, you know. (2:34:39:7) And it's, you know, I mean Josh is pretty level-headed, he knows that if he has to give up playing basket ball because of his arms, so he became a coach. Now he's doing a PhD in physiology. My education, I was never expected to do well. My parents might have expected me to do well, the education system was like disabled child, we let him in blah blah blah.

A: Can you give me some specific examples of how you were treated at school or..

R: I think that.. Can I? Well, this is probably the worst example of.. I remember my headmaster being hauled in front of him for the umpteenth time and him being absolutely incandescent - he was a very good incandescent headmaster - yes there you go, that's a title for you, 'The Incandescent Headmaster'. Had with rage, or really because I'd done something wrong yet again, but he couldn't give me the cane because he feared that giving me the cane was gong to somehow be bad for my impairment. So I did not disabuse him of his faux pas. My dad wasn't shy of smacking, again, it's an age, my dad smacked me, yes it was a pointless exercise.. But that's how things were done fifty years ago. I don't have a problem with it. I've never smacked my kids, or once maybe, once, I remembered how futile it was. I just I don't know because I think that the relationship I had with school would have been tainted a lot earlier so by the time I'm old enough to recognise those things I was just already a badly behaved schoolboy. So I became a self-fulfilling prophecy, I am an archetypal self-fulfilling prophecy, you won't do well because, and just allowed that, so I was the wiseass in the class. And then, but there were certain teachers that were really annoyed by this, so actually, it's interesting because actually I became that and then other teachers would be like oh I'm so disappointed, because we know, because you're a clever bloke, you know.. Probably driven by the fact that eventually I got a degree in philosophy, so maybe. But even when I was at uni, I got a 2.2, should have got higher. Got a 2.2. But in my three years at university,

ended up being four and a bit because I had to start again because of going to the paralympics twice. I went to two paralympic games, played in a band, I mean going to paralympic games isn't about the three weeks you're away for, it's the seven days a week training schedule that you follow to be a paralympic athlete. So I trained and competed in two paralympics. At the same time played in a touring uni band up and down the country and got married, because I was a mature student when I started. In my three years of a degree, or four years of a degree, actually I did all of those other things as well. So I probably didn't put as much into my studies as I should have done.. It's hard, so yeah, but that, I mean there were silly things, things that I remember like at uni, I went to Birmingham uni and the arts faculty was split between two levels, it was a T-shaped building and had all the seminar rooms and the lectures offices were all on the Ts, but the seminar rooms were all on the leg. But this was between two floors. But the lifts only went to the main floors then you had half a set of steps, you either had half a set of steps down or you had half a set of steps up to get to the seminar rooms. In the first year, you didn't use the seminar rooms, you went to the lecture theatres and they were all, you just sat at the front, that was fine. And then, but the university wouldn't put in a platform lift. And in my year there was actually another girl that was doing philosophy and something else who was a wheelchair user. We were like the only two wheelchair users in the whole university and we were in the same department. And, apart from Tim Marshall but he was a lecturer, but he was in engineering I think. But the university refused to put a lift in because they described us as a transient population and they wouldn't invest money in a transient population. With no thought for the fact that they could actually then advertise themselves as an accessible faculty. And it just so happened that there was a lecturer who was a, philosophy and theology shared the back bit of the faculty and there was a theology lecturer who had some kind of walking issue and it was getting a bit worse and she lied to the university and said, or made, changed everything so that she had to use those seminar rooms, so they had to then, well didn't have to I suppose, it was pre-DDA and stuff but she did something so that they could then put it in, so that we could then, the people who needed it, 'cause she didn't really need the platform lift, but said that she did. So even as late as that, things were not good. But that's the practical side of it, not the learning side of it. It's hard to say, really, I just, I just know that the majority of teachers didn't have the expectations of me, so

therefore when I was misbehaved, cause I thought well it doesn't matter. So I wasn't necessarily gone in there and gone he's stupid, he ain't gonna to do any good, which was what Josh's experiences were, much much later. Mine were, he's a wiseass but he's disabled it doesn't matter. So it was just, it didn't matter, so that was the experience rather than so yeah, rather than it being you can't do this, you're not going to do this blah balh blah, it was probably almost worse, it was a 'it doesn't matter, because he's disabled and whatever, what will be will be. Whereas when Joshua went to mainstream school and he went into year seven, he had this really weird timetable, was allowed to miss bits of lessons and went to this strange little room for where the, the resource base or something where all the disabled students, becaues it was a resource base school, they went there and they'd go to their lesson when they felt like it, they didn't have to ,well the science was up here, so we won't' change the science room, cause it doesn't matter they can miss science, cause they're the disabled students. It was like he's only gonna get, he's never gonna get above Cs in his GCSE's so what does it really matter if he's missing a few lessons. And like it fucking does. To the point we changed his school, we took him out of it, I'm not having this, and changed him to a school on the other side of Birmingham, we then had to move house to make it sensible, 'cause otherwise he was having to travel an hour to and from school. They brought him in the taxi in the days when schools still provided taxis. But you know. And now, this child who was only gonna get above C's and it didn't matter, is in the first semester of a PhD. Kind of says it all, doesn't it, how utterly wrong. (2:44:29)

A: I remember my parents having discussions about what secondary school my brother should go, on the basis that they didn't want to push a not very academic kid into a very academically pressurised environment. He was , he did birdwatching and stuff.. The 'not very academic kid' is now a Cambridge professor. The University of Cambridge fucking head-hunted him for a new Chair they were setting up. Bill, all his life has known what he's interested in and what he's not interested in . I visited him one term while he was at university. The previous term, this was at East Anglia, which has a course-grading system, the previous term he had scored nothing between 20% and 80%. There was like the things he was interested in, which he worked at, and the things he wasn't interested in, fuck them. That attitude has served him well in academia.

A: Tell me about punk, did you actually get into *being* a punk.

R: Yeah. In the broadest sense. I mean I had many-coloured hairs, I got my ears pierced, I was the first boy at school to have my ear pierced. That's who I was, it's like shit I could get my ear pierced. And then when everyone blah started getting their ear pierced, I then got both done. And then it was like, you're gay then aren't you mate. Okay, if that's what you wanna think, think what you want, I know, I'm not but I could have been, but I didn't care, I didn't care, it was like, so it was like and it was just to give a big finger to the authorities, 'cause you weren't allowed to wear ear-rings to school, so I did. And then I wore two. And I was told to take em out and I never did. Then I put another one in, so I ended up I had two in one and one in the other. I had blue hair, green hair, pink hair, purple hair. Bleached hair. I never had a proper mohican, but I was a swimmer. It didn't stop me doing it, it simply made no sense to have a mohican, because, you know when you're in the swimming pool four, five times a week or whatever, a haircut like that, it's just on the way. So I had, I always had short, spiky scruffy, messed-up kind of hair. And occasionally long, I had it longish at one point, a bit later on. And that became many colours as well.

A: What about, in the paralympics, I remember seeing like a swimming race of people with no arms, where you just swim until you bash the end with your head. Why would you choose that sport?

R: Cause if you've got a great leg-kick why not? Cause if you like swimming.

A: But someone like that, suppose they grew a mohican, great big mohican, would that count?

R: They would probably define that it still had to be your head. Although, somehow I don't think in a swimming pool it would stay up. You'd just not be able to see where you were going and then you'd be a blind no-armed swimmer.

Yeah, my one regret is I never got to meet Ian Dury . I was meant to and

something happened. I think it was an insecurity issue and I never went, something oh I can't remember, 'cause he was always my hero. But as a punk, not as a disabled person. I think as well as a disabled person. His songwriting is, you know if there's anyone that my songwriting is akin to, and again I'm not trying to measure myself against him, but just stylised-wise it's about telling stories, that's where I get my songwriting and storytelling. It's Ian Duryesque. Although he's the only person I've ever been any good at doing karaoke of as well, Cause I aint never read no nothing aint never said nothing, neither is it anything I ever said Fred.

A: Clever Trevor.

R: Yeah. Knock me down with a feather.

A: He can write. I only know, you know that facility with rhyme that American songwriters have, clever, snappy. I can only think of two British songwriters ever who have had that kind of facility. One of them's Noel Coward 'In tropical Climes there are certain times of day when all the citizens retire to take their clothes off and perspire. It's one of those rules which the greatest fools obey, because the sun is far too sultry and one must avoid its ultra violet rays'. And the other one is Ian Dury.

