'It's a show about love' *The Guardian*

THE DEFINITIVE BBC RADIO 4 DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Ian Gittins

Foreword by
Lauren Laverne

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FOREWORD

LAUREN LAVERNE

Long before I hosted *Desert Island Discs*, I was a devoted listener, first to the peerless Kirsty Young and then to her predecessors, whose buried audio treasure I unearthed in the BBC's extraordinary online archive. *Desert Island Discs* has been broadcasting for eighty years, and while (generally speaking) I keep my focus on the castaway at hand, every now and again I'll remember that in all that time only five of us have been entrusted with the task of marooning our guests on the island in their mind's eye, and my head will spin. As I write, *Desert Island Discs* has just celebrated its landmark anniversary and it remains one of BBC Radio 4's best-loved and most popular programmes, with an audience all over the world. For me, it is a dream job – literally and metaphorically: each week we invite someone with a fascinating life to dream for us, to lose themselves in their imagination and tell us what they find there.

If you could make a new world, what would it look like? The island a person creates says a lot. Radio is known as the 'theatre of the mind', and the *mise en scène* our castaways construct fascinates me. Is the island a prison to be endured or a paradise to be enjoyed? Is creating this new world a challenge to be relished, a grim grind or a game? There are no right or wrong ways to approach the programme, but I love it when a castaway has total commitment to their method.

Poet John Cooper Clarke told me he'd been working on his list of tracks for forty years. He took the idea of the island very literally and chose the things that he knew he could not live without – women's voices, a song by his

old friend Nico and a luxury item that ... actually, I won't spoil it. Let's just say it's not for the fainthearted. Comic firebrand Alexei Sayle took the invitation as an opportunity to stage a revolution of his own devising, founding the 'Tropical Socialist Republic of Alexei Sayle' and choosing the Battle Hymn of the Soviet Air Force as its anthem. *Cloud Atlas* author David Mitchell meanwhile selected the programme's archive as his luxury item, saying, 'In the many years of its history *Desert Island Discs* has become this Library of Babel: of human stories, experience and language ... hunger for voices and company that isn't my own will be assuaged.' Speaking of hunger, Sophia Loren's luxury was a pizza oven, which – strictly speaking – is far too practical, but I allowed it on the basis that 1) a pizza made by Sophia Loren is technically a work of art rather than a foodstuff (she likened making a pizza to writing a poem) and 2) well, you try arguing with Sophia Loren and see how far you get.

What about the music? Castaways' choices have prompted plenty of kitchen dancing, joy, tears, rage and even academic enquiry over the years (for more on that last, try the thought-provoking *Defining the Discographic Self: Desert Island Discs in Context*, Oxford University Press, 2017). People tend to assume that my own preferences are important to me, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, some of my favourite episodes include discs that may not be my thing, but for that story are just *perfect*. One example from the archive is *Dragons' Den* star Hilary Devey, who sadly passed away at the age of 65 earlier this year. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more dramatic tale than this one from the tough-as-they-come entrepreneur whose hardscrabble success as a trucking magnate contrasts with dramatic family secrets, three marriages, one lover's secret family and coming back from the brink after serious illness. Only Celine Dion could soundtrack it, and she does. I'm also a sucker for discs that – as only music can – carry the atmosphere of the place and time to which a castaway's story takes us. Whether it's the Trinidadian calypso of Savile Row master tailor Andrew Ramroop's youth, the symphonic synths of screenwriter Jack Thorne's family holidays (like me, he often had to sit in the boot) soundtracked by Jean-Michel Jarre or Malala Yousafzai's unexpected decision to take 'Love Always Comes as a Surprise' from the animated film *Madagascar 3* to the island – to celebrate rediscovering her childlike, playful side after the attack that almost killed her.

One of the great pleasures of hosting *Desert Island Discs* is the meaningful impact it has – on listeners and on guests, too. The latter might not always be as visible, but since so many castaways have told me about it later I wanted to mention it here. There's nothing quite like witnessing an outpouring of love for someone who has been brave enough to tell their story, particularly when doing so is difficult, and it is often a profound experience for them. Ian Wright's emotional episode detailed the domestic violence he lived with as a

child and his tribute to the teacher who gave him hope during that time. The day we recorded he apologised to listeners, worrying what they would think of him 'turning into this bumbling, crying guy', but Ian's programme went viral – thousands of people sent supportive messages and he went on to write a book and make a documentary about his experiences, continuing the conversation he started in the studio. Richard Osman, Joe Wicks and Stephen Graham were brave enough to be vulnerable, and it was wonderful to see that rewarded with waves of compassion from the public. Stephen revealed for the first time that he once attempted to take his own life, Richard talked about coping with food addiction and Joe was incredibly honest about the struggles he went through living with a mother suffering from mental health issues and a father with a drug addiction, which often made family life difficult. Samantha Morton reflected on growing up in and out of the care system and actor Wendell Pierce discussed the racism he experienced as a black child in the New Orleans of the 1960s. In each case, their honesty was motivated by the hope that their story might reach ears that really needed it, and every time it did.

It is the deepest honour to be the first listener to stories that bring a new perspective on someone we thought we already 'knew', but I reserve a special place in my heart for the stories that – were it not for *Desert Island Discs* – we might not otherwise hear. The firefighter and research psychologist Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, statistician Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter and shepherd, author and historian James Rebanks are three of my favourite examples. One minute you think, *How much do I really need to know about breeding Herdwick sheep in the Lake District?*, and the next you're having your mind blown by the tale of an angry boy-genius who ran away from his family farm to study history at Oxford, came back with a double first and set himself up with a plot of his own, as a leading voice in the fight for a more sustainable farming system and as an international troubleshooter for UNESCO. *Thank you, D.I.D.*

But don't take my word for it, read on. This book includes eighty of the most moving, entertaining and inspiring encounters from eight sparkling decades of this jewel in radio's crown, as well as interviews with castaways about making their programmes. I do hope you enjoy it.

INTRODUCTION

Like many great ideas, the concept was so simple that it bordered on genius. Cast a famous person or public figure away on a theoretical desert island, ask them which eight records they would like to take with them, and discuss how that music had impacted on, and reflected, their lives.

This particular brainwave came, in 1941, courtesy of a twenty-seven-year-old freelance actor and broadcaster named Roy Plomley. Plomley was in the regular habit of pitching format ideas for radio programmes to the BBC, and sent his latest inspiration to a commissioning editor at the corporation.

The rest is history – history that is still unfolding. Eighty years and well over 3,500 castaways later, *Desert Island Discs* is a British institution, with millions of listeners tuning in to Radio 4 – or listening online – every week to hear its shipwrecked souls. Only *The Shipping Forecast* and *The Daily Service* have lasted longer on the network.

It's not difficult to define *Desert Island Discs*' enduring appeal. Put at its simplest: all human life is there. Famous figures who might usually shun in-depth confessional interviews will open up on the island, seduced by the show's format, tradition and iconic status.

Kirsty Young, who presented the show from 2006 to 2018, gave a typically astute summary of its ethos ten years ago in her foreword to a previous commemorative book, *Desert Island Discs: 70 Years of Castaways*.

'It works best as a sort of triangulated conversation,' she wrote. 'It's castaway, host and listener sitting around the table, engaged in a no-hold-barred dialogue about how the guest of honour got to where they are, and what's it's like to live the life they have lived.'

It's hard to better this appraisal and yet maybe, just maybe, one of the

castaways in this book has done so. Reflecting on his 2019 appearance on the island, the brilliant TV screenwriter and producer, Russell T Davies, links the show to advice he always gives to upcoming writers looking for tips.

'I tell them that *anyone* can write about chases, and explosions, and monsters, and detectives, and murders, and ghosts,' he says. 'But all you have to do, all you *must* do as a writer, is to understand the human soul.

'You have to understand psychology: why people do things, where they are from, what built them, what they're capable of. That's what *Desert Island Discs* does. It lays open a person's life. And there is nothing more dramatic, or interesting, or beautiful than that. It's the ultimate drama.'

The human soul. The ultimate drama. These are large claims and yet, week after week, *Desert Island Discs* justifies them. And this book ranges far and wide across eight decades of a truly unique programme to compile eighty of the most memorable guests from its illustrious history.

There was Arthur Askey, wisecracking his way through a visit in 1942; Sir Cliff Richard, first appearing as a callow youth in 1960 before returning, older and a great deal wiser, sixty years later; Joan Collins, airily explaining why Bob Hope really was *so* much nicer than Bing Crosby.

Victoria Wood described a tense, troubled childhood. George Michael, Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King recalled the pain and stress of being outed. Malala Yousafzai described being shot in the head by the Taliban before making a new life as a global activist. And Bono from U2 told the world about a secret half-brother.

