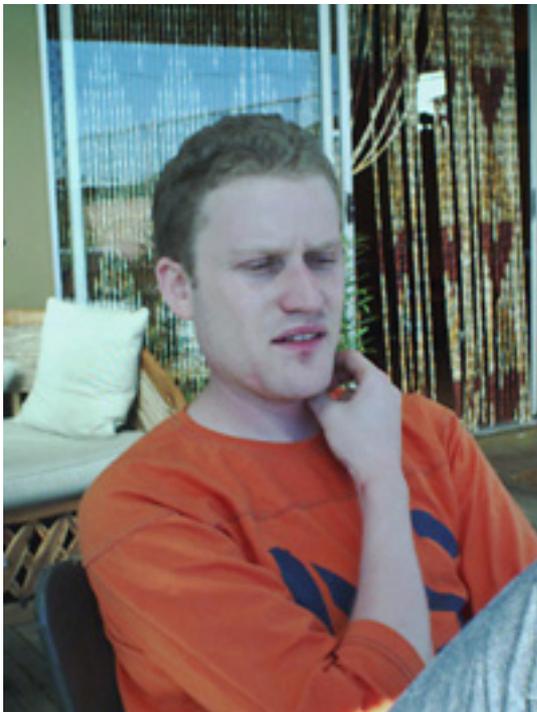


Some Safran Talking

Indevelopment talks to John Safran

Once upon a time there was a program on the ABC called "Race Round the World". They gave young twenty-something TV unknowns video cameras and let them create their own segments that would be beamed back to Australia, shown and judged by a panel of experts.



John Safran was one of the contestants. He didn't win the grand prize, but through his insane, quirky segments he quickly became the fan favourite. A series of pilots followed, including a notorious Ray Martin confrontational interview, which quickly became an underground bootleg sensation.

In 1999 John featured as a weekly guest of the 3rrr-fm morning show, the Breakfasters. This role was expanded to a full-time host in 2000, continuing in 2001.

It was after the program on Friday the 9th of March that I met John for a chat at Fitzroy's rooftop café.

John Safran knows how to talk. He's just been on air for three hours and is pumped full of caffeine. Although this is our first meeting, the atmosphere is quite relaxed. Whilst walking to our table, John's talking about people in Brazil that would kill you as sure as look at you and having bumped into one of my friends who works down the road, he ponders about whether I have friends like that.

Whilst setting up the minidisc, getting the levels right and the microphone in position, John Safran is on, talking about the kind of people that continue to keep old stores open, not falling for the modern thing of attracting consumers through glitz and razzle. The two examples are the phonogram shop at the Sping Street end of Collins Street and the walkman repair place just down from museum station.

It was at this point I knew I'd have my work cut out from me. Not getting answers, that wasn't going to be a problem. Not from any awkward responses, because John is chatting away. No, the problem was going to be in the transcription.

So here we are, at the stage where I'm presenting the article to you and I'm just going to have to break this into segments. So I bring you part one of a chat with John Safran. I asked him to think of three songs that could go along with this interview, so here is Guilty Conscience named after an Eminem song.

What time do you start to do Breakfasters?

6. I wake up at like 5 and then pretty much get in at 6. I go through the news services the night before to find stuff so I'm prepared.

You started as a Thursday guest, so I was wondering how the regular spot happened?

Other people were wanting to move on. They knew Kate was going to go off and do some other stuff and it was just... I guess if you're a guest you're just bled in, so it was kind of like that. I was happy.

Was there a period where you felt you were battling the not being Chris Hatzis syndrome?

Yeah, sort of. That's been weird. I don't mind being negative and cynical, but only if it's entertaining. I think when I started it I thought it was entertaining but it wasn't, somehow. Radio's really different from shooting small bits, for so many reasons. The fact you're stuck in a room with two other people for three hours a day, five hours a week, you can't really payout on each other all the time.

When you do a short piece you can script it and therefore your negativity can have more sharpness to it so it's not just sarcastic or not just negative, it's got something else going about it. It's far harder to be that aggressive for three hours a day so I try not to be that aggressive anymore. I don't know how that comes across, maybe I do come across as totally embittered and negative. But I try not to. I try to be positive.

A couple of weeks ago you did a short answer, multiple category quiz for album of the week. One of your categories was "Handguns". What sort of reaction did you get to that afterwards?

That got feedback, which was weird. It is weird that people actually listen and you know that, when in your one year of not doing anything entertaining you do something entertaining. People kind of go to you, "yeah I heard that". So I think everyone was okay with it. I don't think I got into any trouble or anything.

Do you realise now, a couple of years after the incident, how stupid you were to run naked in Israel for "Race Around the World"?

Yeah, I realised that only a couple of months after. All this stuff really doesn't occur to you. They might of thought I was some guy trying to divert attention from a bomber or I am some suicide bomber.

It's a bit like when I was in Lebanon, it didn't occur to me. At one point I was filming something and they were saying you have to film us up really close so you can't see anything in the background because they've had troubles in the past where things are filmed in Lebanon and if the Israelis can identify the place and they say anything bad

about Israel they know where to bomb. It's like, man fuck, that's kind of really quite creepy. I don't think I want to take responsibility just because I want to film a pisstake story, leave the country and then people get killed, just because I was taking the piss. It's too much responsibility.

Do you think you've been told more than someone else in your position, not to stick your camera somewhere?

Yeah definitely. I got that when I was doing Channel Seven. By that stage for some reason, everyone in Australia in any position of authority had somehow heard of me. I'd turn up to the MCG and they'd go "You don't have a camera do you?" I'd turn up anywhere and everyone thought I was on to them.

