

BBC
RADIO



DESERT ISLAND DISCS



70 YEARS OF CASTAWAYS

from one of BBC Radio 4's
best-loved programmes

SEAN MAGEE

Foreword by
KIRSTY YOUNG

ABOUT THE BOOK

'For seventy years now Desert Island Discs has managed that rare feat - to be both enduring and relevant. By casting away the biggest names of the day in science, business, politics, showbiz, sport and the arts, it presents a cross-sectional snapshot of the times in which we live. As the decades have passed, the programme has kept pace; never frozen in time yet always, somehow, comfortingly the same.'

Kirsty Young

BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* celebrates its seventieth birthday in 2012. Since the programme's deviser Roy Plomley interviewed comedian Vic Oliver in January 1942, nearly 3,000 distinguished people from all walks of life have been stranded on the mythical island, accompanied by only eight records, one book and a luxury.

Here the story of one of BBC Radio 4's favourite programmes is chronicled through a special selection of castaways.

Roy Plomley, inventor of the programme as well as its presenter for over forty years, quizzes the young Cliff Richard about 'these rather frenzied movements' the 1960s pop sensation makes on the stage. Robert Maxwell tells Plomley's successor Michael Parkinson that 'I will have left the world a slightly better place by having lived in it.' Diana Mosley assures Sue Lawley that Adolf Hitler was 'extraordinarily fascinating' and had mesmeric blue eyes. And Johnny Vegas tugs Kirsty Young's heart-strings with his account of a childhood so impoverished that family pets

were fair game: 'My dad had always claimed that rabbits were livestock, but we'd never eaten one before.'

Desert Island Discs is much more than a radio programme. It is a unique and enduringly popular take on our lives and times - and this extensively illustrated book tells in rich detail the colourful and absorbing story of an extraordinary institution.

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Have you visited the Desert Island Discs website?

www.bbc.co.uk/desertislanddiscs

Tap on the name of each castaway featured in this book to view their entry on the website and to listen to their original recording, where available.

To find all the castaways in the Desert Island Discs archive, please visit the website and search for their name.

FOREWORD

by Kirsty Young



Let me ask you a question (it's a hard habit to break). What do the late Prince Chula Chakrabongse of Thailand and Ian Hislop have in common? Two men born more than half a century and half a world apart: it's tricky to imagine what could possibly unite them.

Unlike one of our best-known satirists, His Royal Highness didn't, as far as we're aware, harbour a deep-seated love of the breakfast treat Frosties. Yet when it came to choosing the eight discs they couldn't be without on a desert island, the Prince and the *Private Eye* editor were very much in tune. Though their programmes were broadcast thirty-four years apart, nestling among each man's little bundle of choices was a disc by the debonair comedy actor Jack Buchanan. Who would have thought it?

For seventy years now *Desert Island Discs* has managed that rare feat – to be both enduring and relevant. By casting away the biggest names of the day in science, business, politics, showbiz and the arts it presents a cross-sectional snapshot of the times in which we live. As the decades have passed the programme has kept pace; never frozen in time yet always, somehow, comfortingly the same.

And here we must surely tip our hat to Roy Plomley. Like most truly great ideas – the wellie boot, the sandwich, the spellcheck – the premise of *Desert Island Discs* is stunning in its simplicity. A person of significant accomplishment enters into a bargain with the Beeb: they chat about their life and we play the eight discs they've chosen. What could be more straightforward?

The humble genius of the format is that it cradles and shapes itself around each highly individual guest – like a well-tethered hammock slung between a pair of obliging palm trees.

Back in 1942 – before publicity junkets and PRs, YouTube and tweeting – one person talking to another person while other folk tuned in on the wireless must surely have seemed like a jolly bright idea. But now? In 2012? For *forty-five minutes*? Are you mad?

Well, no, you're not. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that among the constant flow of instant verbiage that swirls, non-stop, around us these days, the opportunity to take a decent amount of time to properly appreciate and examine the life of someone significant is more welcome than ever.

But of course the chat is only part of it (twenty-nine minutes, if you're counting, and I very much hope you are). What about the other essential component – the discs? Where do castaways begin when it comes to choosing the pieces that will illustrate and illuminate who they are and how their life has been?