'I've always wanted to do this!' admitted Adele. 'I've been making my list of records for sixty years!' said John Cooper Clarke. 'And I'm not even joking!' While the poet Lemn Sissay confides, in this book, that he splits his life into *before* and *after* he appeared on *Desert Island Discs*.

This book revisits such landmark episodes from the show's eighty-year history. It also allows selected castaways to reminisce about their visit to the island, and how much they enjoyed it, in specially conducted new interviews titled 'Isle never forget ...'

What attracts so many venerable figures to the island, and makes them want to share such intimacies? Is it the sea air? The seagulls' caws? Does the prospect of soul-searching isolation lead castaways to open their hearts? Or does it come down to what Noël Coward famously called *the potency of cheap music*: long-loved tunes forever triggering memories and passions?

Maybe it's all of these. Or maybe, sometimes, it's best not to analyse those so-simple-it's-genius ideas too closely, but just to accept that they work, brilliantly – which *Desert Island Discs* certainly does. Here's to the next eighty years.

ROY PLOMLEY YEARS

1942–85

Despite being *Desert Island Discs'* ingenious progenitor, Roy Plomley did not initially intend to host the programme. His original proposal to the BBC was that he should be a background figure, identifying and contacting potential castaways and helping to put the show together.

The Beeb begged to differ, insisting instead that Plomley should be the show's presenter. This visionary figure's clipped tones were thus to be synonymous with the programme in the listeners' minds right from the off – and, indeed, for the following forty-three years.

Plomley provided the BBC with a first list of potential castaways. It consisted mostly of entertainers and playwrights. J.B. Priestley and Noël Coward were on there. So was Leslie Perowne, head of popular music programmes at the BBC, and thus the man that Plomley was pitching to! (He never actually appeared.)

Before the first broadcast, there were a few tweaks. Plomley's initial letter had suggested each castaway chose ten discs. The programme's producers whittled this down to eight, as a more natural fit for the show's thirty-minute length.

There was also the little matter of a theme tune. The BBC went with composer Eric Coates's 'By the Sleepy Lagoon', augmented with waves crashing on a shore and discreetly cawing seagulls. This gentle valse serenade has introduced every single episode from show one.

It seems a curious concept now, but initially the programmes were scripted. Roy Plomley would write both sides of each episode's dialogue in advance and the castaway would sit in the studio and read it with him. This practice was, understandably, dropped after a few years.

The first ever *Desert Island Discs* was broadcast on the BBC Forces Programme at 8pm on 29 January 1942. The castaway was an Austrian musician and comedian, Vic Oliver, a hugely popular figure who was then starring in a West End show, *Get a Load of This*.

The critic and essayist, James Agate, followed, then a naval officer and broadcaster, Captain A.B. Campbell. They set the tone for Plomley's early castaways, who were largely drawn from the worlds of theatre, film, radio and journalism, with the odd emissary from the military.

With his immaculate received pronunciation, and a background in light entertainment rather than journalism, Plomley was the archetype of a courteous BBC interviewer. While they can't help but sound dated to modern ears, his early shows were sharp, witty ... and very entertaining.

The host was not on a quest for deep psychological insights into his castaways' characters. His priority was that his guests should enjoy the show, the questioning should not cause them any discomfort – and the chat should make for pleasant listening. Which it invariably did.

To set the tone – and loosen their lips? – Plomley would usually take his guests for a slap-up lunch before the show, preferably at the nearby Garrick Club. Reminiscing in this book, Dame Judi Dench speaks fondly of those Plomley luncheons: 'It set you up for the afternoon!'

Desert Island Discs was not a weekly radio staple in its earliest years. Its first, fifteen-week series came to an end in May 1942, with Plomley himself in the castaway's chair. There were a further ten episodes at the end of the year, then only fourteen in the whole of 1943.

After a five-week series at the start of 1944, there was a gap of nearly a year-and-a-half before shows in the second half of 1945 that included appearances by Celia Johnson and Deborah Kerr. After a single episode at the start of 1946, the show then went off the air for five years.

Desert Island Discs returned in the first week of 1951 with, for the first time, not a limited run but an open-ended, indefinite commission. The security and permanence of this new arrangement allowed Plomley and his team to approach – and secure – some ambitious castaway targets.

The first part of this book draws on highlights from these Roy Plomley years. There was Petula Clark, an eighteen-year-old child prodigy when she washed up on the island in 1951. The 'Lancashire lass', Gracie Fields, was rather more established, a bona fide British superstar, when she dropped in later that year.

David Attenborough was but a tyro TV producer and presenter when, in 1957, he made the first of his four visits to the island. Joan Collins was younger still, just twenty-eight, when she was marooned in 1961, but had just returned from seven years of shooting major movies in Hollywood.

By then, a tweak to the programme's format let castaways pick a favourite

book to take to the isle with them, alongside the Bible and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. They were also allowed a luxury item, and required to nominate one disc to save, were a tidal wave to sweep away the rest (in this book, these choices are shown in bold in each castaway's list of music).

Shipwrecked in 1964, Cilla Black was still coming to terms with fame after being whisked to pop stardom by Brian Epstein. At the opposite end of her career, Hollywood legend Tallulah Bankhead was struggling with alcoholism and horribly incoherent when she met Plomley.

Upcoming comedy titans Morecambe and Wise were in scintillating form on the island in 1966: it's genuinely impossible to read their exchanges without smiling. Pulp-fiction novelist Barbara Cartland also made for great radio as she detailed rejecting forty-nine marriage proposals.

James Stewart arrived on the island sounding remarkably humble for a true cinematic living legend. Les Dawson reminisced about moving to Paris to try to be a writer before reinventing himself as a wisecracking comedian and deadpan TV gameshow host.

A strength of *Desert Island Discs* is its variety. In 1979, Norman Mailer described longing to go to war in order to find the inspiration to pen a literary masterpiece. Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie recalled growing up in the US Great Depression before running away from home at fourteen.

In 1983, Terry Wogan reminisced about being a bank clerk in Ireland before beginning his own illustrious BBC career. Two years on, Julie Walters explained how she first met Victoria Wood – an account that Ms Wood herself would soon corroborate on *Desert Island Discs*.

Without Roy Plomley, there would have been no *Desert Island Discs*. He invented the show and, despite his initial protestations, was to present it for forty-three years and 1,784 episodes. For millions of listeners throughout the decades, he will be forever synonymous with this much-loved show – and quite right, too.

1
CAPTAIN A.E. DINGLE

SAILOR, WRITER, REAL-LIFE CASTAWAY
12 March 1942

Three years into the Second World War, a guest washed up on Roy Plomley's imaginary shore who remains unique in *Desert Island Discs* history a full eighty years later. He was a genuine, real-life castaway.

Captain Aylward Edward 'A.E.' Dingle was a truly intrepid cove. Born in Oxford in 1874, he spent twenty-two years at sea, and was fond of boasting that he had been shipwrecked five times, which might arguably call into question his maritime navigational abilities.

Dingle's most notable shipwreck came in 1893 when he was half of a two-man crew on a schooner, the *Black Pearl*, that sailed from Mahé in the Seychelles to the Crozet Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. Their mission was to retrieve gold from an immigrant ship, the *Strathmore*, that had sunk there eighteen years earlier.

Dingle and his crewmate located the ship but were unable to remove the heavy strongbox while being buffeted by gales. On their way home, the *Black Pearl* was shipwrecked on the remote, volcanic St Paul Island. The two crewmates survived but the ship sank to a watery grave.

Capt. Dingle and his fellow castaway spent eleven weeks on the island, surviving on raw penguin and goat meat and rainwater. Remarkably, while stranded, they found treasure on an 1870 wreck half-buried in the sand, before being rescued by a passing French sailing vessel.

In his later life, Dingle moved to New York and churned out magazine articles and pulp-fiction pot-boilers with titles such as *The Pirate Woman*, *The Bomb Ship* and *The Corpse Came Back*. Unsurprisingly, however, it was his shipwreck stories that most intrigued Roy Plomley.

• • •

The palpably impressed Plomley opened the show marvelling that his guest, 'a real man of the sea', to whom he referred throughout by his nickname and sometime nom-de-plume, Sinbad, could draw from his real-life experience of having been a castaway.

'Yes, I have got the advantage of being able to tell you not just the music that I think I would like to take on a desert island, but the sort of music that I actually wanted to hear while I was there,' replied Dingle. 'Of course, there are many things I would choose to have before gramophone records!

'The real obvious trouble on a desert island, of course, is depression.

There were two of us on the bleak little volcanic island on which I spent eleven weary weeks, and we got so depressed and fed up that by the end of the first fortnight, we weren't on speaking terms with each other for days at a stretch.'

'I should think that's understandable,' sympathised Plomley. 'What sort of music did you want to hear under the palm trees on that desert island?' This triggered an amused reaction from Dingle.

'*What* palm trees? People seem to think that all desert islands are like picture postcards of Miami, with white sandy beaches and shady palms and running fresh water! The island we were on was craggy and bare, with no trees or vegetation at all except a few patches of coarse grass.'