R: Yeah, he was brill. You must start studying my lyrics and see what you think of them.

A: Yeah, sure.

R: See how they match up. That was something, something that I, in poetry and songwriting is about where you're splitting your sentence at a given point So you split the sentence but it's still delivered so that you get the two points of the sentence to give you the rhyming, or the syncopation or what ever the, I'm a very untechnical poet. You know what I mean, you know so that actually you think the line's finished but it hasn't, cause you carry it on with the next line.

A: That's one of the things this transcription poetry is all about. What's really

helpful for that is having written comedy. Cause comedy's all about like where the beat is, where the stress is, where the pause is.

R: Well, I don't know if you do use Apple, I didn't bring a CD. There's a song on my album 'Black Thursday' called 'Far Queue', which is all about the experiences of music festivals. It's probably the one comedy song I've written. Which goes down well when you've got a good audience, they pick it up almost instantly. There is a bit, cause it goes, like the first verse goes, 'I was trying to park my motor at V just the year before, people climbing out of camper vans and falling to the floor. So I asked the parking marshal what I should do. He said there's parking over there for the likes of you. But when I saw where he was pointed and what I had to do, I turned back to the marshal and said 'Far Queue' I mean, and then it's, 'it's twelve-bar, or sixteen bar. But then it comes back in with 'he said you what, I said far queue, he said you what, I said far queue, he shook his head, he said you come to these events you expect us to provide a wheelchair tent'. And then it kind of goes on like that. And then each line ends with 'far queue'. But without actually saying it. And then I do it and I do it, and people pick it up really really, it's just, there's a stop, so it goes 'and I was talking to the marshal and I said, then the music stops and I go far queue. But the very last line says blah blah, the service and the atmosphere are just crap, so you lose your tongue and lose your moor and shout 'this is really bad service'. And whatever it is, whatever comes out at the end line it's not what, the whole audience has gone FAR QUEUE!. And I go no rude! And I'll add a bit on the end.

My wife is phoning me, probably to find out if I've even left yet. So I'm gonna drop her a text if that's alright with you.

A: I think we're pretty much done.

R: When you've listened to it all and you go actually, I've missed this...

A: Well that's what I think actually. Let's stop now. Unless there's anything..

R: No..

ENDS

Part Two

A: Okay. Tell me some more about Angryfish.

R: So, Angryfish came about in about 1999 as a stage name if you like. So I'd been doing lots of stuff around disability art for a long long time in various things, you know music, poetry whatever. And then I decided that I wanted to put together an album. And I needed a name, I wanted a name, I didn't need a name. And I kind of, as you do, if you go and research for a band name or whatever. Or a stage name you know you go through., you go from the sublime to the ridiculous and I suppose Angryfish probably picked on the ridiculous end of band names. I ummed and ahed and ummed and ahed and talked to a few people and they were like well how do you reflect you? And I think that it's a combination of three things as a start point. One, me as a swimmer, two with a name like Surgeoner, I've been called Surgeon many, many, many times. And probably, maybe some of that but obviously from a political, you know disability art, politics side of it I do have angry, is it angry? A bit of anger shall we say, frustration and anger. And it's a kind of all of those things suddenly, this epiphany of Angryfish. And it stuck, I just used it. So kind of Angryfish is me, and then there have been two incarnations of Angryfish the band, so that's me with other people coming in and doing various bits. I had my brother-in-law who's passed away, but he was drummer in a band he had muscular dystrophy at one point. And another guy on bass. And then the band, Angryfish the band now, when I put together Black Thursday as an album, I recorded it with some friends who were, (weren't shit-hot musicians). But then if I release this I wanna be able to play it, d'you know what, why don't I do a bit of positive discrimination. And then I put out an advert for disabled musicians to create a band.

And so we ended up with a band of four, four guys, but not by intention, it's just, you can only come back to who applies. It was me, Phil on drums who's blind and looks like he was in Z.Z.Top, he'll be seventy-two this year, I think, and still plays like a young rocker. And I know the impairments aren't particularly

relevant, but just for making it make sense, the bass player's a guy called Ian who has, lost his legs as a teenager. And then the other guitar player, who's a guy called Sam, who's late twenties and has Aspergers, other kind of spectrumy stuff. He's also a songwriter and singer. So if you like, so Angryfish as an entity is a kind of malleable thing. So if there's me, I am Angryfish. And so almost everything that I've produced in the last twenty years has gone under the name of Angryfish. So that's who I am. I am Angryfish and then I have other fish with me. Bob Findlay, because when we get onto everything we could have been, he was one of the cohort, within one of those cohorts and we were labelled as Angryfish and crips. You know, which is fabulous, although in the public arena loses some of its irony. So we had that. That was the internal name we had.

We were practising and trying to get gigs and doing stuff. And I still run it and do things and, it depends where you want to get to, what point you wanna talk about now as opposed to up to now.

A: I'll just take individual bits and edit them anyway. Either as individual poems themselves, or even mixed up with other bits you told me in the first interview to make a single poem. I'll oversee that side.

R: So I mean Angryfish is gonna stay, Angryfish is here to stay. Just occasionally becomes a flounder. Not least the last few years where it.. As an individual disabled artist it has become immensely difficult to get funding unless you can continually be, you know, avant-garde and innovative and stuff like that. And there comes a point where being those things for the sake of having to be them doesn't necessarily make good art. From my point of view, you know 'cause no-one told Shakespeare he had to write differently, he just continued doing what worked well. That's the vein I'm in at the moment is well I can only do what I know works well with some little bits here and there and trying to do it. The last grant I put in for got turned down purely on the grounds that there were other more innovative projects. No-one's doing anything, no that's not fair. The whole point of the Why Festival, right from its inception, before it was called the Why Festival was about giving, providing safe opportunities for disabled people who are not at this point necessarily artists, they may well become, they could already be, but about giving them safe learning, creative performance

opportunities. Because most of us are either too old, or it's not accessible to just suddenly go to Stagecoach or some other, you know buy-in drama school sort of thing that you can go to when you're eleven but not when you're twenty-one, or fifty-one, or whatever it is.

So my rationale all the way through it was about creating new opportunities for new up-and-coming and wherever it was appropriate um mid-career artists to perform, you know to have the opportunity to work together to create collaboratively and deliver performance spaces. And that's like yeah we don't care about that any more. That 'cause it's not new, you're not painting yourself gold and hanging upside-down in a wheelchair from Waterloo Bridge or some kind of headline-grabbing kind of spectacle. But it forgets the me and yous of this world that are artists who wanna just do their art and want to help other people become the artists that they could be, or even don't yet know that they could be, but by offering those really kind of small windows of opportunity. And yet, you know I've got, not wishing to blow my own trumpet, but there's a poet now called Kuli Kohli who had been doing some poetry, had written lots of poetry but would not perform them. She's a forty-something, maybe even fifty-something year old Asian woman with CP, married, got kids, she's written her own back story, you don't need that from me, she would be someone that you might want to talk to in the future. So she came along and she said I could do all this, write all those things, but will you perform them for me. And I went no. No I won't. Not in a horrible way, you can do it, she said I can't, I can't. Without going through the whole process, I gave her the confidence that she's now, she's doing trips to foreign places, reading her poetry. So you know I've been completely usurped. She sends me everything and there's always like you know, I didn't help her particularly, I didn't help her as a poet, I helped her as a performer of poetry. But she's gone on.

Robert Pontin, I don't know if you know Robert. He's now kind of operating as Robert Pontin or the Bitterfly, sort of play on butterfly. Again he had CP, got speech issues. But he's now recorded a thirty-track poetry CD in my place, but you know he did his first course with me ten years ago probably and then he did 'All the Things We Could Have Been' and its like 'I can do this!' But without opportunities like what I've always tried to offer those people would just be, I'm

not saying I'm thoroughly responsible, but you know what I'm saying is they may not have found themselves and this opportunity to be who they are inside without that kind of safe environment to do it.

So at the moment I'm writing songs and stuff, but I'm forever trying to, I don't know if you've had the experience, you put in fucking hours and hours and hours of work into an ACE application, you know you get endorsements and sharing this and then they go sorry, no somebody else is more interesting. And you're like, the investment into the application, you can't suddenly go back to someone and say, yeah that one failed, can you spend another couple of hours writing something for me, can you do this? So at the moment, I keep having, I keep visiting this you know internal conversation about can you come up with something good, or sellable in terms of funding and what have you, And at the moment I think I'm still a bit too cross to do that, because you just, you know I didn't become an artist or I don't identify as an artist to become a bureaucrat.