Naturally, no two castaways are the same and every recording takes on a character all its own. But if there is one common utterance from every single guest who sits in the studio (and there is) it goes like this: 'It was almost *impossible* to choose just eight.' The self-editing process for a guest is swingeing. If they're playing the 'game' properly it can't all be just Beethoven or Dylan. It's about pinpointing pieces that cast light on their life's most significant moments – adversities conquered, children born, lovers lost, laughter shared. As a result their little list of discs is often very surprising indeed. When the former head of MI5, the redoubtable Eliza Manningham-Buller, told me she'd decided on a track from Detroit garage rockers The White Stripes it was all I could do not to punch the air and shout 'Wowza!'

It's a formula that works, then; but the programme is hopefully never formulaic. In my mind it works best as a sort of triangulated conversation – castaway, host and listener sitting around the table engaged in a no-holds-barred dialogue about how the guest of honour got to where they are and what it's like to live the life they have lived. I say 'no-holds-barred' because that's the deal: there is no 'deal'. We never agree questions beforehand – no matter how platinum-plated the castaway. And keeping the listener engaged often means being very nosey and very persistent. Yet *Desert Island Discs* is unashamedly a celebration of achievement – the people who come on are there because they matter. From Field Marshal Montgomery to Tanni Grey Thompson, all of them have reached the heights in their chosen field. They're different from the rest of us: more talented, more ambitious, more energetic – and often more insecure.

And since we happen to be on the subject of anxiety, these days I often wonder if the only reason I'm ever asked anywhere is because people want to know the low down and dirty on *Desert Island Discs*. I am constantly filleted for

information about castaways. How do we choose them? Who's been the most interesting? Who's had the worst music? Who was rudest? Who's been your favourite? Well, for fear of never being invited anywhere ever again, I hereby refuse to definitively answer any of those questions right now. But I will pull back the curtain a few inches and offer you a behind-the-scenes glimpse of what goes on 'off mic', as we say in the business.

It's well known that Roy Plomley used to take castaways to his club prior to recordings, furnishing them with what might reasonably be called 'a good lunch'. Whether it was a social nicety or a bid to loosen their tongues, it's one of the few programme traditions that's gone by the board. These days BBC budget constraints mean we run to a cup of tea or some fizzy water. There's a lot to be said for tradition ...

So, the first chance I get to meet our castaways face to face is when they arrive for the recording. Minutes are precious then and none of them are wasted. Some turn up at the doors of Broadcasting House with an entourage. The elderly American comedian Jackie Mason was trailing three people and one of them was trailing the longest mink coat I've ever clapped eyes on. It was not a cold day. Some arrive alone. Annie Lennox (ten Grammys, four Ivor Novello Awards, eight Brits, a Golden Globe and an OBE) pitched up entirely by herself, save for a packet of shop-bought sandwiches. Then there was 73-year-old Yoko Ono in a plunging top, tiny fedora and very big, very black sunglasses. Barry Manilow was in shades too; however, unlike Yoko he did me the favour of taking them off for the recording.

For a short time we settle down in the control room – the booth with all the knobs and buttons, next door to the studio – and over tea and the occasional biscuit we listen to the castaway's choices, double-checking that for each we have exactly the right track and firming up which precise two minutes the castaway would like to be played.

Incidentally, Sir Tom Jones didn't get mere biscuits with his tea. He was accorded the privilege of home-made Welsh Cakes: not from my home but from the oven of the Welsh-born mother of the programme's producer. Mrs Buckle - I salute you. The Pride of the Valleys stuffed three in his pocket as he left.

So, with discs double-checked and entourages ensconced, it's off into the studio. But not, crucially, to the island. And that's another one of the very few differences between way back then and now. Roy Plomley would welcome listeners with the words 'on our desert island this evening'; these days (much later in the programme) I say to my guest: 'I'm about to cast you away.' Somehow that makes more sense to me. The cruelty of abandoning someone to a life of solitude and sunburn is surely bad enough; to suggest that I might actually be dumping them there myself and then swanning off seems indefensible.