'Just complete desolation?' asked Plomley.

'Absolutely!' agreed Dingle, before choosing Peter Dawson's 'The Floral Dance', a disc to remind him of 'England and home – smooth green lawns and clean clothes and shaves and pubs and a little comfort'.

'Sinbad, how did you get on for food?' wondered Plomley.

'There wasn't even a bit of wood to light a fire,' recalled Dingle. 'And we hadn't got a knife or anything like that; not even a rusty nail. We lived on penguin and wild-goat meat, eaten raw. We killed them with stones and dismembered them with our bare hands.'

'And water?' asked Plomley.

'Rainwater pools. The water was hot and stale and tasted as if old boots had been boiled in it.'

'That sounds a wicked diet!' exclaimed Plomley, bizarrely jumping sixty years into the future and twenty-first-century teenage slang.

Dingle turned to black humour, surmising that his mood on the island could have been lifted by listening to 'an absurd little nonsense tune about shipwrecks that always makes me chuckle and which I often find myself whistling.' It went by the catchy title of, 'He Played His Ukulele as the Ship Went Down'.

'I must say, I admire your sense of humour, Sinbad,' noted an approving Plomley. 'Let's hear some more about that desert island. How did you come to get there?'

'We were looking for treasure on one of the Crozet Islands in the Indian Ocean. Another man and myself had a small sailing sloop and a diving suit and we were trying to reach the wreck of the *Strathmore* that had gone down there thirty years before with quite a lot of money in the skipper's strongbox.

'But we were driven off our mooring by a storm. We rode the storm for the rest of the day and struck hard on a desert island called St Paul after dark. The sloop was smashed up completely and we didn't even find a single spar left. It was a miracle we got ashore. I can't swim.'

Dingle chose Paul Robeson's 'Old Man River' 'for no other reason than I like it'. Plomley commented that the tune is a 'treasure' that might have provided some consolation for not finding actual treasure on the voyage – at which point, Sinbad dropped a bombshell.

'We did find treasure! Incredible as it may sound, we found treasure on the island we were wrecked on. One day, about the seventh week we were there, my companion came across a broken old hulk of a ship half-buried in the sand. We were excited because it was firewood and we might have enough to make a raft. But the wood was rotten and crumbling.

'Anyway, we went on digging. We got enough nails and spikes to make fish hooks and spears and traps, and then one day we came across an iron strongbox.'

'How did you open it?' asked Plomley.

'By fire. And in it were two thousand golden Australian sovereigns.'

'Did you manage to get it away when you were rescued?'

'Yes, we bundled it up in goat-skin bags and tied it to our bodies.'

'Good work!' exclaimed Plomley, clearly captivated by this real-life *Boy's Own* adventure.

Dingle wrapped up his tale of derring-do by explaining to Plomley how he got rescued: 'We stuck a shirt up on a flagstaff that had been put up by French traders, years before. One day a little barque saw our signal and picked us up and landed us in Mauritius.'

'Thanks, Sinbad, for a very interesting story,' said Plomley at the end of the broadcast. 'That eleven weeks on that desert island must be something to look back on with real horror – in spite of finding the buried treasure!'

'Actually, I don't think the desert-island experience was my worst one,' mused Dingle. 'There was another time when I sailed alone 1,600 miles through a hurricane and went five days without water. But, as Kipling says, that's another story ...'

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Captain A.E. Dingle returned from New York to Britain and died in the seafarers' county of Cornwall in 1947. He is likely forever to remain the sole true castaway to wash up on *Desert Island Discs*. Oliver Reed doesn't count.

DISCS CHOSEN

J.F. Wagner's 'Under the Double Eagle'
Band of HM Coldstream Guards

'The Floral Dance'
Peter Dawson

Fritz Kreisler's *Caprice Viennois*
Fritz Kreisler
'It would give a sort of contentment to the mind that might help induce a well-fed feeling'

'He Played His Ukulele as the Ship Went Down'
The Two Leslies

'Old Man River'
Paul Robeson
'That's a gem of a record'

'Bunger Up of Rat 'Oles'
Jack Warner
'I should want another bit of nonsense'

Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*
Wilhelm Backhaus
'It would dispel the mulligrubs and bring peace'

Overture to Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*
Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra

2
ARTHUR ASKEY

MUSIC HALL STAR, COMEDIAN, ACTOR
2 April 1942

Diminutive Liverpudlian comic 'Big-Hearted' Arthur Askey was already well on his way to national treasure status when he called in at *Desert Island Discs* in 1942. Forged in the music hall, his irrepressible, cheeky-chappie persona was poised to dominate both radio and television.

Having been one of the very first BBC TV performers in the early thirties, Askey then starred in the corporation's first radio comedy series, *Band Waggon*. Running from 1938 to 1940, it saw him work alongside the man who was to be his long-time comedic foil, Richard Murdoch.

Along with Vera Lynn, later a castaway herself, Askey then took it upon himself to help to lift the nation's wartime spirits. Having recently diversified into films, he had starred in Gainsborough Pictures comedies including *Charley's (Big-Hearted) Aunt* (1940) and *I Thank You* (1942).

Before your very ears, Askey now extended this remit of non-stop gag-cracking gaiety to the *Desert Island Discs* studio. Co-opting Roy Plomley as his gamely willing straight man, Askey turned his appearance into an entertaining radio comedy sketch which bears repeating.

• • •

Roy Plomley: 'Good evening, everyone. Tonight, we are privileged to have on our desert island a man whose tireless activities and brilliant work in the field of ...'

Arthur Askey: 'I still think we should have used the studio at Tottering Towers.'

Plomley: 'Don't keep harping on about that. Anyway, it was your fault. We came here on your bicycle and you were steering.'

Askey: 'I followed the wrong bus.'

Plomley: 'You should have turned off at Tottering Court Road.'

Askey: 'I couldn't turn the handlebars, what with you and all that baggage.'

Plomley: 'Yes, for Pete's sake. What is all that baggage?'

Askey: 'These are my records. You asked me to bring eight records, didn't you?'

Plomley: 'But eight flat discs don't take up all that space!'

Askey: 'They're not flat discs.'

Plomley: 'What are they, then?'

Askey: 'Cylinders.'

Plomley: 'Phonograph cylinders?'

Askey: 'Yes, I much prefer cylinders. We buy 'em wholesale – by the yard, like a roll of lino. Then we cut off a piece when we feel like it.'
Plomley: 'And what's in that basket?'
Askey: 'That's my gramophone!'
Plomley: 'But the BBC has plenty of gramophones!'
Askey: 'Not like *my* gramophone! Swapped it with Mrs Bagwash for a plush-bottomed tea cosy and Vic Oliver's autograph ...'

After Askey had supposedly demonstrated the unlistenable, strangled-cat strains of his rickety old gramophone, Plomley attempted to reassert some control over proceedings.

Plomley: 'Right-o. Formal introduction coming up. On your desert island tonight is Arthur Askey – castaway number ten.'
Askey: 'Do you mean to tell me this has been going on for ten weeks and you've only just asked me?'
Plomley: 'We've had a lot of very important people.'
Askey: 'You should have done them in alphabetical order!'

This rollicking badinage left Plomley and Askey little time to talk about anything except for the particular choices of music. However, Askey did venture a touching little tale when explaining his reasons for choosing 'To a Wild Rose', a piece by an American composer and pianist, Edward MacDowell.

Askey: 'It was soon after my wife and I had got engaged. I wasn't on the stage in those days.'
Plomley: 'What were you?'
Askey: 'I was a clerk in the Liverpool Education Office. I had been there for eight years, and it looked a nice steady job for life with a pension at the end of it, but I had been messing about in my spare time with odd local concerts and I was all for taking the plunge and going on the stage, full time.'
Plomley: 'And what did your fiancée think about it?'
Askey: 'She was absolutely grand about it! She believed in me and, although it meant us parting for quite a long time, she encouraged me to go.'
Plomley: 'Where does this orchestral piece you were talking about come into it?'
Askey: 'We used to do our courting in the local park. The local municipal orchestra seemed to have a very small repertoire, but they always played one lovely little melody we both adored. We sort of adopted it for a theme tune and when the band didn't play it off its own bat, which wasn't often, we used to send up a request for it. It was to the strains of this tune that I decided to go on the stage!'

It was a heart-warming tale – yet as soon as the strains of 'To a Wild Rose' had faded, Askey was straight back into joke-machine mode.

Askey: 'Is this the studio where you do all the other *Desert Island Discs* programmes?'
Plomley: 'Yes.'
Askey: 'I thought so. I've been sitting on a bit of ship's biscuit left by Commander Campbell.'
Plomley: 'Arthur, you promised me not to gag for half-an-hour!'
Askey: 'So I did, but it's very difficult. I want some Schubert next.'
Plomley: 'Sherbet?'
Askey: 'Now who's gagging? Come, come, comely – remember you're a Plomley ...'