It's a huge contradiction. You accept that if you get it wrong you've gotta administer it and all the rest of, well depends who you are and what your setup is, certainly is as a sole artist. Accepting that that, and reporting, proper accounting, all the rest of it you've gotta deal with and.. to an office in Manchester that, they don't feel the weight of the boot that they've just shut the lid with. So you know in terms of current output and I'm doing stuff, I'm writing, but I'm writing in a way that's just, it's very organic. I mean my writing's mostly been organic anyway, but it's like, you know there are bits and they're very kind of acerbic. Occasional vitriol, if that wasn't a contradiction, I'm full of occasional vitriol. But I suppose without compromising the quality of it, because what I don't want to do is just become Angryfish actually is angry poet, cause I'm not. So although the name suggests it, there needs to be a turning point in the conception of angry to actually creatively, constructively positive. There you go.

A: D'yu wanna take that back to the beginning?

R: Right. So. The beginning being I played various festivals right back in the early 2000s. Judith Stevenson and the Council of Disabled People did the Millenium Festival, then we had the Liberty, which kind of fell on its arse for various reasons.

And that ran for a couple of years and did like quite a lot of disability art does, it's a great idea, then nothing gets publicised and nobody goes to it. So lots of little things in between and then of course DaDa happened. I did quite a lot of the early stuff up in Liverpool. And, and then I thought well if they can do that, why can't I do something, obviously I don't have the scale of DaDa as it became, was NWDAF or something I think back in those days. And er so probably about 2012 maybe, 2013, I'd had an idea that I'd like to do this, so I went to see Ruth Gould and we spent a lot of time chatting. And she was really good, really, you know, supportive, said she'd mentor any ideas I'd got. So that was great, and then I can't remember, some things you try to put out of your mind but then.. I faltered because there was just, like these things can take time. And then, so at that point it didn't have a name as such, but it was the ideas I've already talked about, about you know and doing a mix of bringing in some established artists to, when you've got your performance ready, the idea is that, like any support act, you're coming in and you've got an audience because someone's come to see somebody bigger than you. That's the theory. Anyway, so not remembering the exact machinations of it, a bit later, Ruth then contacted me and said can you come and see me, I've been asked to throw together a strategic funding thing, looking at the six areas of lowest engagement in the arts, which included the Black Country, it was the Black Country, Newham and Stratford, so Ju was involved. Belfast, or Northern Ireland perhaps, um Liverpool, St Helen's, those six anyway.

A: West Country?

R: No, no. there was, there was a sort of cohort of the North-West, plus Northern Ireland, Black Country, Newham and Stratford. And then, so she took my idea, I don't mean that in the wrong way, it was different to DaDaFest, because DaDaFest was very much about presenting what was there. But then she like the whole concept of it, so she then built the concept that I'd put together in to being a sort of foundational bit of this National Disability Arts project, which for the life of me I now can't remember what it was called. I mean you saw bits of it, when we came up there, some of that was the stuff that went on in DaDa. And it was a three year project, culminating in what was probably the 2016 DaDaFest, thinking about it. Um. Or it might have been earlier. Forgive the time scales, I'm sure we can find those out. So, yeah that, so I then took on that I

would, so I was invited from having had this original concept to then be the lynch-pin for anything in the Black Country. And then obviously I had links with various other people in the Black country and then put together this, originally it was called Wolverhampton and something Fest. And then the spanner in all of this, and it was really, really horrible was that Paul Darke then threw his toys out of the pram because we hadn't asked him if we could do work in Wolverhampton. Him and Ann Whitehurst, Paul's missus, summoned me to a meeting at the Arena and it was vile, really horrible, me and Ruth came out of it like fucking white, I mean it was so offensive, based on the ground that we were stealing their work, we were going into their territory,. Nothing can happen in Wolverhampton without their permission, it was really awful. And that kind of really put a knock on stuff. To the point that actually, in the end, we did the work. I mean and I've spoken to Paul a couple of times and the odd Facebook kind of affirmation, but actually, we'd been really good friends up until this point. And he took it as a total snub from both me and Ruth. It wasn't anything of the sort, it wasn't, you know, hadn't even got to the stage really of who was gonna be involved at the local level. He put two and two together and made ninety-four, you know, then had this, to the point where I was supposed to be doing, Alan, what's his bloody name, we were supposed to be doing some work in Wolverhampton for December the 3rd or around that day. And we were threatened by Paul that if we did this, they would scupper everything that we ever did in the future. This was when his wife had been elected to, was on the council. And I actually got these emails saying if you turn up at this, it's the end of your world in disability arts. And so we did it and his wife came in as a councillor, and just stood as I performed at the back staring me down. And I'm like hold on I'm the one up here with the microphone performing. You're not going to intimidate me too much. I mean, it's intimidating, it is, You'd lie if you said it didn't. But it was that kind of intense around it, no we're not gonna let that happen, you know. So I, Paul has a very, have to be really careful, I don't know how good friends you are with Paul.

A: Don't worry about it. Not particularly.

R: He has a very, he's very good at getting work and getting money, he doesn't go to anything he funds or supports, because he says it's all shit. How does that

work? There is a real contradiction of things going on there. Which is annoying,. But anyway. That bit out of the way, so I embraced what I was gonna do for the West Midlands. Instead of calling it whatever we did, I needed to come up with something and I came up with the Why Festival. And this what we called it before I was aware that there was anything else called the Why Festival or the Why Not Festival, and I'm sure they came afterwards and nicked the name, or happened upon it anyway. Um. And then so my concept is that the Why Festival is not about why not but simply, why is a much bigger question, why are you doing this, why haven't you done it, why aren't you doing it, why can you do it, why shouldn't you do it, how, why is that what you're doing. You know there's a, it was meant to be why as a positive 'Why?'. 'Why can't I?' 'Why shouldn't I?' Not 'why aren't you?'. It's a very, you know it's meant as a much more positive reflection on, perhaps effectively the same questions to some degree. And so all the stuff I then did under the strategic touring grant in the Black Country was done as the Why Festival. There were lots of little things that went on but then there were two events, but of course we didn't do one in Wolverhampton, which was a real pain in the arse. So we ended up doing one at a really great venue called the Glass House in Stourbridge, which has changed a bit now, but that was really good, it was a college for young adults, typically with non-neurotypical behaviours. And kind of associations, so there were some kids with physical impairments, young adults, sort of range of people, but this college was tertiary place about learning, but learning about art skills and using glass. So the Glass House is still there, it's like a, got lots of mini-workshops for contemporary artisans, it's a really, really interesting place. But it's also got histories of glass in the area and all kinds of things. But they also have this incredible performance space, because the college students as part of the broader bit of what they were doing, were doing performancey-type things, or had the space to do it. So you got DJs and all kind of manner of things going on. So then, I was able to put in both local artists, but then we had the touring artists that came in, which were Krip Hop, um and Gareth Berliner and Karuna Stammell doing whatever the show was as the sort of headline acts. But it was so difficult to sell space, to get people to them, then brought in all these other artists, like the local artists who were just chuffed to be getting an opportunity.

So when that finished, I then did reapply and got however long it was worth of

funding, I mean I massively, massively underpriced it to get it under the fifteen grand, for effectively a two-year project, so most of it I did for free. Um and then kind of kept it all, so we did loads and loads of workshops, and er< I'm trying to remember, this is really bad now, because it all meshes into one, I'm trying to think whether all the things we could have been did have a separate, yes it must have done.

So, yeah, so, so I then, so we built on it and then did loads of work around it, lots and lots of workshops, but then bringing that all together came all the bits of all the things we could have been, which again I will come back to but..

A: Give me some more about the workshops before we move on. What sort of workshops were they?

