

INTERVIEW WITH GERRY ANDERSON, BBC RADIO PRESENTER

Q: We are looking at victims, their problems and issues. And your name came up over and over again. Whenever we were speaking to the journalists who had to go and report on these victims' atrocities, and we came to talk about the Omagh bombing. [A leading political journalist] put it best, and I hope this doesn't in any way embarrass you. He said that probably for that whole week after the Omagh bombing, that Gerry Anderson counselled the whole country.

GA: Well I wasn't aware of that. It is the strangest thing.

Q: Could you start at the beginning. You heard about the Omagh bombing and then it was wall to wall on the radio and the TV. Yours was the first show that came on. So could you start at the beginning and give us a 2 or 3 minute narrative?

GA: Well I was watching TV, oddly enough on a Saturday afternoon, which I rarely do for some strange reason. I don't know why was doing that, but, the whole thing came through about Omagh. And I remember being really really shocked, because I knew Omagh very well, because I lived there. Well not really lived there, I played in a band, Frankie McBride and the Polka Dots, to be honest. And if you play in a band like that you are there 3 or 4 days a week. And you go for rehearsal and then you go out for a gig. And I would find myself wandering around. I would go into a pub for a drink and that and you get to know people.

I was there for nearly a year. I thought they were the loveliest people, very talented, very outgoing and very funny. Very Irish in a way. Kind of like, Derry people are like that and kind of Newry people are like that. For some strange reason it is kind of because they are near the border. They have got a wee bit of both kinds of traditions. That kind of Ulster thing...Of course Omagh wasn't like that really, but at the same time it had that spirit. And I just loved its people. And I had previously worked in Strabane, so I knew people in Strabane very well. I liked those towns. There are just all the same, just wonderful people. That peters out about ten miles down the road.

So I felt that I knew the people and I realised what it would do to them. I realise what it would do to them. And that is the thing which really got to me. What it was going to do to the people, what it was going to do to the community. So I felt that at a visceral level...And I felt it very strongly. But I never said to myself, "Oh I must help". It never occurred to me.

But what did occur to me was, that I was the first guy on the radio live, after it had sunk it. It was a Saturday, there was nobody on live, on Radio Ulster...I think there was hardly anybody on live, except the news. And the news is straightforward, in that you deal with it. But when a guy like me comes on, what do I do?

So I remember sitting on Monday morning and thinking – I am going to be the first light entertainment guy, which, I don't like that term, but I am not news. I am the first general guy to go on live. What do I do?

Well the key to this is going to be music. And you are not going to be saying how horrible everything is because they know how horrible it is. And you are not going to grasp an opportunity, others did that, I have to be honest with you, others did that “show business thing”. If a disaster happens – oh great this is an opportunity for me to shine. That is what show business is. It is a terrible thing, but others were guilty of that. And I was very aware that was going to happen.

I wasn't going to do that. So what I was going to do was I will act fairly normal and try to play music that matters. And I remember saying to myself – the first record is going to be really important. So I remembered a song called ‘Our Town’. I said – ‘Our Town’, it was all about the death of an American small town. Big Malls outside and all the businesses closing down. And one of the lines was “I am saying goodbye to our town”.

And I will play that first. And that set the mood. And I said – that is the way to go. That kind of thing there, get people to think, don't be maudlin, don't be mawkish, don't be saying how terrible it was. Just be as normal as possible. And let people talk.

People were ringing up and wanting to talk, so just let them talk. And that is basically all I did. I wasn't really aware that I was having any kind of an impact. I was just trying to get through it.

Q: The very first caller on your show that day, there was a woman phoned up, ...and you had tried to just be yourself and said hello.... the next thing the woman broke down and cried and said – Gerry I feel so guilty.

GA: Well that's the type of people they are. I can't actually recall if that woman was from Omagh. Even if she wasn't.

Q: But you said to her – but sure love you didn't do anything what have you got to be guilty about? And this is where the journalists have said to me...hat they were glued to the radio. In fact [the leading political journalist] said that he was saying to himself – I wonder how Gerry Anderson is going to handle his show being the first on. He said that within five or ten minutes on comes a woman saying – Gerry I feel so guilty. And she burst out crying. And then you spent the next five or ten minutes trying to calm her down. And then that opened the flood gates and for the whole of that week people were ringing you. Were you conscious of being the people's channel?

GA: No. You don't think that you are doing anything special. Because if you do think that you are doing anything special it becomes not special. I tried not to think about it at all. But one of the things that did surprise me was that people felt guilt. Because that never occurred to me. To feel personal guilt. It never occurred to me. It is probably guilt of living on. I imagine a lot of people in Omagh, I know for a fact that a lot of people felt guilty. Because they said to themselves – why not me? Why did it happen to him? Why not me?

I could have been down town that day, I wasn't. That was the basis for their guilt.