The programme rolled along in this bantering vein. Askey divulged that he hated hearing his own singing voice on record, even on his signature tune 'The Bee's Song' ('I don't sound a bit like I think I do!'). He was far more admiring of the talents of Gracie Fields, with whom he had played wartime concerts to entertain British troops in France.

'She was simply grand!' he marvelled. 'She wasn't at all well but she worked like a Trojan. She kept at it all day long and, however tired she was, I never once saw her without a grin on her face.'

Askey's final choice of record was a recording of the opening of the last of his *Band Waggon* radio shows from two years earlier, which he still regarded as a career – and life – highlight. Then, naturally, he departed Plomley's studio with one last gag routine.

Askey: 'Now, I'd better get my bits and bobs together again and trundle off home. I've left Stafford on his own. It's my turn to mind him tonight.'
Plomley: 'You mean to say you've left that poor boy all alone?'
Askey: 'Oh, he'll be quite happy, I gave him a box of matches and some scissors to play with. Ta-ta, Roy. Thanks for having me.'
Plomley: 'Goodbye, Arthur. Can you manage?'
Askey: 'I think so. I hope the bassinette doesn't get stuck in the lift like it did on the way up. You might tuck this watering can under my chin, old boy?'
Plomley: 'Yes. I'll open the door for you.'
Askey: 'Ah' thang-yaw! Goodnight, playmates!'

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Arthur Askey was the first castaway to make a repeat appearance on *Desert Island Discs*, on 21 April 1955. He was to appear four times in total, a record that he held in splendid isolation until it was equalled by Sir David Attenborough in 2012.

Askey's 1955 visit to the studio was less of a comedy routine and more of an actual conversation. He confessed to Plomley that his father had been livid when he left his job at the Liverpool Education Office to go on the stage, and divulged he was still trying to reclaim eight years of pension contributions from the local corporation.

Arthur was shipwrecked again on 20 December 1968 and, as usual, chose mainly classical music. Why? He confessed to Plomley that 'I hate pop groups ... they're a load of rubbish!' then made an exception for his fellow Scousers, the Beatles, and 'All My Loving': 'At this point, they were very civilised and nice young fellows.'

His final trip to the island came twelve years later to the day, on 20 December 1980, at the age of eighty. His longevity in showbusiness was reflected by an anecdote about working on the BBC's first ever television broadcasts, with a bossy John Logie Baird, in 1934: 'I thought, *This fellow's an idiot!* But I was getting a guinea-and-a-half ...'

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Arthur Askey's phenomenal career in music hall, comedy, theatre, films, radio, television and pantomime made him one of the most famous all-round entertainers in Britain for nigh on five decades. He continued to work until just before he died in 1982, for which an appreciative nation could only reply: '*Ay'-thang-yaw!*'

DISCS CHOSEN (1942)

Coates's 'The Three Bears'
Jack Hylton and His Orchestra
'I like nearly everything of his – the melodies, the scoring, and the ideas behind them' (This was just as well, as Coates was also the composer of the *Desert Island Discs* theme tune.)

'Canoe Song'
Paul Robeson
'The greatest singer in the world'

'To a Wild Rose' from Edward MacDowell's *Ten Woodland Sketches*
Victor Olof Sextet

'Serenade' from Schubert's *Schwanengesang*
Webster Booth

'The Bees' Wedding' from Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*
Sergei Rachmaninov
'That lovely, swirling, dizzy piece of music'

'Sing as We Go'
Gracie Fields
'A person I admire tremendously, both as an artist and a woman'

'Andante Cantabile' from Tchaikovsky's String Quartet No. 1
Budapest String Quartet
'I couldn't spell it and I'm not sure what it means'

Band Waggon
Final episode of Askey's 1938–40 BBC radio comedy show
'So much fun – I could almost live on the memory of it for the rest of my life'

3
PETER USTINOV

WRITER, ACTOR, WIT, RACONTEUR
7 March 1951

Noted polymath Peter Ustinov was an illustrious visitor to the desert island even in his relative youth. He had still to turn thirty in March 1951 and yet, as an impressed Roy Plomley marvelled, had already written several hit plays, starred in West End roles ranging from revues to Russian tragedies, and written, directed and appeared in many films.

A true citizen of the world, Ustinov was an endlessly fascinating figure – and, unlike many of Plomley's guests, a passionate and informed music lover, with a record collection stacked to the ceiling of his Chelsea flat. 'I've never considered gramophone records an extravagance, but a necessary decoration to life!' he declared as the broadcast began.

The ensuing conversation confirmed that dedication.

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Plomley opened the interview by commenting on his guest's insatiable love for travel, which Ustinov attributed to his mother, Russian-born painter Nadia Benois, frequently taking him to exotic locales during his school holidays in search of subjects to paint.

'We got as far as Estonia once!' he recalled. 'I found it a little unsettling to return from more or less living a Gipsy life in some far-flung corner of Europe to a very conventional and tradition-loving public school where top hats were worn.'

Asked by Plomley why he had chosen the theatre as a career, Ustinov ascribed it to his fear of the School Certificate: the exam that was then taken by all sixteen-year-olds in mainstream British schools.

'I'd always been able to imitate my father's friends, much to his embarrassment, and I used that as a lever to get myself transferred to a drama school where they had never heard of the School Certificate,' he confessed.

'A smart move!' admired Plomley.

'One learns from experience, even early in life,' concurred Ustinov, before relating a curious story about having been at school with the son of Joachim von Ribbentrop, the foreign affairs minister of Nazi Germany.

'I wrote an uncomplimentary review of his activities in the school art competition for a London paper,' he recalled. 'To my delight, it was accepted, and I was offered seven and six. I forgot to answer the letter.

'They sent me a guinea, obviously thinking my feelings had been hurt by

the paltry reward originally offered. I've never been in a hurry to answer a letter since. Nine or ten months is a fair average.'

Ustinov was famously a treasure trove of such charming, self-deprecating anecdotes. Yet the business of *Desert Island Discs* was music, and he was determined to focus his laser mind on what he found so attractive about his choices.

Selecting soprano Jennie Tourel singing a love song from an Offenbach operetta, Ustinov lauded it as epitomising 'the rich, untroubled world before 1914 ... *La Belle Époque*,' and contrasted it favourably with most contemporary music offerings.

'Modern light music is either too sentimental for my tastes or else its artificially inseminated, cannibal rhythm has me nodding off,' he said. 'But this ... it has no particular association for me, but I wish it had.'

Yet Ustinov was clearly dissatisfied with his own analysis, because as Tourel's dulcet tones faded away, he returned to the topic.

'A minute or two ago, I was mildly insulting to modern light music,' he said. 'I'd like to make it clear that that didn't apply to modern serious music as well. I like modern music. I believe it to be our duty to try to understand it.

'In these self-conscious times, the problems of the artist have a great deal in common. We have to create something out of a tired world, and that something must be beautiful, expressive, captivating or witty.'

Ustinov applying his singular intellect to the dissection of music was a joy. Rhapsodising the merits of Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, he became carried away by his own erudition.

'The whole thing is so pure!' he told Plomley. 'The melody line is so exquisite! Do you mind putting it on, because I'm beginning to talk like a programme note?'

It's fair to say that Ustinov had given his record choices rather more thought than had Arthur Askey. Yet he was at pains to stress that, while his selections might be relatively obscure, he was no musical contrarian.

'In case it might be thought that my choice so far is eccentric, I do feel I must make it clear that I'd take most of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart with me if I had the chance,' he explained.

'But, you know, while recognising the greatness of the great, I have my particular favourites which are pets of mine, and which I would rather be with, under the desolate circumstances you have prescribed. I'm not possessive by nature but I am unreasonably, aggressively possessive about my *Desert Island Discs*!'

'And why not?' acquiesced Plomley.

The eclectic tone continued as Ustinov selected two works by Czech composer, Leoš Janáček, then rounded off the programme with a dash of Russian Orthodox Church music.

'It is the most elevated music I know: both sad and serene, anguished and uncomplaining,' he said. 'This is the record I shall save for when the water runs out on my island.'

'How poignant that is indeed,' agreed Plomley as the music faded away. 'It's been a most unusual and fascinating choice you've given us. After records from Sicily, France, Russia, Brazil, Austria and Czechoslovakia, perhaps you'd like to say "Goodnight" in English?'

'Goodnight, everyone,' said Peter Ustinov.

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Ustinov was to be shipwrecked just once more, in November 1977. This was a less music-focused, more discursive appearance, and his razor-witted bon mots and anecdotes were, unsurprisingly, a delight.

Typical was his answer to being asked by Plomley what he would be happiest to be away from on the desert island. 'I said this year that my idea of paradise is a country without telephones,' he mused. 'And my idea of hell is a place where telephones don't work.'