R: So, a lot of them were, created, were, if you like sort of free-thinking creative writingy things but literally about me using my skills as a facilitator to get people to do stuff that they didn't know they could do. And, you know, so some of these were like workshops in day centres, for example, that were just with the cohort, and I'd say okay we're gonna do a song writing workshop, and they're like okay, but you're never really gonna get anything out of these people, and at the end of the day they would always have produced a song. Whether it was, you know, as simple as doh re mi or something else, but it was always about, what I got really, you know, I'll blow me own trumpet, really good at, I don't know how, but good at, was getting people to sit in a place, brainstorm, come up with a few ideas then work on those ideas and work on those ideas, so that we'd end up with so many flipcharts or whatever and drawings, and my cartooning got better, it's still crap but, often you got people who don't have reading skills or good reading skills so being able to use pictures as well. And then kind of collating those together and all through agreement, saying okay well this means this, so as a set of words, cause obviously a lot of people who don't say have English, written English, you know reading and writing, still have a reasonable understanding of the spoken English. So then, you know, putting it all together and coming up with, you know saying well this picture, that word, those things this means we wanna choose what we wanna do. And then you literally put in building blocks, the bit that I would do generally, I would take what I usually

classed as my box of hitty-bangy things and occasional blowy things. But yeah that gets really yuck. But I would use my capacity to play the guitar. But again also agreeing, I would come up with what mood do we want, do you want this to be a slow song, do you want this to be a jumpy up and down song, do you want it to be, and then through agreement and then produce you know a simple set of chords that would drive a melody, so then they get that and they'd have you know (SINGS) duh duh duh duh duh and they'd go okay 'we wanna choose what we wanna do'. And there would be that kind of building songs by Lego almost if you like, but absolutely in a collaborative agreement way, very unlike Brexit negotiations. And so I've got a whole series of these songs, you know and depending on the circumstances sometimes it'd be a bit of longer one, and I'd go in and take the computer in and do some, you know, record a bit. Some workshops could have been four weeks, so you've got a bit more time but then you teach people a tiny bit about multi-track recording.

But it was, the whole point of it was about empowering people to do something different and to think about themselves in a different way, you know, and I would say to people, you know, okay this is, I want you to be creative and if at the end of the day all you've done is go AAAGH and we've got that recorded in some way, that is as valid a contribution as, you know I wandered lonely as a cloud. Because it's your contribution about you and your relationship with the world. So it's all, you know, very grandiose perceptions of myself, but it's about that idea of giving people that idea, so that's right, so get my chronologies and things right. So the Why Festival finished, the second lot, with a big event, it was at a local college, but it's a performing arts place. And we had, you know, did a whole day festival with two stage running simultaneously, an art exhibition and poetry stuff all going on, which was fab. Again, incredibly under-attended but that just seems to be how it is with disability art.

A: When was that?

S: I think it was July 2017.

A: Right.

R: You know how so much goes on, but then I'd also got, so I then had another application, which was called 'Permission to Perform'. So right back into the 2006/7 period I did a lot of workshops which were called 'Permission to Speak'. Very much exactly what I'm talking about. And this is when Robert Punton came on, early ones and other people who are now doing bigger things. And some who just really really enjoyed the experience. But I ran these 'Permission to Speak' workshops um, which, actually that was through local authority funding when it still existed. So they ended up in workshops, I did a whole series of workshops in the bottom of the, I say in the bottom, of the ICC in Symphony Hall in Birmingham, where I'd used... It was a great place, cause we had the, where it is. Sometimes and I think it does matter, sometimes places just being there give you a, a sense of oh I can be artistic here because of where it is. And then, so 'Permission to Speak' and I got two or three like compilation CDs, so it would be a series of days of building up about how they work, and there was never any prescription about what people had to do, so, you know but I always had a bass guitar, I always had a guitar and some hitty-bangy things as I said. So people would then choose what they wanted to create. They might just want to do spoken word or it might have gone, well can you help me write, can you turn this into a short song or whatever.

Sp that was 'Permission to Speak'. | And obviously again it was about, it wasn't about saying you can talk now at all, it was about the whole political notion of who you are and it's okay to have questions about how you're treated and how you engage with society because of barriers blahblahblah. So then kind of, finished that original one. And then I had this idea to write a one-man show which became, which, I invented the title right at the beginning, so it was one of those few things where the title came first, which Was 'All the Things We Could Have Been' which in essence is I dunno, I'm sure there's a posh you know literature or arts name for it. But it's taken my story and lots of other people's stories that I understand or had tangential relationships with or whatever. And my understanding of the world as I see it to create this kind of story arc which goes from being a completely misunderstood teenager to coming out the other end of it as a self-determined artist, agent provocateur, disability activist whatever.

And then it goes through, there's a sort of, it's almost like a, again I'm not trying to be up me own arse but in the simplest terms it's a kind of rite of passage thing, from you know, being a disabled child and being treated as a disabled child through to at some point finding out who you are and starting to stand up for who you are. It's not a, it's an ongoing project at that point but.. So then I, so I wrote 'All the Things We Could Have Been' and I'd made, I'd made the decision that I wanted to be able to perform it as a solo show and be as portable as possible. So I designed it around, I would write the piece, I would create, any scenery there would be would be portable and that I could put up as a wheelchair user. And that I could literally perform solo bit without wanting to compromise, compromising as little access as I could. The show ended up as a solo performance, I do the main narrative, but in the background is a video, it's set in , the whole play is set in a pub called 'The Hasty and the Hurting'. And it's the pub that's next door to the pearly gates. And I kind of play both the landlord and thw narrator and the performer and then, so looking at it now it's a little hack, a little tired, but I'd love to be able to fund it to do it properly but..

Behind me, running on a video screen is what looks like a stage, with 'The Hasty and The Hurting' written across the back of it. And then there's a sign language interpreter filmed, already doing the sign language of my performance. But I'd made all of those decisions, that was how I would do it before I'd written it, so then I had to work out how on earth I write something that I can pace, with the sign language going on behind me. So the whole, almost the whole of the show, the play, I mean it's like a very, I call it my baby Faust, really. So it's all written in, almost entirely in couplets. But some really, really complicated ones that do bear out as you get through them. But it took me, I started writing it, bits of it anyway, outlines of it, you know you get, a scene come in your head, or a bit of little, I've still got most of them at home as well, pages or a book like you've got in front of you. Suddenly there'd be ten lines in it with a block round the going such and such to the play. So I ended up writing it in these very complicated couplets so that, well it was doubly challenging 'cause I refused, I refused to compromise on, on rhyme. So it took me a long, you know rather than going oh if I put down wham cause it happens to rhyme with sham, then fine, but then I wasn't gonna do that. It was, I would spend, I would have pages going on missing half a line. And I'd just have to wait till it came, how do I put that, how

do I phrase that?

So I really didn't compromise at all on any of the rhymes to get me the story that I wanted to give. With the kind of underlying idea that I'd written it, or half of the reason I'd written it that way was so that I could then give myself a metre to be able to play in time with what I couldn't see was going on behind me. No rhythm track going tss, tss, tss, because that would just annoy the shit out of everybody. And I tried doing a bit of rappy singing version of it. It doesn't work in that sense, cause it's prose rather than poetry I suppose. Not really knowing the distinction. Cause it does rhyme, but they're not 8.000 words of iambic pentameters. Because some of the lines might have twenty words in and some of might only have six. Anyway.

So I then created this piece and then it's got, its got four songs in it, it's got, which again the soundtrack was recorded without the vocal, so I would then sing the vocal, so that's in the video as well. There are some, I had some mantras in it as well, which were sort of built in as natural breaks for me, which were pre-recorded but I could choose to say them at the same time, 'nobody noticed, nobody cared, prepare to be frightened, prepare to be scared'. Bit sinister but um and then another one was 'who died today, who died today, who died today, what did the papers say they said nothing'. You know because, probably even this time it was really early around the whole like people dying because of the result of changes to benefits and stuff like that. People that read it now.. And this was like really prophetic. I wish I could remember his bloody name, Alan .. This is annoying me now. I shall look and cheat. Can't be that many people in my phone book called Alan. Alan McLean.

And he's always been quite a good supporter of my work. I did a lot of the workshops with him or for him in the days when we had funding. He was even sort of six, seven, eight years after I'd written it the people were still saying how did you see all this back then. It's like, I haven't, nothing's changed, it's just that other people now see it if that makes sense. It's like I had the sort of, my own looking glass as if it were, were somehow able, don't get me wrong I'm not saying other people are, I'm seeing more than anybody else, I've managed to capture it. Can we pause for a minute?