And so we come to the interview, the conversation. What's its point, what's the aim? For me it's to strike up an intimacy with the guest that allows them to trust me and in turn properly reveal themselves. I want the listener to come as close as they can to meeting them without actually meeting them. The best piece of professional advice I was ever given - aged twenty-two and working at BBC Radio Scotland - was 'Listen, listen to what people say.' In the twenty-two years since, what I've also learned is: do your homework; then be ready to ditch every smarty-pants question you have on your list in pursuit of original, fresh, immediate dialogue. It's always good to be prepared, but above all else be prepared to listen to the answers and take it from there.

My predecessor Sue Lawley once described *Desert Island Discs* as 'the best job in radio'; I would find it hard to disagree.

Kirsty Yang



‘My castaway this week is ...’



In June 2012 Aung San Suu Kyi, the inspirational opposition leader in Burma, finally made it to Oslo to collect the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to her more than two decades earlier. In her acceptance speech, she recalled that when she had been living in Oxford many years ago, she had listened to *Desert Island Discs* with her young son Alexander, and he had asked her whether she might ever be invited to appear on the programme. He was aware that in general only celebrities took part, and wondered for what reason she might be invited. ‘I considered this for a moment and then answered: “Perhaps because I’d have won the Nobel Prize for literature,” and we both laughed. The prospect seemed pleasant but hardly probable.’ Yet improbable things do happen, and in summer 2012 it was announced that Aung San Suu Kyi had agreed to appear on *Desert Island Discs*.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s name-checking *Desert Island Discs* at such an important moment in her struggle offers further proof that the reach of this radio programme knows no bounds. It has featured in a Tom Stoppard play ([see here](#)) and an episode of *Absolutely Fabulous*; it has been imitated all round the world; and many among its loyal audience of around three million people need little prompting to offer

their own selections of eight records – as became evident when in June 2011 some 28,000 submissions were made to the special programme *Your Desert Island Discs*, which had invited listeners to submit their personal record choices, and reasons for making them. The result ([see here](#)) made for compelling listening.



Should you ever get the invitation to the island, this is what will usually happen.

Around three months before the proposed transmission date your name will have been raised as a potential interviewee at one of the regular meetings held to review candidates. Present at this meeting will have been the *Desert Island Discs* producer, the presenter (whom for current purposes we will call Kirsty), and the researcher. The small programme team that lies behind *Desert Island Discs* nestles in Room 6045 in Broadcasting House, among the teams responsible for *In Our Time*, *Start the Week*, *Midweek* and *Loose Ends* – so the opinions of passing colleagues are also heard.

There is little science underpinning the choice of castaways, and deciding who should be invited is the subject of much – often heated – debate among the production team. So when you receive your invitation to the island, you will already have passed a test that is at the same time stringent and subjective, with a strong element of randomness. Castaways are not necessarily household names, but each one has played a highly significant role within his or her own field and lived a rich and interesting life.

Once it is confirmed that you have the right profile to be marooned, you will be approached. If the invitation plops on to your doormat in the same post as notification of your

proposed knighthood or damehood, open the letter marked 'BBC' first, for whatever that other envelope might contain, being marooned on the desert island is the greater honour. (And the *Desert Island Discs* invitation is much more exclusive. Over 2,500 awards are made annually in the official Honours Lists, whereas just 42 people are cast away each year on the desert island.)

If you agree to be cast away – and it is not assumed that you will agree, since some are approached but choose not to appear – two months or so in advance of your edition being aired you will be visited by the researcher, to whom you will give your list of eight records, plus book and luxury. You will then undergo an interview about the areas of your life which the programme should cover, and in particular the details of your childhood, which might not be extensively covered in the press cuttings but which will be of considerable interest to the listener.

You will not be invited to define 'no-go areas', but sensitivities (about family matters, for example) will be discussed. In essence, the researcher will be looking for ways to express how the particular shake-up of your genetic cocktail and the circumstances of your early life have produced the person you have become.

After this interview, the researcher will draft a summary of what you have said – trying at the same time to capture the subjects that made your eyes light up, the moments when you were lost in thought and the reflections about pieces of music that captured very vivid and significant memories. The research notes – together with any books or DVDs – are sent to the presenter and producer so that they can immerse themselves in the details of your life in advance of your programme being recorded. Meanwhile, back in the office, work begins trying to meet your exacting musical demands. While most recordings are found in the BBC's Grams Library, it is not unknown for friends or family to record a track specially for the programme.