Similarly enlightening was his response to Plomley's question, 'Were you bright at school?'

'No, I was a matt finish, on the whole,' said Ustinov. 'I once said that I thought that a British education was probably the best in the world, if you could survive it. And if you couldn't, there was nothing left for you but the diplomatic corps. I still feel that quite strongly, on occasion!'

Plomley chuckled appreciatively as his guest related tales of being turned down to be a British spy ('They said that my face would be very difficult to lose in a crowd') and of, extraordinarily, serving as David Niven's batman during his Second World War military service.

Yet Ustinov's genius as a raconteur was most evident in his account of the instructions that he was given during three singing lessons he took while filming *Quo Vadis* in 1951.

'I took three lessons at Rome Opera House,' he recalled, 'from a man who confided in me that he only did it because he needed the money, because "the grandmother is old and the children are young". I said, "Well, that consideration is not entirely absent from *my* thinking!"

'He said, "In three lessons, to teach you to sing is impossible. Three years, perhaps. But I will try to squeeze a year a lesson." "Fine!" I said.

'He said, "The first thing to remember is to breathe with the forehead." I said, "What?" He said, "Try, you must always try to breathe with the forehead!" So, I wrinkled my brow and tried to give the impression that there was a small pulse in it.

'He said, "You are really very quick on the uptake! Good! Tomorrow, we will see how good your memory is. You will breathe with the ..." I said, "Forehead?" "Bravo, that's incredible! So quickly you learn!"

'In the second lesson, he told me: "Not only breathe with the forehead, but think with the stomach." I said, "Oh, I see!" and I tried to wear a rather constricted look, as though I was thinking with my stomach – not forgetting to wrinkle my forehead, to demonstrate that the little pulse was at work there.

'On the third lesson, he said, "I will see how much you remember of the lesson so far." I said, "Yes." "I ask you to think with the ..." "Stomach." "Bravo! And to breathe with the ..." "Forehead." "It's incredible! I never heard a student so quick!"

'"And now, the last thing I must tell you, the third lesson – remember always, under any circumstances, to sing with the eye." And I'm afraid I may on occasion have forgotten to breathe with my forehead, or think with my stomach, but never *ever* did I forget to sing with my eye! I think that's probably the only part of me that *was* singing, at times ...'

The genius that was Peter Ustinov ended his second *Desert Island Discs* appearance by asking Roy Plomley for writing paper as his luxury item.

'I'll make my own books,' he explained. 'I hope there may be a few bottles around with something to drink. As I expend the bottles, I can fill them with writing and set them off on their road to oblivion by launching them in the sea ...'

• • •

After a life whose achievements included Academy Awards, Golden Globes, BAFTAs and a Grammy, becoming a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF and, in 1990, being knighted, Sir Peter Ustinov died in 2004 at the age of 82. There really wasn't a lot that he *hadn't* done by then. Including, obviously, singing with his eye.

DISCS CHOSEN (1951)

'A la Barcillunisa'
Giuseppe Di Stefano
'It has the exquisite feeling of maritime nostalgia'

'Ô mon cher amant' from Offenbach's *La Périchole*
Jennie Tourel
'Still nostalgic, but gayer – a love song, in fact'

Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor
Jascha Heifetz
'An example of modern lyricism at its most poignant'

Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5
Bidu Sayão

Schubert's String Quartet No. 13 in A Minor
Philharmonia String Quartet
'The superb resignation and fatalism and simplicity of Schubert'

'Odesli' from Janáček's *Jenůfa*
Štěpánka Jelínková

Janáček's Sinfonietta
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra
'Pulsating with joy and gaiety'

'Prière de Saint-Siméon'
Choir of the Russian Cathedral in Paris
'Of all church music I've heard, this is the most beautiful'

4
PETULA CLARK

SINGER, ACTOR
2 May 1951

Petula Clark was only eighteen when she fetched up on the desert island in May 1951 but she already had a considerable showbiz career behind her. A wartime BBC radio child entertainer, she had also toured Britain, as 'the Singing Sweetheart', with fellow tyro Julie Andrews.

Having had her first film role aged twelve, Clark had since then become a movie veteran, including starring with Anthony Newley in *Vice Versa*, directed by our previous castaway, Peter Ustinov. She had also hosted her own afternoon BBC TV programme and had recently launched her recording career.

Yet despite these laudable achievements, she was still a teenager, with little real-life experience or worldly sophistication to draw upon, as was evident from her *Desert Island Discs* interlocution.

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With his avuncular yet patrician manner, Roy Plomley's interview with Petula Clark took a notably gallant tone. This courtesy was evident from the off, as he addressed his 'attractive' castaway as 'Pet', adding, 'I hate to think of you wasting your sweetness on a desert isle!'

'Records do mean a lot to me,' began Clark. 'I've collected them ever since I was a child ...'

'*All* those years?' teased Plomley.

'I like new things,' she persisted. 'This means that, with two or three exceptions, the eight records I stagger up the beach with are my present favourites, and how long it would be before I tire of them and want new ones, I have no idea.'

Clark introduced her first record, 'Aba Daba Honeymoon' from the soundtrack of a movie called *Two Weeks with Love*, as 'a love song of two chimpanzees'. Plomley affected to be perplexed by this.

'It's recorded by two chimpanzees, is it?' he enquired.

'Do try to be serious about this!' admonished Clark.

'What does "aba daba" mean?'

'That's chimpanzee language.'

As the song finished, Clark hoped that its use of chimp-speak might be useful to coax monkeys on the island down from the trees to lend her some company.

'You may not have monkeys on the island,' warned Plomley.

'Surely *every* desert island has monkeys?' she asked.

'We had a castaway on this programme once who had actually been

shipwrecked on a desert island, and the only inhabitants he found were penguins and wild goats!' exclaimed Plomley, clearly still not over the thrill of meeting Captain A.E. Dingle.

'I think I should get on well with penguins,' Clark speculated. 'I like comedians.'

Plomley widened the conversational remit to ask his guest how she would get on with making a fire and cooking on the island.

'I'd have a shot at cooking – I'll try anything once – but I wouldn't have a clue about making a fire,' she replied.

'Pity – because a fire does help when you're cooking ...' he pointed out, before returning to the topic of her extreme youth.

'Pet, we all know that you're just eighteen, but you seem to have been on the radio and in pictures for a few years now. At whatever age did you start?'

'I made up my mind I wanted to be an actress when I was six years old,' she explained. 'It was on top of a bus.'

'Why on top of a bus?'

'My father had just taken me to see my first play: Flora Robson in *Mary Tudor* at the Streatham Hill Theatre. I came out of the theatre in a bit of a daze and on the way home, I said, "I'm going to be an actress." I firmly made my mind up at that moment and I never changed it.'

'And did you start right away, at the age of six?' Plomley asked.

'No, I had to wait, because of LCC [*London County Council*] regulations, until I was twelve. I have to say, I waited *fuming* with impatience!'

The broadcast wended to its end with a little more desultory chit-chat about Clark's remaining record choices. As Plomley wound things up by saying, 'There you are, Pet, that's your eight!' he sounded as if he was patting her on the head as if she were, indeed, a pet.

'That's the eight I'd take this week but, as I warned you, my favourites change, and if I were to be cast away again in a month's time, I might have a quite different eight,' Clark replied.

'I might take you up on that,' said Plomley.

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Yet it was actually thirty-one years before an older, far worldlier Petula Clark returned to Plomley's island in 1982. By then she was a huge recording star not just in Britain and America but across Europe, due to a canny habit of also recording in French, Italian, Spanish and German.

After recalling her early, adolescent shipwreck, the now-savvier Clark talked of having back then been the youngest artist signed to the Rank Organisation, and regretted how they had tried to artificially prolong her spell as a child star as it was coining them so much money.

'They kept you in ankle socks?' asked Plomley.

'And bound in my bosom,' sighed Clark.

'It was very mean of them!' sympathised Plomley.

'Yes, it was rather mean,' agreed Clark. 'I wasn't allowed to grow up. It was very difficult for me. I was not very happy during those years.'

The host and guest moved on to a happier topic, reminiscing about working together on a satirical BBC radio show written by Plomley, *The Rhubarb Room*, in 1949.

'Why *was* it called that?' wondered Clark, laughing.

'I don't know,' admitted Plomley. 'I wanted something ridiculous.'

Far more significant was Clark describing being asked to begin recording in French in 1957. Unable to speak the language, she demurred, but reluctantly agreed to play a one-off show at Paris's Olympia Theatre.

'I sang for about fifteen minutes and pulled the place down,' she told Plomley. 'I couldn't figure out why [*because*] I sang very badly! I had a very bad cold and looked dreadful.

'The next morning, the record chief was trying to talk me into recording in French. I was still saying no, blowing my nose and saying, "I want to go home!" Anyway, the lights went off in this record chief's office and he said something in French, which I obviously didn't understand.