And then there was another kind of guilt. People who had done this may be in my name, in the name of Nationalism or whatever godforsaken thing that was supposed to be that caused that. So people felt that. So there was two different types of guilt. And then there was the other people whom I met. I felt as if I should go down. And I went down the Saturday after that. Me and my daughter went down and we kept out of the way. And just went into the middle of the crowd. And it was the best thing I think that I have ever done, because I have never felt anything like that.

Juliet Turner got up and sang. I was in the corner. There was just a well of incredible remorse and grief. After that first week I realised how big this thing was. You see I try not to think too deeply into what I do on the radio and try to make it distinctive. I try not to think too much about it. But it was only when I witnessed that cold kind of atmosphere down there, just exactly a week afterwards, that was the first time I realised just actually how momentous it was. To be honest with you.

Q: We were calling it some type of a Diana moment. When Princess Diana died there was this sort of National grief. Do you think that?

GA: No, it wasn't like that. Because even at the very start, even when Diana died, you just knew it was...a kind of a pop reaction. Because I just never bought into that at all. It was just a kind of a media thing. Something happened to people. And a year later they are ashamed. If you remember, the First Anniversary, there was hardly a word about it. People were actually ashamed of the way they acted. Because they realised they were making fools of themselves over somebody that we didn't know anything about. And they realised that eventually.

But these are people, reflections of people, people knew what kind of people these were. These were ordinary people.

Q: ...[Is it because] you came from a social work background that you were able to do this?

GA: I wouldn't say it was because, well that implies that I am trained. But I was never trained. If I was to say to you now a Social Work background helped me. I will tell you how it helped me. Because what I was, I was just a fellow who was based in Strabane. I was never a qualified social worker, I was a social work assistant. The person that helps the social worker. But the need was that great in Strabane that you had a case load that was equal to a qualified social worker. You didn't do the big things that social workers did, but you did everything else. What I did was, I spent every day in people's houses talking to them. That is all day, that is what I did all day. For like two years. And I learned more in those two years about people that I think I ever knew. And that is people who had nothing. In Strabane that time it was the unemployment black spot of Europe, could well still be it. But I don't think it is as bad now. Nobody was working and there was a whole kind of culture there. They were the loveliest people. The greatest people. I loved it. I sit and marvel at the people. They were just so full of craic and so smart. And Omagh people were exactly the same.

Q: Whether you are aware of it or not or you might not even be aware, and I am going to tell you something. That a lot of the Northern Ireland victim, you tend to have a sympathetic ear or a sympathetic voice, or carry some type of a torch or mantle for the victims of the troubles. You have a jocular show and all of a sudden when somebody comes on that is a victim in some way, you change your tone and you seem to move to the victim's champion. Are you aware of that?

GA: I am. It is that I just try to show a little bit of respect for people that have suffered. That is all it is really. Because it is very easy to kind of do that showbiz thing and cross over and sat things that you don't mean. It is very difficult to describe. There are a lot of things that you can say that sound good on radio. But the people that are listening, the people you matter know that it is bullshit. You see it is people that listen casually who say - oh he's a great fellow. But the people who are listening know it is just bullshit. So I try not to go down that road.

Q: My last question is to do with the mainstreaming of victim's issues. I am trying to argue that victims in Northern Ireland are going to have to eventually be treated like any other political issue. Should that be health, education or whatever. They should just be treated the same and be brought into the political mainstream. As somebody who has a show that many of the victims tell us that they tune into, in order to kick off their day, would it be fair to say that you already mainstream victims.

GA: What do you mean?

Q: Well do you just treat the victims as any other listener and just treat everybody the same, so as not to set them apart from people?

GA: On no I think that is vital. You have to treat them the same. Because otherwise they will never ever recover. Because the more you are treated as being someone to whom something horrible happened and you are not like anybody else, the more you will believe that the thing that happened to you is more horrible than happened to everyone else.

And you know it is a terrible thing. And you really have to come to terms with it because there is nothing you can do to reverse it. And providing that there has been some type of token acknowledgement of what you have been through, even if it has been compensation, some wee kind of thing, it is not money that you want, but some wee recognition, some tangible recognition that you have suffered this. If that is made to you, even an apology, then move on, because you can't go back. Then you move on.

Once you have that wee kind of bridge to step on, whether it is an apology from the Provos, or Loyalists, even if it is an apology from the government, or even somebody sorting out compensation saying – here listen, I know what has happened to you, that money might ease it just a wee bit for you.

And that is saying that somebody cares. And then you move on and you say – I have to get back to where I was before. And you cannot go back. And the more people bring and talk about it the worse you get. You have to kind of try to forget.

And the only reason you can try and forget is to feel normal. You never forget, but take it from the forefront of your mind. Put it to the back of your mind. And not let it be the thing that matters to you the most.

Q: Gerry, that is it. Thanks very much.

GA: It's hard to talk about stuff like that.