I went to Rob Sitch's place once and they thought I was going to do something there. Everyone was a bit suspicious of me. Except for oddly, weirdly, I once went to Lachlan Murdoch's house and he gazumped me. It's then hard to double-cross people when you know them. It's like that weird thing, putting the human face to things.

I always thought it was odd because there was a monthly launch of Australian Style Magazine so I went to that and he was saying I really liked your pilots and that thing you did to Ray Martin. I'm going , my god that's bizarre, if I was like him, why hasn't it occurred to him that maybe if I'm like doing that, why is it the first thing you do is contact me and give me your home address?

It is weird that whole dynamic. It's so easy to be a smartarse if you're not making that physical connection. Even in that Ray thing, the reason I wear that mask was my "creative way"; I'd bumped into him previously at a Logies thing and spoken to him and I felt so just like a regular person would. I don't know what it is, embaressment. If you've never met anyone and your first contact with them you go in hard, once you meet them them it's really difficult...

To turn?



You're kind of double-crossing them, why didn't you act like a cunt the first time you saw them.

It happened just yesterday with this woman from this group called "Petcare". There the ones that do the ads on TV that say "Cats are good for you" and they show a cat at a primary school and they show a disabled kid.

They're the ones sponsored by Whiskas?

That's part of this thing called Pet Care and Advisory. They have these weird campaigns that are like quasi-community service things but the whole thing is Uncle Bens, that's all it is. It's set up by Uncle Bens because they so dominate the petfood market, like all the petfood is owned by them except for a little here and there and because of that they can't really win over any new customers because they get customers from Chum which they own going to Pal which they own, so what have they achieved?

So the only thing that will make them more money is if they increase the dog and cat population. So that's why they run these ads and campaigns, to try and increase the dog and cat population because that's the only thing that will affect their bottom line.

I won't tell you why I know this - anyway.... I've talked about a few times and I talked about it yesterday on air because they actually got a spot on the ABC on a talkback thing. "We've got blah blah from the Pet Advisory Council talking about dog and cat names and how they've changed" and I was like, that's one of those grey areas because the ABC has this person on posing as some thing, when really their aim, the reason they're doing it is so people listen at home and say "cats and dogs are lovable and you can give them cute names. I think I might buy one".

I've talked about that a few times because I've found it interesting and then this woman rang me up from them yesterday and it was a really weird phone call. It's like when the secret police ring you. She was trying to suss out things. She wanted to know why I was talking about it, she thought there was some buzz out there, like, rather than I'm just randomly speaking, there was some reason. Everything I said was right, she didn't deny it or whatever. So some reason, once you make that contact I felt really bad, I was thinking man that's a really interesting story to say on air.

It's also got that Media Monitors people, the people that monitor the media and then they ring up and do on you. So Media Monitors were listening to this show, so then they ring her. There is this whole behind the scenes thing.

Dave Hughes this morning was talking about this advertising campaign he's doing for Ford going around to construction sites. There's this whole weird world that doesn't occur to most people.

But because I'd spoken to her on the phone, even though it was insane and I was totally accurate in what I said and it's really interesting the follow-up to these things, how they follow up. She's borderline, not threatening me but going "But cats and dogs are really good for people, so now you know, so now you don't really have to talk about it", really weird.

But because I've had that personal contact I felt guilty talking about it... because of that thing of why didn't I hassle her right then.

How in depth do you research your targets? I'll give you Philip Morris. You've obviously gone to a lot of time and effort researching them, working out who's who, who's doing what?

That more like I just find it interesting. A lot of things like that, things just springboard off it. There are so many moles at Philip Morris. I don't actually think anyone works there who is not a mole who leaks information to me. I'm constantly in conversations with people. Just say I go out and someone will talk to me and they'll tell me this other thing. It's actually what I found annoying when the Herald Sun did this thing about Wavenet, a fashion show. It wasn't like they'd set up this fashion show and after the fact they'd got a sponsor which was Philip Morris, the whole event was a totally set up thing. And then the Herald Sun did this story and there was a huge fuss about it and someone had told me about it a month before and because it was just another thing, I didn't bother talking about it on air.

Pretty much if I talk about Philip Morris on air I'll get a call a phone call from someone at Philip Morris afterwards telling me something else. And I guess also that the 'net has just become this amazing research tool.

"Oh, Starbucks is owned by Philip Morris."** You have to be smart about it because any idiot can put up anything about anything.

Another bizarre thing is where I've discovered this whole new culture in the media,

where bulk emails suddenly become the truth. Then they're run like they're stories. What I find embarrassing is that the Age will run something like the Nike shoes, the guy who wanted to get his Nikes made with "Sweatshop" on it and then got rejected. There's no evidence. Maybe it did happen and it's a great story and I'm not saying it didn't happen but they run it as a story they don't run it in the context of this is a bulk email gong around and there's no backup to it

So an urban myth then again gets treated as being true?

Yeah, yeah, bulk emails, they're like the urban myths of the modern world. I was watching this show on Channel Seven one Saturday or Sunday afternoon called Rush TV. They were talking about George Bush quotes, where the whole point was trying to prove how dumb George Bush is because he said this and said that and I'm going, how do you know? It's ironic that you're saying he's somehow stupid when you've got this bulk email that everyone's got. First of all you're looking like a fool on TV pretending that you've done some kind of research, and also how do you know bulk email is the truth. How do you know?

** The link between Philip Morris and Starbucks is that Kraft distributes Starbucks products in the USA - Just mentioning this so no one gets sued - Grant.

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