'This boy came in, stood on the desk and changed the light bulb. The light went on and *there he was*. I said, "Who's *that*?" The boss said, "Oh, that is Claude Wolff, he's our promotions person. If you did make a record, he would be showing you around Paris ..." So, I said, "Oh well, all right, I'll have a go, then!"'

Clark did not speak French and Wolff had little English. ('The only English Claude knew was some rather nasty American jazz slang, which I found rather shocking!') Yet four years later, they were married. They were to have three children and remain married for fifty years.

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Clark was to move to France to live with Claude Wolff once they were married. This upheaval also opened her eyes to different ways to sing and to be a popular entertainer, as she explained to Sue Lawley when she made her third visit to the desert island, on Christmas Eve 1995.

On this visit, Clark concurred with Lawley's suggestion that she had cut her showbiz teeth in the British music hall tradition of sequins and big ballads. On crossing *la Manche*, she realised that performing could be done with greater depth, nuance and subtlety.

'I remember going to the music hall for the first time in Paris,' she said. 'I saw Piaf and I thought, *Well, what's all this about?* This little lady comes out in this rather shabby little black dress and sings about death and madness and sex and all kinds of heavy stuff. It was, like, *but this isn't music hall!*

'I'd never seen anything like that before and, of course, she wasn't the only one. There was Aznavour, obviously, but also so many, many singers like that and it just taught me so much.'

Clark was far too modest to say so, but Lawley pointed out that, within

two or three years, her guest had beaten Piaf to be regarded by the French as the very best *chanteuse* extant. 'You were the number-one female vocalist in France, weren't you?' she asked.

'Yes, and it was amazing, really!' marvelled Petula Clark. 'I never really understood how that happened ...'

• • •

One of the most talented and tenacious female stars in the history of British music, Petula Clark has sold nearly 70 million records worldwide and starred in numerous high-profile movies and stage musicals. In 2019, at the age of eighty-six, she returned to the West End stage to play the part of the Bird Woman in *Mary Poppins*. She splits her time between homes in Geneva, the French Alps and Chelsea, and continues to record and perform. That moment of inspiration on a Streatham omnibus really worked out rather well.

DISCS CHOSEN (1951)

'Aba Daba Honeymoon'
Debbie Reynolds and Carleton Carpenter

'The Story of the Stars'
Jack Pleis and His Piano
'This is one for the evening, sitting outside my little hut'

'Dear, dear, dear'
Champ Butler
'A piece of hot jazz. It starts in bop then just gets wild'

Ravel's *La Valse*
Paris Conservatoire Orchestra
'As close as I get to being classical'

'A Friend of Johnny's'
Jo Stafford with Paul Weston and His Orchestra

'Gipsy Fiddler'
Ray Martin and His Concert Orchestra
'Wild Gipsy music ... I like to fling myself about'

'Life's Desire'
Jimmy Young
'I'm afraid this one is sentimental'

'Temptation (Tim-Tayshun)'
Red Ingle and the Natural Seven
'This is a record that, in a way, debunks all the other records'

5
GRACIE FIELDS

SINGER, ACTOR
13 June 1951

There were few bigger stars in the British showbiz world in the thirties than Gracie Fields, 'the Lancashire lass'. As well as her vast repertoire of music hall songs such as 'Sally', she was also reputedly the highest-paid movie star in the world during the year of 1937.

Wartime, a cancer battle and a temporary move to America had reduced her ubiquity a little by the time of her first visit to *Desert Island Discs*, fourteen years later. Even so, such was her celebrity that Roy Plomley declared: 'I'm not going to *introduce* our castaway – all I have to do is to *announce* her.'

Famous for never losing her broad Rochdale accent, Fields's first words on the show were, 'This is a rum do I've got mixed up in! Eight records that would last the rest of my life, is that it?' It set the tone for a sweet and rather engaging exchange.

Also notable was Plomley's extreme respect for this particular castaway. Where Petula Clark had been 'Pet' to him, Gracie was 'Miss Fields' throughout.

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Plomley opened by enquiring of his guest whether she had made use of the BBC Record Library while selecting her music.

'They were very helpful,' said Fields. 'They said, "We've got a quarter of a million records here and you can play them all, if you like."

'I asked, "How long is that going to take?" and they said, "If you keep at it, day and night, you can manage it in just under two years." I said, "I can't stop now – I'm late as it is!"'

She then enquired of Plomley exactly what conditions on the desert isle were like. 'It's quite deserted, nobody about, no warmth, no comfort,' he reported. 'That sounds like some of the places I used to play on tour, years ago ...' she deadpanned, no doubt following her host's script.

Moving beyond this initial joshing, Fields selected 'O Paradiso', from an opera named *L'Africaine*, by legendary tenor Enrico Caruso. 'You feel all the time that he's giving all he's got,' she commented. 'He did what I always try to do: give the lot or nothing at all.'

As the tune faded away, Fields divulged a further reason for her choice: 'If that desert island is as dreamy as you make it out to be, it would take my mind off it by recalling for me the sunshine and the beautiful scenery of Italy.'

'You have a house in Capri, haven't you?' asked Plomley.

'That's right. That's my home, or, rather, one of my homes, because I think your real home must always be where you were brought up. And although I've got all my bits and pieces in that little house in Capri, the word "home" will always mean England to me.

'And my next record is, I think, the most English tune that I know. It's "Greensleeves". A wonderfully restful melody. It conjures up a picture of smooth, green lawns and shady trees and old houses. The picture you always have of England when you're away from it.'

Plomley moved on to enquire of 'Miss Fields' what made her go into the theatre. 'Were your family professionals?'

'No, I just liked singing, that was all. I went into the [*cotton*] mill when I was twelve years old as a half-timer: half my day at school, half at the mill. I used to sing while I worked. I jolly near got the sack for it, too!'

'For singing?' puzzled Plomley.

'I used to dance, as well, you see. Well, the idea of being paid for singing and dancing, for what I liked doing better than anything else in the world: I *had* to go on the stage!'

Plomley: 'Were you taking lessons?'

'I've never had a singing lesson in my life. We had them at school, but they wouldn't let me join in. They said my voice was too noisy.'

'How did you start in the business?'

'Singing at concerts, locally. Then I started in variety. I was doing a solo act when I was fifteen. Come on, let's have another record!'

Fields chose *Zigeunerweisen* by Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate, played by Russian violinist Jascha Heifetz. 'There must be some Gipsy blood in me,' she mused. 'Every time I hear Gipsy tunes, I want to dance. You can imagine me leaping about on the sand. Well, I've got to keep me weight down somehow!'

Fields's refusal to take herself seriously was endearing. Yet her tone became notably more serious, even reverential, when she came to discuss 'Una voce poco fa' from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, sung by legendary Italian soprano Luisa Tetrazzini.

'We had a gramophone back home in Rochdale,' she recalled. 'One of the old sort, with a big horn that half-filled up the front room. We had a pile of records: Billy Williams, Gus Elen, Harry Lauder, Vesta Victoria. All the music hall stars of the day. That was what we used to like.

'But suddenly, among them turned up a record by Tetrazzini. *How* it got there, heaven only knows! It wasn't me. I'll swear it wasn't Dad or Mum – I can't think of anybody in the family bringing it home! But there it was. *Opera! Italian! Highbrow!*

'I used to play it and that was the first time – there was no wireless in those days – that I ever heard *proper singing*.'

Plomley: 'That record had an effect on you, did it?'

'It certainly did! I'm not putting myself in the same class as Tetrazzini, don't think that, but it did give me something to aim at. It showed me there was more to singing than I ever heard at the local music hall.

'I used to burlesque it. I was doing that one night when I was playing in *The Show's the Thing* at the Lyceum. I was doing a charwoman sketch: I was scrubbing the floor and singing the cadenza: a cod on the way that Tetrazzini did it.

'I got off, and had a big hand for it, and somebody on the side said, "Do you know who is in front?" I said, "No." He said, 'Tetrazzini." I nearly died! But she came round afterwards, and she was grand. A lovely person, she was.'

Bidding Miss Fields a courtly farewell at the end of the show, Plomley noted that he had omitted to ask her one of the programme's staple questions: how would she manage, alone on the island?

'I think I'd be all right, love. I'm quite a good housekeeper and not a bad cook, but I don't think I'd be as good as most other Englishwomen. I've been so busy, the past few years, I haven't had as much experience as other women have in making do and making not very much go round.

'The way the English housewife has been managing – bless her! She's a marvel! I think she'd take a desert island in her stride ...'

• • •

Gracie Fields returned to the desert island ten years later, on Christmas Day 1961. By then, she'd had success on US TV, being the first actress to play Miss Marple in Agatha Christie's *A Murder is Announced* and winning an Emmy nomination for her role in J.M. Barrie's *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*.