R: Okay, we running? So, we were talking about 'All the Things We Could Have Been', weren't we. So I created this show which, when I do it as a solo show, it's about an hour and ten minutes. People that have seen it, it might not be the most polished piece of art, and it's so long that I don't know it off by heart, but I don't pretend to. I bought myself a massive big black book and I use it, kind of Domesday thing, I read through it, but make it part of the performance. And it's amazing when it's there, how little you do look at it cause you just need to see little bits of it. You know, I don't profess to have a memory for performance, even as a songwriter, this is one of those strange things, I can remember phone numbers till they come out of my bum, lyrics, even the ones I write, some of them, the moment I put them on the page they're in my head, others not. Anyway.

And so the show ends up, so there's me as the only live person as it were, the video running, with music tracks in it where appropriate and the sign language interpreter, and then there are three guests, because, so going back to the setting of the pub that's next door to the gates and there's lots of references um, sort of quasi-religious references about people come in, whether they should come in and go back out through the in door, Led Zeppelin reference, that's in through the out door isn't it, this is out through the in door but, so when the landlord speaks as the narrator being the landlord, there are various other references about who I am and how I see my people, but then comes this whole thing about my people and being kind of the activist disabled population, but then, so there are three guest appearances, which act as again, rests and kind of not, distractions is probably the wrong word. Maybe. But because the main narrative is very, it raises a gazillion questions cause every one that's seen it wants to see it again because there's so much there that they don't, you know cause if you focus on that, almost every rhyming couplet's a question. And then people are like I missed that because I was trying, I was thinking about what you'd said *then*. Cause it covers this huge breadth of things, from euthanasia and aborting disabled foetuses through to, you know, careers offices and there's a massive thing of what life is as a disabled person, which I suppose is the same as anybody else's but there's just, all the extra ramifications of it.

So anyway, you've got these distractions, there is , so one song is sung by a young woman who is, who generally has paraplegia but her title in the show is Miss Paralysis. And she does this heavy rock rap. And then it happens to be my son Josh.

A: Who genuinely has paraplegia.

R: Yes, I haven't just brought someone in and put them in a wheelchair. And then my son Josh, who is also a wheelchair user as it happens . He play the character, again this is a real sort of just a break almost, he plays the character of the Little Limerick Laureate. And I can't remember how many but he delivers six, seven or eight really completely un-PC, disability focused limericks. And the biggest, probably the longest separate section, which is about half way through is a story called 'The Red Hand from Ulster'. And it tells the story of the hand, the hand that went on to live for time immemorial, having been chopped off and thrown on the shore. You don't necessarily need to know the story of the red hand of Ulster, because the story is kind of self-contained. But yeah. It's a little baby story of absolute independence: even if you're only a hand, if you learn how to live, you can do on your own, you can live. Yeah and it's quite funny because it ends up as, it's, I suppose the only, it's probably the only bit of it that's now slightly anachronistic in the sense that, the story tells, this hand ends up living in the betting shop on a council estate in, somewhere in Northern Ireland. And all it does is watch football all day. But still wants to have some influence on the world. And it works out that actually through its own will power he can affect what people do on the football pitch, the hand of certain players. And then it goes, Maradona, didn't know what he was doing, Thierry Henry had no control over that. And then a line about Northern Ireland having beating southern Ireland or whatever it was, no the French beating Ireland, whichever it was, so if you don't know your football history that doesn't necessarily make sense. It's just that you'd lose a little bit of it.

But anyway. So then I produced it and then you know, and it is, I mean if I look at it back you know I've made little revisions to it , you know, you would do ten years down the line. But fundamentally not, just tidied little bits up, I think I've taken out some swear words as I've grown into an adult. I think there's still

some in there, but I think I've just, just tweaked little bits of it and we performed it and read it, so I'll come back to the next bit of it but essentially I still look at that and go fuck I wrote that, that was really good. If there's one the one thing, you know because it doesn't rely on my guitar playing, it doesn't rely on me being able to sing, it is the pure piece of work. And then, as I wrote it, and it's written in chapters so it's not just an 80,000 word poem, it's written in chapters and then you can, I've used , so I did it so you can use any given chapter as the beginning, for a workshop, what is this asking, so whether you're doing disabled people, or social workers or whoever, it's there and it's a real strong critique, a lot of people are like really? Particularly when they're not disabled people. And there is that? No way. Yes way. There's nothing in there that's made up, well the red hand from Ulster but you know what I'm saying, the real stuff, It's all real , it just might not be attached to the person that it happened to is the sense of it.

Yeah. I mean I don't.. So, you know there is a chapter called The Impact. And actually it's all about my realisation as a late teenager, probably, of what Michael Oliver called the Social Model. Which I was living long before I had the name, but in terms of being able to externalise it, literally, on stage I'd go and it hit me like a slap in the face. And then.. It's both a positive and a negative realisation, because it goes on to focus on the fact that okay, you can feel better that it's not you who says that, you go through that externalisation from self-blame to what's been done to me, but actually is that recognition any more comfort? Because do people not want me, do people not like you because of your disability? There is a real sting in the tail of that self-realisation. Sometimes you know, while it's not in the play, the whole idea of ignorance being bliss, maybe it is, maybe you're not always - I've been accused, I can remember, but if you tell people that, they're gonna be more unhappy as they realise that they're being discriminated against and it's like yeah but I'm still gonna tell them. You know. So there is that sort of double-edged sword to it.

I mean it, that was funded, so that had a series of performances. But you know, once I've finished the ones that are funded by the grant, could I get anywhere else? I've done a few little performances, well people are like well, who's your booking agent, what (techno schools?) have you done, they just could not, mainstream arts venues well who are you, we're not gonna put it on, we don't

know who you are. So it's kind of, it got shelved for a bit. So then and then I redid it for Birmingham Arts, Theatre and Arts Festival. I thought d'you know, I'll apply, I had to apply for this, it's one of those festivals where it comes under the name, but you've still got to pay to do it, but then you get your ticket sales minus whatever. And I thought d'you know what, this needs to come out again. So I got it out and did it, and some people who hadn't seen it came and like fucking hell that is so powerful. So I then, I thought what shall I do with it? So then I thought, I tell you what, so this moves on to then becoming the omnibus.

I then put a proposal to ACE which, this one they did approve, this was the last one they approved, I think, to use the original performance piece as the introduction to a series of creative writing, creative discovery workshops. So each, I think they were eight week, you know I got the money and booked out rehearsal space and the end of, end of course performance in the main auditorium. I did them both at Newhampton Arts Centre, in Wolverhampton. So the idea being, oh no sorry we did one at Newhampton Arts Centre, and then the second one at a place called the Blue Orange, which is an independent theatre in Birmingham. So the idea was that the very first thing apart from doing a bit of an ice-breaker's like sit down and watch me now. And then I would perform the piece in its original format. And then have the discussions about how did that make you feel, okay how does that make you feel about yourself blahblahblah. So that the end, the purpose was that then each of the people that were in the cohort devised themselves a character and then that got slotted into the main performance.

So from the original narrative or whatever you call it, script, I would then adjust the little bits to be able to fit in. So changed some of the continuity, so the whole play still started at one point and finished at the same point, cause the finish which are two songs, the play opens with the song 'What Could Have Been' and finishes with the song 'Don't Ever Give Up'. So then people would then spend the time working on writing something, but I brought in a dramaturg as well, who helped with running, giving people some performance and drama skills as well, even in this little space. Guy called Patrice Naiambana, who's pretty well-known. He played Aslan for RSC and Hamlet and all sorts of things like that. The first course, he came on the first one as the dramaturg. I think for me this was, a

lovely kind of result of it was that he, he did what I asked him to do but he was, he became so engaged, cause he's from Sierra, he's French Sierra, he's a mixture of Sierra Leone, but with a French background and some West Indies as well. So he, a lot of his stuff is very powerful, he's won all manner of awards for his own one-man shows and stuff.

So anyway, he was so engaged by the process that he came up to me and said can I have a part in this. I wanna write my own piece and put it in, and he came in as this kind of African overlord came on stage, with AK47, which he just happened to have in the annals of collections of things he uses as props. And an anti-Mugabe T-shirt and all kinds of things. To me that was like a testament if you like, because he was you know. So then the show ended up being, going from my an hour and six minutes, hour and ten minutes, whatever it is, through to being a show in two halves, which ended up being two hours and twenty minutes, because it expanded. And it gave all these people, I mean the problem about it was it was fucking great fun, all these people, one of them being Kuli Kohli, Bob Findlay was involved in this, Robert Punton was involved in this, you know, not just, nobody's a nobody, but there are people you know who were involved in it and Patrice, who as I say is a national touring actor, you know getting him, he was supposed to do the second one but then he got taken on tour and I had to live with it, it was just, you know. That's how it goes in that world isn't it? To then all be part of what was a performance.

And then the band, so the band that is now Angryfish became both creators in their own right and had their own spoken word pieces within the broader thing, but also then the songs became played live and then we had to use an interpreter. So that point, because it changed so much, we did bring in an interpreter to, who was like 'oh my god, I can't believe this' kind of, but she was lovely, she was really good. But she's an arts, proper arts interpreter, not just someone, you know, from the local list of interpreters. And that was amazing. And people like when can we do the next thing, when can we do the next thing. But right back to the beginning with this, you can't do the same thing again. No matter how fucking well it works. From the Grants for the Arts thing, it just seems it's gotta be, it's gotta change, it's gotta move, it's gotta evolve.

But from my point of view, there's 10,000 disabled people who could benefit from taking part in this and learn about themselves who don't need, that is their involvement, that will be part of their involvement will be to be doing something like this that is not just a workshop and that feels good or like you come and sit there and watch somebody else do something, it was totally immersive. And I suppose that's yeah. I can't remember if I've ever sent you the script. Did I send it to you with the preambles to this, I could send you a version. Might be worth you going well actually I'll kick that out of this. Because as I say it is eight thousand, something like eight thousand words long. In terms of a straight simple performance it's an hour's worth of words.

That's still bubbling under there, my wife keeps saying well what can we do with that, can't we revisit it, can't we do that? There's just no, I dunno. I'm sure, because what's absolutely certain is it is a completely relevant now, if not more so, because we've seen this, you know this, such a turnaround in the public perspective. We all know that the paralympic/Olympic legacies are a fart in the wind. It has made a difference but legacy, no. You know that, living in London, what change has it made. The only, the real only disability arts organisation from that part of London got fucking pushed aside to create the Paralympic legacy, which is a bit of a joke really. Gosh another baby rant there.

So if you like, so 'All the Things We Could Have Been' as either the solo thing, could probably do with upgrading, particularly now filming is so much more easy with technology. And or its versions that could be, you know can't we do it again. Sometimes. The play in itself could be done again, but rehashing the one that they've done doesn't work, it is that, the organic growth of the eight week process that delivers the and you've built to it and you've all worked towards it and then you've done it and you've got that euphoria and it's really sometimes hard to kind of go back and oh shall we do that again? Well why. Yes, it's probably equally valid because for those people they've only ever done it once, but finding a way to make it a viable thing because at the end of the day, I did think for a moment I'd won the lottery and then I woke up.

So that's a lot of 'All the Things We Could Have Been'. And all of this goes under the banner of the Why Festival. For me, even though it's probably been sitting

on the back burner as they say for maybe eighteen months, it's now a standing, I call it a standing festival. So it's there, so whatever I do, if I'm doing anything public that is more than me being asked to go and do something, it comes under the Why Festival. Cause it's, it works, it's a product, the website's still up there, I haven't done anything to it forever because I haven't needed to. There is this thing called the Why Festival. I still get emails, enquiries and things. So really, now Angryfish and the Why Festival are kind of two, had their own lives within me I suppose. But then, you know because of all the changes and the lack of funding across the board, not just my lack of ability to gain Arts Council funding, I've had to take on other work because I now, as I think I said last time, I coach six days a week now. That has its own poetry.

But I bring me to it. I bring who I am to how I coach. And I approach how I've got, I'm bringing through para, I'm actively trying to find other para swimmers to bring in and to develop through within an inclusive setting. So I kind of, all of that stuff still kind of goes on, it's just at the moment, the financially supportive focus of it is in sport. But then sport and art aren't supposed to be divorced even though they seem to be a lot of the time.

So Black Thursday..

A: You're reading this upside-down.

R: Well a bit of it, yeah. So there were two early pieces that I wrote that became performed by others. Lots of little kind of vignettes or whatever they call them. But one of them that for me I remember, there was one called Mine Won't Stand up in My Hand, which was done with a group of people, the majority of whom were recovering from having had strokes, life-changing strokes. And it was a whole take on the Diet Coke advert about you know the kind of, sounds a bit bizarre but you know the women in the Diet Coke lusting after somebody and then this guy, used to be kind of virile builder guy. And this was all about real people, but again taking their experiences and building it into a narrative, you know he loves Diet Coke but he can't get an erection any more. So it's kind of a pretty white-knuckle ride if it's, you're the wrong person and it's very much, it was written as a piece that was then delivered with the people, but as a question,

to front workshops and question and answer sessions about understanding disability and relating to it, whether that's from other disabled people or health professionals or whatever.

And then I was, at the time Josh would have been about ten maybe, maybe slightly younger, and we were involved in Stagecoach, because he did a little bit of classes and stuff. And I was, the principal of the school knew that I had started writing again and writing stuff, I haven't really talked of anything other than sport pre the late 1990s but she said it would be really great to have a piece, an original piece, because we don't get original pieces. So I said okay, how do we do, we need to involve as many people as possible. So then I wrote this play which was entered into the then Birmingham and Solihull Theatre Guild Festival, that was the aim of where it was going. And so I wrote this play which was about a load of kids at a theatre school going to a summer camp and then the magnifying glass of being at a summer camp and the relationships that delivers made people realise that people have things that they don't see and then it focuses on a relationship between the guy who's a wheelchair user and the girl who seems to be the principal of everything but when they go on this camp suddenly becomes really withdrawn and has always got her headphones on other than when she's in the workshop, she's always got her headphones on, always on her own. And having it uses this kind of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony kind of moment of him talking to her and then opening up to each other and he's about his worries about how people see him as a wheelchair use, whether he's fanciable. So it's very teenage thing. And then her opening up to him that the reason she always learns her lines, and the reason she's always got her headphones on like this, is because she's dyslexic. So she gets all her scripts sent to her on tape, but has never told anybody this other than the school to get it all recorded. And then how they, and then actually then how this opening up of who they are to each other is the healing element of it, so actually taking the nuances of learning or the nuances of the relationships you have as a disabled person actually is positive ones.

And then other people going well I could learn my lines like that. But helping learn lines when you can't, you know.. But for me it was a really pivotal piece of writing that made me realise that I could write something that was a bit more

substantial but still kept my core ethos of around disabled people helping each other to empower themselves, or empower each other within the scenario. And it was from that that I then went on to really get the idea for, you know being able to, that I had the belief in myself that I could write a one-man show, performing it that was another whole matter but anyway, you know. Having been on stage as a guitarist and a singer is one thing but actually, I don't hide behind my guitar but it's a barrier if you like. It's the protection as a performer. And when I sing, a lot of the time, so I think not so much now but there've been various points where I go on stage and I am being Angryfish as opposed to Robin Surgeoner with a guitar. So you're stepping into that character and putting on the armour that that character delivers to be able to go out there and often do things, bits of performance that are really quite questioning, undermining, abrasive as well as, it depends on who you are, because for me, if you're a disabled person and you understand where I'm coming from or begin to, you see it as an uplift, you see it as a fillip, you see it as solidarity and cohesion. If you're an able-bodied person you see it as crap he's really undermining everything I thought about me, disabled people, the world how we relate to them blahblahblah.

And so when I go out to do gigs and open mike, just a pub, get a gig, open mike or even with the band, there is a kind of very deep intake of breath before going into any given song, you know 'Fascist Fucking' for example, which we don't do very often, you know and it's not about having sex, it's about the fascists, it's about undermining them. I remember doing it once, we'd entered, this is the earlier cohort of Angryfish. And we'd entered this Battle of the Bands and one of the bands, and their very physical supporters were obviously a right-wing band. And we went on and you could hear from the crowd what are they doing on there, they should be in homes, put 'em in hospitals. Them not knowing that my brother-in-law, not the one that was drumming but another one and his mates, were all about six three, they had this big band of them, they're not rugby players but fucking big guys. So I changed our set and then finished with this song, 'Fascist Fucking', which is an out and out punk song, completely, the meaning, you gotta, the chorus is something like 'you've gotta screw these fascist morons and their politics of perfection, you've gotta demonstrate how wrong they are through rioting imperfection, you've gotta take these dickheads by the throats and throttle their obsessions'. I was so cross and the band I don't care you said

we've gotta do it, we'll do it. And then they got really, and the other band were on after us. And there was an absolute ruck, because when we'd got off and they knew we were safely offstage, our supporters this other band came on and were trying to give it some and they just went in and kicked the shit out of them. I don't condone violence but there was a certain retribution needed at that point, in a not hospitalisation sense but you can get away with a lot in a mosh pit that you really shouldn't, shall we say.