Plomley found the pluck to address her as 'Gracie' and noted that she now had a lower profile in Britain: 'We don't see nearly enough of you these days ... it seems a shame to send you off to a desert island when you *do* get here!'

Fields explained that she spent eight months a year in Capri, splitting the rest of her time between England and the US. She admitted she had originally been driven to live on the Italian island by the pressure of her mega-fame in Britain.

'It was when I was being made such a fuss of,' she said. 'I never got the chance to even learn a new song! I was always opening a bazaar, or something. It used to be from eleven o'clock in the morning, they'd pick me up in any town I went to, and I never had any day to myself.

'I couldn't learn new programmes so I used to go to Capri. If it was only for a week, I'd have two days on the train, three days in Capri, and two days coming back again. I'd stick the songs under my arm and I could be there quietly without being disturbed, because it took two days to get a telegram to you and I wasn't on the phone.'

And yet, despite Gracie Fields's embrace of life in Italy and America, her musical selections still included the none-more-English 'Greensleeves'. The Lancashire lass was to continue to perform right up until she died, aged eighty-one, in 1979.

DISCS CHOSEN (1951)

'O Paradiso' from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*
Enrico Caruso
'There's no faking; no little tricks'

'Greensleeves'
Hallé Orchestra

'Old Sam (Sam, Pick Oop Tha' Musket)'
Stanley Holloway
'It's got the character of the North Country people'

Sarasate's *Zigeunerweisen*
Jascha Heifetz with the London Symphony Orchestra

Selection from *Show Boat*
Geraldo and His Romance in Rhythm Orchestra
'Theatre music: to make me imagine the curtain going up, and all the lights and colour and excitement'

Intermezzo and serenade from Delius's *Hassan*
Hallé Orchestra
'It's got a sort of Eastern fatalism, which would be appropriate for a desert island'

'Una voce poco fa' from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*
Luisa Tetrazzini

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
'Lots of romance, lots of violins, a lovely melody'

6
NORMAN WISDOM

COMEDIAN, ACTOR, SINGER
17 April 1953

Roy Plomley had invented *Desert Island Discs* and he had a determined vision of how the show should be. His interview encounters were invariably charming and easy on the ear. However, a polite reticence to probe meant that he rarely dived too deep beneath his castaways' surfaces.

Typical was his April 1953 encounter with Norman Wisdom, a man with an extraordinary backstory. Beaten by his father as a boy, he had run away to a children's home, slept rough, been a British Army flyweight boxing champion in India and connected Winston Churchill's phone calls during the Second World War before becoming an entertainer.

However, the reliably urbane Plomley eschewed these tantalising topics in favour of a characteristically entertaining humorous exchange. As both parties were very skilled in this particular discipline, it was still a highly enjoyable episode.

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In fairness to Plomley, Wisdom was equally keen to turn his appearance on the island into an Arthur Askey-style comedy routine. The tone was set when he arrived in the studio apparently grunting and puffing.

'What are you doing, Norman?' asked Plomley.

'Getting packed.'

'Getting packed? But you're not allowed to take anything with you!'

'All right, well, I'll change here, then.'

'But you can't change! You must go as you are!'

'Go as I am? But I've got a smashing outfit ready! I've got a grass skirt and a beautiful double-breasted fig leaf ...'

Wisdom abruptly dismissed his host's suggestion that he should build a hut on the island, pointing instead to his time sleeping rough in London as a child: 'If you've done it in England, you can do it anywhere!'

'You had a pretty adventurous childhood, didn't you?' asked Plomley.

'I don't know about adventurous, but I had a pretty tough one.'

'You ran away from home when you were about eleven?'

'That's right.'

'What sort of jobs did you hold down?'

'Well, I didn't hold any of them down, but I had a lot of fun trying.'

'For instance?'

'Oh, pageboy, errand boy, cabin boy on a ship going to South America ... that was a nice safe job.'

'Safe?!' exclaimed Plomley.

'Yes, well, they can't very well sack you in the middle of the South Atlantic ...'

Wisdom was by now thirty-eight yet it was clear his nomadic days were not entirely over. Invited by Plomley to begin nominating his music choices, he commented that he was no expert, as he had only recently begun collecting records.

'I've only just got myself a house,' he admitted. 'I've been touring in a caravan until now, and there is no room to collect anything in a caravan. We were so short of space that where other fellows could take their wives home boxes of chocolates, I had to take my wife half-a-dozen hundreds and thousands!'

Miffed at having to miss the imminent coronation of Queen Elizabeth II while he was on the island, Wisdom chose a tune named 'Coronation Scot' to soften the blow. Then, before his next tune, 'Dummy Song', he directly addressed its performer, Max Bygraves.

'Are you listening, Max?' he wondered. 'Do you remember those not-so-far-off days, just after the war, when we were demobbed and we used to work those tiny little music halls, far from civilisation, with our names outside on the bills down in the right-hand corner, about the same size as the bloke who'd printed 'em?

'And do you remember we used to go on stage and flog ourselves to a standstill then come off and sit in the dressing room and say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were stars?" Then we'd come down to earth and say, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were *working* next week?" Good luck, Max – I'd like to have your voice on my island ...'

Plomley turned the questioning to Wisdom's army career. His guest spoke of it fondly.

'I have a great deal to thank the army for,' he said. 'Firstly, and I'm not afraid to admit it, for a square meal and a bed when I needed it very badly. Plus, a smashing warm overcoat and that wonderful thing called companionship, which I think is more prevalent in the army than anywhere else. And, strangely enough, although I didn't get my career in the army, my career came *from* the army.'

Plomley: 'In what respect, Norman?'

'I joined the band and learned a lot about music. Have you ever listened to Harry James playing the trumpet, Roy? I'd take one of his records with me.'

'Any particular reason?'

'Well, when I was in India, all the chaps in the band, including myself, had to play a trumpet in order to carry out guard duties, you know: like

"Cookhouse", or "Reveille", or something like that. I used to go and struggle through various calls at about half-speed with a handful of wrong notes thrown in. It sounded as if I was blowing a trumpet while I was riding a bike on a rough road.

'Then I'd go back into the guard room, put on this record of Harry James playing "Flight of the Bumble Bee", and think to myself, *Cor, strike me lucky! How does he do it?* And if you know, you tell me!'

As the interview neared its end, Wisdom made a heartfelt plea for Plomley to bend *Desert Island Discs*' rules. He had recently become a father for the first time (his son, Nicholas, would in later years play first-class cricket for Sussex). Could he possibly take his small boy with him?

'How small?' asked Plomley.

'Six pounds seven ounces! Not very heavy. He wouldn't take up much room!'

'Not allowed, I'm afraid!'

'Oh, this is just the same as any other digs!' sighed Wisdom. 'No dogs or children – and no musical instruments after eleven, I suppose?'

'You've got to be fair to the seagulls!' cautioned Plomley.

'But he's quiet! He never cries!'

'What would you feed him on?'

'Coconut milk and seagull eggs.'

'Nourishing but monotonous,' decided Plomley. 'Anyway, he can't go, it's against the rules.'

There was just time left for Wisdom to choose a record by Gracie Fields: 'I look upon her as my good fairy because, when I started, she was very kind to me.' His episode had been fun, but it would have been nice to hear his experiences of homelessness, boxing and Winston Churchill.

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When Norman Wisdom returned to the desert island in August 2000, at the age of eighty-five, he had just been knighted. He had not yet come to terms with the honour, as was evidenced by his reaction when the show's host, Sue Lawley, addressed him by his new title.

'I'm sorry, but I can't help laughing when you say "Sir Norman!"' he admitted. "Most people are still saying "Tich!"'

Despite this, he and Lawley appeared to have an instant rapport, and he was more than willing to fill her in on the details of his homelessness as a teenager.

'I was sleeping rough behind the Marshal Fox statue in Victoria station,' he recalled. 'I used to go over at about half past two in the morning to a coffee-stall attendant and look over the counter. And the bloke eventually said, "What's the matter with you?"'

'I told him the truth so he pushed me a hot pie and a cup of Bovril.

He did this for about seven or eight nights, then he said, "Why don't you join the army? You'll have somewhere to sleep!" I said, "I can't get in the army at my size!" I was four foot ten-and-a-half and I weighed five stone nine!'

Wisdom told Lawley that he nevertheless went to a recruiting centre, where a military band master took pity on him, enlisted him and turned his fortunes around.

'Two weeks later, I was on my way to India, having the time of my life! Wonderful weather, my own bed, wonderful food, football, cricket, swimming, and I was put on to clarinet and saxophone. Those six years I did in India were the happiest time of my life.'

Wisdom also opened up on his troubled family background, describing an abusive father who would bounce him off the sitting-room ceiling, and who beat his mother until she was forced to leave.

'He claimed custody of the children only because he didn't want her to have them,' he said. 'He was a chauffeur and he'd be away for weeks or, sometimes, months. It became a question of beg, steal or borrow. That's what we'd do: steal.'