I started writing poetry as a teenager and I've got folders and folders of things that I've written. Two-liners, ten-liners, forty liners, you know. And a lot of it is really very, very angst, you know like 'god this was written by a depressed teenage' kind of. But you can only, when you're writing at that kind of level of who you are, it's gotta come out. But if it wasn't for the writing, I think, and I don't want to offend anybody who has had genuine mental health illnesses because it's very easy perhaps to say what I'm gonna say, but I believe that my creative indulgences, I mean and sometimes I'm talking very, very deep, very sometimes loathsome ones, where actually what stopped me from ending up, that kept me, I think equilibrium would be way off the truth but stopped me descending far enough to end up ill, or if I was ill I was, I self-medicated through, perhaps, oh yeah there was a lot of alcohol, that probably was both good and bad, but I could have a little bit to drink and then could unleash what I needed to through the pencil. So, yeah, so no I never got sectioned, I have seen psychiatrists, psychologists, but you know they usually, my experience was as long as you told them what they wanted to hear then they'd let you go. Although at one point one psychologist gave me a tape, it was in the original cassette, and it was literally about lying back, closing my eyes, starting with a blank canvas and then seeing a blue square and a red triangle. And you'd think it was utterly banal, but for me I've never forgotten, if I really need to I can go back to that utterly simple, so that psychologist did see something and gave me something that worked. So that's good. But yeah, I've probably had some really dark times, you know and, I think what you find is that I've developed a good deal of bravado, but if you know me you know when it's bravado and when, if I'm not careful now I could cry quite easily, things that have gone on in your life, and what you end up with is that you just, you do, and I'm not even sure suppress would be the right word, you just, you've got those scales, or it's like

I've got a dustbin next to me that I put things in. But sometimes you haven't had time to get a bigger dustbin. And then, then you put something else in the bin and the bin overflows. And then you go into, I don't know whether it's self-reverie or manic whatever, or just, I don't revert to alcohol any more because again I realised there is a point, having had a brain aneurism and this that and the next thing, having fallen over and banged my head drunk blah blah blah, that actually, I'm not teetotal, but I know that I, moderation, I sound like a very good Christian there, but in a sensible sense now that I, you know, I will have, at the end of the day I might sit down and have a Jack Daniels or a little beer, just to relax. I don't drink to find myself, because actually I now know that it just takes me to somewhere I don't want to be.

But you know, and I think some of the songs I've written, I'm hope I'm bringing this to make some kind of whole here. So all of those sets of emotions, you know with loss of things, losing family, I think that, you know my swimming career also helped keep me a little bit on the straight and narrow. I think if I hadn't had the swimming career, again I don't know where I would be now. But I had that, my sobriety was delivered by swimming eight times a week or whatever. But in the same way as, you know Tony Adams was a functioning alcoholic, again I was probably not quite that bad but it was, getting in the swimming pool in the morning at half past five sobers you up really quickly. Whether I should always have driven to the swimming pool in the morning's another matter but you know. I put all my own personal experiences, I'm probably very much like you and a lot of people who believe that they're writers, artists, whatever, you take a lot of cognizance of other people's stories. And then the luck, is it luck, the fortitude travelling the world, if that's the right word, travelling the world as a sportsperson and seeing a lot of other cultures and a lot of ways how people, disabled people see themselves, how they're treated. There are still countries who don't send people to the paralympics because they don't have disabled people. Hello!

All of those things go into my, when I get my pencil out to write something and I can write to order but I tend not to, I tend to wait till something's either festered or grown enough creative juice or whatever to come out. And then, so I put all of those things in, so I kind of, very much like 'All the Things We Could Have Been', a lot of the stuff I write, I write from a, I don't know, I write as Angryfish,

there you go, I write as this conglomeration of experiences that then enable me to write. So there's a song on, so 'Barbed Wire and Potholes' was this hope, vision of hope, which didn't materialise. The songs are all still pretty valid. Then I wrote 'Black Thursday'. So 'Black Thursday' is the title track and it's all about election days. Any given bloody election pretty much, if it is was in America it'd be Black Monday for example. But there's a song in there which, we played it yesterday, we had a rehearsal, I played it yesterday and when I play it right it still makes the hairs on my arms stand up. It's a song I wrote and it's not a song about a real person as such, but the song's called 'The Last Time Ever I Saw Your Face'. So it's kind of, you know you've got 'First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' being, you know a love Song, 'The Last Time Ever I Saw Your Face', the premise of the song is that you should never go out of the front door or close the bedroom door or storm out of an office or whatever without resolving an argument. Because you never know what's gonna happen the other side of that door, the other side of that argument. And so the story's about loss and it finishes with the line 'and we never got a chance to say goodbye'. I remember I did it, one of the first times I did it, was at one of the early Why Festival performances and Krip Hop were there, you remember Krip Hop, you've seen them, the rap group, they came as part of that DaDa Festival. Sasha, who plays the psycho, his stage name is Psycho, just massive big German guy, had mental health, comes from a mental health background. But he's a real big German rock/rap kind of Grrr I was playing before them and I did that, he said you bastard, I said what? He said how am I supposed to go on stage. I've been crying. I listened to that song in the green room and I was in tears. And I said and it's not even a real, and I know it's not, it just gets hold of you because of how the words fit together, and it's written, the song it's dramatically, or melodramatically in a minor chords and whatever. I can't always play it. Like if I'm in the wrong mood I can't play it because, if I am feeling a bit vulnerable, I'll choke halfway through, it's that powerful, and it's not even, it is real because it's real in the sense of it is, yes it's not one person's story, it's kind of many people's stories.

If I was to send you lyrics of the song, because it is so powerful. And then, so 'Black Thursday is a concept album'. Again it goes through, it's very much like 'Bilge'. It's not a concept album in the sense that there is a real, there's lots of

story in it that you're telling, it's just that it's a sort of, it's a story of realisations again, I suppose, but with some other bits thrown in, some funny, like the song 'Far Queue', which is all about the experience of festivals as a disabled person, I think we talked about that before. And then, you know 'Basement Billy'. So there's a song on Barbed Wire and Potholes which mentions somebody called Basement Billy. And then fifteen years later, Billy reappears and it tells his story in relation to how, there's a bit, without referencing the song, it references it by

A: (Got into?) the character

R: Yeah. Cause he ends up.. So in the earlier song he's already incarcerated, whereas in the modern version that we've heard, the actual song about Basement Billy, it's about how he becomes incarcerated as a result of mental health issues by being, you know, losing his benefits, losing, bedroom tax, this that and the next thing that build and build until he loses the plot and ends up on drugs. Cause the original song says Basement Billy hasn't got a view, he hasn't got a clue, or what ever. But, again, musically that's a quite in your face song, 'The Tale of Basement Billy'. But then the album finished with 'Black Thursday', which is, literally takes you, it starts with the line 'Come and put your cross in the box'. So it's all about elections. And if you've seen the album cover, Colin did the album cover for it, it's a picture of an election box with a stick going into it. That is, you know the black and white images of the (...) It might even be on here if I can find it and show you. And then, but again it's a really slow, grungy blues song, but then goes right through to gentrification, justification, the cleansing of the poor. It's all about modern kind of conservative politics 'they didn't tell me they were lying, I could have done more if I'd known'. As the voter, if you like. I'll find it in a minute if I can.

And then you know, although it's a long song so it never gets played, if anything gets played on the radio, that doesn't because it's too long. Can't remember if it's got any swearing in it. But then that doesn't seem to matter these days on modern radio. Come on, Surgeoner, should know how to use your phone, you'd think I'd know.