After Wisdom's mother was driven out, he told Lawley, she vanished and he did not see her for decades – until they reunited in a most extraordinary manner.

'I was doing a show at the Cambridge Theatre in '51,' he recalled. 'We were on the stage for the applause. I was only on the second row because I wasn't the star. Suddenly there was this voice from up in the gods: "Norman Wisdom! Norman Wisdom! Well done, Norman Wisdom!"

'She kept on and on! The stage manager even took me by the arm and led me to the front. She shouted, "Congratulations, Norman Wisdom!" Then I was in the dressing room and the doorkeeper came and said, "Norman, a lady would like to see you." And it was my mother.'

Lawley: 'That would have been twenty-seven years since you'd seen her?'

Wisdom: 'That's right. And I kept her and I never let her go.'

Wisdom also recalled a brief period in his life when he had appeared likely to break America. In the late sixties, he had starred in a Broadway show, made a movie – *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968) – and worked with Audrey Hepburn, Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy.

Sue Lawley wondered why this had come to an end: 'You had a very firm foothold in the States, because you were on Broadway. Why didn't you go on and make it big there?' And Norman Wisdom explained: he had not wanted to repeat the mistake of his own parents and abandon his children.

'It's a bit sad, but I'll tell you,' he said, 'I was married at that time and I had two children, a son and a daughter, and my wife found someone tall and good-looking. And, so, I packed it all in to come back to look after my children.

'And I'm very pleased that I did, because they're a couple of crackers ...'

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Sir Norman Wisdom had a decade to get accustomed to being a knight of the realm. He retired from acting on his ninetieth birthday, in February 2005, in order to spend more time with his family and on his adopted home of the Isle of Man. Sir Norman was to pass away in a care home on the island, on 4 October 2010, at the age of ninety-five.

DISCS CHOSEN (1953)

'Coronation Scot'
Sidney Torch and His Orchestra
'A beautiful descriptive piece'

'Dummy Song'
Max Bygraves

'The Three Trumpeters'
The Band of the Royal Military School of Music

'My Heart and I'
Richard Tauber and the Luton Girls' Choir

'Flight of the Bumble Bee'
Harry James and His Orchestra

Sibelius's *Valse triste*
Philharmonia Orchestra
'I'm not really a classical fan, but this is my favourite piece of music bar none'

'What Is a Boy?'
Jan Peerce

'Now Is the Hour'
Gracie Fields
'A very sweet lady, loved by everybody in showbusiness'

LUXURY ITEM

Motor car and petrol
'Just so I can park it anywhere I like – on the wrong side of the street, up one-way streets facing the wrong way ...'

7
LESLIE CARON

ACTOR, DANCER
2 July 1956

Norman Wisdom came close to breaking America yet was ultimately happy to settle for being a very British performer with little profile outside of his homeland (except, a tad perplexingly, for being huge in Albania). In 1956, by stark contrast, Roy Plomley welcomed to the island a twenty-five-year-old French starlet with the world at her feet.

Leslie Caron had begun her career as a ballerina in Paris before being discovered by Gene Kelly, who cast her opposite him as the female lead in the 1951 musical comedy movie *An American in Paris*. Her success in this debut film role landed her a move to Hollywood and a seven-year contract with MGM.

Ms Caron had since gone on to win an Academy Award Nomination for her lead role in musical movie *Lili* (strapline: 'You'll fall in love with Lili!'). She was well on her way to becoming one of the most recognisable and bankable faces of the golden age of Hollywood.

She was also to make her own little piece of *Desert Island Discs* history. In February 2022, at the age of ninety, Caron returned to the show to talk to Lauren Laverne, more than sixty-five years after her first visit. It is the longest-ever timespan between two appearances as a castaway: a record that is unlikely ever to be surpassed.

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In the opening desert-island exchanges in July 1956, Leslie Caron told Plomley that it was ballet that had inculcated her strong love for music: 'I have quite a large collection: about two hundred LPs!' In return, the host wondered when she had first resolved to become a dancer.

'It's difficult to say,' Caron replied. 'I can't quite remember when I first wanted. I think I have always wanted to dance.'

Plomley: 'How old were you when you started to learn?'

'Well, I was actually quite old when I went to my first dancing lesson. I was nine, which is very old for ballet.'

'Did your parents encourage you in your ambition?' asked Plomley.

'My mother did! She was a ballet dancer!'

Caron talked of joining a prestigious French company, Ballet des Champs-Élysées, when she was seventeen and enjoying touring with them, especially to London. Plomley wondered why she had left, after just over two years, to move to Hollywood.

'I was getting very tired. It's a very strenuous life. I found that I couldn't keep up with the company any more, and so I accepted Gene Kelly's offer to do *An American in Paris* with him.'

'Did you find that more restful?'

'No! I think it was quite worse!'

Plomley wondered how his guest had first coped with the limitations of having to dance within tight chalk marks in front of a film camera, after being used to having the freedom of the stage for ballet performances.

'It's very difficult, because you have to repeat over and over again,' Caron agreed. 'As you say, the marvellous thing about ballet is freedom. You *do* have to confine yourself ... it's no use dancing outside the camera range!'

At the time, Caron was in London starring in the lead role in a stage production of *Gigi*, a role she was to reprise three years later in a film that was to win nine Academy Awards. Yet before turning his mind to this production, Plomley awarded his guest what he no doubt considered to be a major accolade.

'I would like to compliment you on your excellent English!' he declared. 'Despite the fact that you've spent the last four or five years in the United States, you speak English with an *English* accent and not an American one.'

'Oh, thank you very much!' said Caron. 'That's quite a compliment! Actually, I learned English from a New England lady. She had a sort of British accent and we read Shakespeare for hours.'

Plomley wondered whether Caron had still to put in many hours of daily dance training while appearing in *Gigi*.

'Well, I would if I were still training, but I am not! I have abandoned dancing now.'

'You've abandoned dancing?' repeated the horrified host. 'That's sad news! Is that a firm decision?'

'Well, one can say anything is firm, really ... I don't know. I might take it up again but I don't think I would go back on the stage again ...'

Having absorbed the news of his guest's planned change of career, Plomley wrapped up the show, as was his wont, by asking Caron if she would make a good castaway. Her reply was surprisingly chipper.

'Oh, I'm sure I could be quite happy! I've already done it, as a matter of fact. I'm quite trained for it.'

'What have you done? Been on a desert island?'

'Yes, for a whole month. A very exciting island in Brittany, that was taken over by some pirates in about 1500, and they built a beautiful tower on it. When I wanted to eat, I had to build my own fire, and fetch the wood and get water from a well.'

'When I wanted to go to the village, I had to go at low tide, harness a horse and drive the horse carriage myself. It was all very romantic!'

Plomley: 'So you've been very well-trained for this! Except that, on our island, you won't have a village to go to ...'

'Then I'm afraid I would eat seaweed!'

'Do you fish?'

'No, not at all. I'm sure I couldn't. The fish wouldn't take to me.'

'Oh, I think you'd charm the fish out of the water ...' concluded a smitten Roy Plomley.

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Leslie Caron had lived a long and eventful life by the time she washed up on the desert island again, aged ninety, early in 2022. She never did return to ballet, but had scooped countless awards and accolades during what had been a truly glittering movie and theatre career.

With the calm and wisdom of age, she was also far more willing to open up about her life to Lauren Laverne than she had been to Roy Plomley more than half a century earlier. It made for compulsive radio.

Laverne asked Caron about her mother, an American divorcee who had danced on Broadway and been previously married before meeting her father. She also appeared to have been entirely lacking in any kind of maternal instinct.

'My mother was very honest,' claimed Caron. 'She said to me: "Listen, I don't like children and I'm not going to take care of you when you're little, because I'm not interested. But when you're a star, I will be there!" So, I knew what I had to do! It was quite clear!'

Laverne: 'You must have been heartbroken?'

Caron laughed a very French laugh: 'No, no! I wasn't heartbroken! I knew my mother: that's just the way she was. She would just say it the way she felt it.'

Caron recalled being eight years old when the Second World War broke out in 1939. She told Laverne that her grandfather had cried as she sat on his knee: 'He said, "My poor child! War is declared! Don't talk about your mother being American. There are men with machine guns."

'Paris changed so much. All bags of sand and German signs everywhere, written in Gothic black and white letters. You couldn't recognise where you were: it wasn't Paris any more. It destroys the soul ... the horror of it all. The greyness!'

Caron went on to describe beginning her dance career after the end of the war, then being spotted by Gene Kelly and whisked to Hollywood to star in *An American in Paris*. Laverne asked if it was true that she had been so shy she had initially tried to shoot scenes with her back to the camera.

'Yes!' she laughed. 'Gene would tell me, "Kiddo, turn your face towards the camera, or your grandmother won't know you were in the film!"'