So, and I'm. And I'm still writing a lot of poetry. I've taken, not a lot but I have

another friend, who, guy called Joe Cook, who is an incredible drummer and a performance poet and has really bad dyslexia but writes the most incredible poetry, really astute political poetry. And he loves what I do and he's always getting me to, he's always inviting me to um... I don't want artists, I want album, why is it not coming up..Anyway he's always asked, he puts on, he has his own, I dunno, bi-monthly poets, spoken word evening which he calls Mouth Pieces. And I've been to a few. That awakened me to performance poetry, so I've written a few bits and pieces now where it's much more, the words still tell all the story but there is this performance element to it and I did, there's one called you what, mate, which tells the story of going down the street and you hear people saying all stupid things. I'm just reading the poem and all of a sudden I'll go 'You what, mate'. And other ones, there's another one which I love doing which works for reading, as long as you've got a good audience, I give out a slip which has got like two lines of response on it. And they have to give it at the right time, and things like that, which is really good, a much more engaging way of doing poetry. So I'm writing...here we go.

That's the picture anyway (plays song from phone)

R: Okay, so. Have we not covered anything?

A: Nothing. Do you remember in the last interview we were taking about rights and responsibilities. Do you want to tell me a bit more about that?

R: I mean almost, earlier I was saying that people had been, when I was doing workshops and delivering self-empowerment or self-realisation, or giving people the tools to do that. And people saying what if it makes less unhappy, more unhappy sorry. Because it changes their reflection on who they are. I think everybody needs to know what their rights are. We are supposedly born with inalienable human rights. Unless you're born a disabled person or you acquire an impairment and then apparently that inalienable ability gets zapped away. But at the same time, if you embrace your rights, you have to do it in a way that, you have to be responsible for how you then fight for your rights or engage in your rights. And therefore you have to be responsible about your actions in pursuance of your rights. So I was, what I always liked about DAN historically

was it was non-violent public demonstration. You know, chaining yourself to a bus isn't violent, holding a placard isn't violent. But for me, all of these things are on scales for people, but for me when they were going to go to such and such and throw red paint..nah. Because that's not responsible. For me, you know some people would call me a jesse if I say I'm not doing that. And in the same way as I'm not gonna put a bomb under the houses of parliament, because there is a point, if you start down that road where does that road end up? It ends up in civil war and terrorism. And that might sound really dramatic. But I think that you can't expect people to treat you, if you want your rights and you want to be treated in a way that befits those rights, you have to behave in a way that befits those rights. Does that make sense?

A: I think so.

R: And with that, there's a kind of reasonableness as well. Without mentioning any names, there was quite a bit of activism in Coventry for a while, it had its own disability rights organisation and stuff. There was a person who was incensed that Coventry, that the shopping centre had a hill in it, and it was built on a hill, and kind of undermined such good stuff by this continual rhetoric about, but how are people supposed to push up the hill. But Coventry was built on a hill, there's a hill there, you cannot take out the hill that is Coventry, that the cathedral's built on the top of, because some wheelchair users are gonna struggle to get up there. What you do is you create a route that enables them, you create a method. So geography, as a wheelchair user, geography and geographical features can be an absolute pain in the arse. But I don't expect them to fill the Thames because I can't walk, I can't row across it or wheel across it, you know, they build bridges. And there are, the realisation that there actually really is something called reasonableness. And that whilst reasonable adjustment usually means not doing anything, actually proper reasonable adjustment does, and it is that meeting of everything, you know, you, there are always going to be barriers to some people's participation in some things. I'm never gonna be able to ice skate. Okay? But when I take my daughter ice skating I ask to go on the rink in my chair. And they're like, okay, if you want to. If they said no, it'd be like why. I'm not gonna injure anyone because I can't go fast enough, and as long as I'm looking out for people crashing into me, but I'm never gonna be able to ice

skate, I'm never gonna be able to climb Mount Everest. I can't fly, but you don't hear people going let's sue the birds because we can't fly. D'you know what I mean., there will be acts of sacrifice and self-sacrifice that happen, that people will do because they feel so strongly, running out in front of the King's horse, for example, is memorable. Was it the thing that brought suffrage for women? Probably not. But it, in its own it didn't. There are, so things that happen, people that self-immolate as a protest. I mean they, maybe I just haven't got the balls to do something like that. But then again, we talked last time, I quite happily went through the streets of Coventry naked in my wheelchair as part of a protest, as make-do Lady Godivas. Some people would say that was pretty extreme. It was extreme without being destructive and somehow detracting because the focus becomes on the action rather than what the action was intended to signify. Is that okay?

A: Well you tell me.

R: Yeah. So these things are done. You know. I'm trying to remember her name now. The woman that streaked at Twickenham.

A: Oh right Erica..

R: That's it. Yeah. See, you remember it. I couldn't tell you why she did it. You remember the action and not what it was for. I mean Emmeline Pankhurst we do know why she did it.

A: It wasn't Emmeline Pankhurst at Twickenham. Emily something else.

Erica.... But, yeah, the, I was just trying to get it right. Just for me, there is that need for, that you have to still, to have rights you have to respect other people's rights. And that's where the responsibility comes in. For me there is a big difference. Freedom to speak and freedom of speech and for me freedom, the freedom of speech doesn't mean being allowed to impinge on someone else's liberty. So the American version of freedom of speech, for me goes too far, because you can just say what the hell you like and call it freedom of speech, irrespective of the fact that it could be inciting hatred of whatever version it is.

A: A country full of lawyers had pushed that. Pornography has been legalised as freedom of speech.

R: Yeah but so long as everybody that's participating in it does it absolutely freedom of will and there's no drug laws involved and there's not this and there's no that and they're not doing it because they're on the breadline 'cause of austerity or they're broke students or whatever. You know if they're doing it purely for the joy of demonstrating sex with their bodies, fine. You know, I'm not a prude about, you know that as a topic, I'm not a prude about if people wish to show themselves off.

A: Sorry I've got off the topic of freedom of speech

R: But it's, the idea of coercion is, for me, going back when that DAN action took place and people threw red paint, people were coerced into that by being made to think that it was the right thing to do. And it will make a difference by other people who thought they could get away with it.

A: Was that the one at Downing Street?

R: There was Downing Street and there was a big one at a hotel in Manchester. The Leonard Cheshire Ball. I think they might be very careful about what you publicise about it, because I think they're probably still looking for the organisers. But it happened. It's that kind of, you've gotta be really careful, but what you don't do is, in the fight for your rights, you end up creating your own kind of mob mentality. And I would never want to do that. Solidarity is one thing, but mob mentality, doing something, it might not be the most pernicious version of coercion, but there are still various people trying to persuade.. It's like every student rally, there was a big time in Birmingham where every disability rally there was a huge, like the Socialist Worker activists would appear. And I'm not saying they weren't supporting disability rights, but what they did was jump on the back of that for their own agenda and then, to the point where they got asked to stop coming to things, because any disability access agenda or whatever it was, rights agenda, was lost behind something, you know something that was political rather

than apolitical. Rights are political, but not in a party-political sense. Anyway we've diversified far too much and I'm looking at the clock.

A: Okay. I think we've covered everything. Anything more?

R: I think, if I was to say what do I think of disability arts now, I would like to see us getting back to the opportunity for disabled people to celebrate with each other inclusively, but what I really feel, what's been lost was that momentum of who we are. You know when, it seems it's utterly okay in the able-bodied arts world to have cabaret, yet it's like oh no we've done that in disability art, you can't do that any more. Well why not? People loved it. You can't have mixed cohort events. You can't have comedians on with poets and bands and do disability art within it, cause you can't. There's not really, it's like well we've done that.

A: Yeah I think there's a big loss.

R: I would live to see that back. I never did play there, but Jackson's Lane, all the things that they used to do there, all the stuff that we did as the DAFs was fabulous, and that somehow got lost in the misunderstanding of inclusion.

A: I think cabaret was a brilliant.. It was Geof Armstrong who started that all off. Geof's always been good at presenting stuff. But cabaret provides something that, it had some sort of pizzazz to it, it was, it took things in a different direction than people were used to, sad shows for the cripples, the idea that you can glitz the place up a bit, you can put flowers on the table, tablecloths on the table. And you have drink. That was really basic.

R: You were allowed to drink.

A: But also, it was a very accessible format. Having everybody seated round tables, I've done shows supposedly for disabled people run by, in a theatre, with rows and rows and rows of fixed seats. I mean you know if you have tables and chair people can sit themselves how they want to be. And you don't know quite what impairment people are gonna have, what access needs people are gonna

have, but you make it flexible and you can sort it. It provides a really good entry point. Sorry, I should turn this off now. Are we done3?

R: Yeah.

Ends