On the appointed day you will turn up at Broadcasting House in Portland Place, just north of Oxford Circus in central London. It is advisable to arrive sober, not least to avoid becoming bracketed in *Desert Island Discs* folklore with the actor who some years ago was so incoherent during the recording that he had to return the following day to do the whole programme again.

You will meet the presenter and be taken into the 'cubicle' – the control room – so that you can check that the records supplied are exactly what you have asked for, and so that the programme's producer and studio manager can confirm with you which segments of each recording are the crucial parts to be played.

This is a very important part of the process: for all the soul-searching and cathartic revelations that the *Desert Island Discs* conversation can generate, the eight records remain at the core of the programme's culture. Part of its appeal is the way it introduces even the most casual listeners to pieces of music of which they were previously unaware – and indeed have heard only imperfectly over the rustle of the Sunday papers or across the ironing board. Did sales of Puccini's *Symphonic Prelude* rocket after Kenny Everett had nominated that intensely moving work to be played 'as I'm hoiked aloft in a ray of God's lovely sunbeam'? How many new fans were attracted to the idiosyncratic American musician Van Dyke Parks after Terry Gilliam had requested his infectiously upbeat song 'Opportunity for Two'? 'When I was making *Brazil*,' explained the castaway, 'which was a long nine months, I played it every morning on the way to work, and it made me be happy – it made me American again – it made me optimistic.'



Kirsty Young casts away Akram Khan, July 2012



Once the niceties of the record extracts have been agreed, you and Kirsty will move into the studio, where you will sit across the table from her and – to put it simply – talk. The dialogue will be steered by her, but it will be a conversation which can go in any direction, so long as every now and again it pauses for the next record. Unlike the procedure during the first forty-odd years of *Desert Island Discs*, the musical choices are played into the studio rather than edited in later, and this allows the presenter to pick up on any reaction of the castaway as the music is played. (See, for example, the exchange between Kirsty Young and Betty Driver [here](#).) You can chat with Kirsty as

each track is playing, or remain locked into that music with your memories. But be aware that she will be wearing headphones (though you will not), and through them, unheard by you, she will be receiving prompts and suggestions from the producer in the cubicle.

Despite the microphones, headphones and loudspeakers, the *Desert Island Discs* recording studio is a surprisingly intimate venue, and it is very easy to hear the sound of sincerely felt emotion on air. Sometimes the music acts as a time-shift, bringing an event from years ago right to the front of the castaway's memory; on other occasions, this is simply the first time that a guest has been asked to think deeply about his or her past.

Kirsty's last words to the castaway are always to thank them for letting us hear their *Desert Island Discs*. Then, as she takes off her headphones, and both she and the castaway sit back in their chairs, there is a palpable breathing-out – a sense of relief that a challenge has been met and a story properly told.

When it's all in the can to the satisfaction of producer and studio manager, you return to the cubicle to add your signature to the already glittering collection of autographs in the *Desert Island Discs* visitors' book, and then, as the producer settles down to edit the programme to the required length, you are free to go and live the rest of your life.



The aim of this book is to celebrate seventy years of *Desert Island Discs* both by tracing the programme's history and by revisiting some individual editions – from Vic Oliver in January 1942 to Sir David Attenborough in January 2012 – which reflect that history in more detail and offer a series of snapshots of the times in which they were broadcast.

The primary rationale behind the selection has been an attempt to reflect the variety which lies at the very heart of the programme, in terms of both the castaway's background and achievements and the nature of the individual programmes. Thus we have the iconic (Eartha Kitt, Luciano Pavarotti), the adored (Joyce Grenfell, Sir David Attenborough), the scientifically brilliant (Stephen Hawking, Fred Hoyle), the controversial (Diana Mosley, Gordon Brown), the anarchic (Spike Milligan, Kenneth Williams, Kenny Everett), the poignant (Signalman Henry Wheeler), the inspirational (Sister Frances Dominica, Desmond Tutu), the eccentric (Margaret Powell, Alfred Wainwright), and so on and so on.

One true legend who has had to be omitted on purely practical grounds is Louis Armstrong, cast away by Roy Plomley in 1968. There is no audio of their interview, and the surviving transcript is simply too patchy to enable any part of it to be reproduced. As for the source material for the pages that follow, when there is an audio record of an individual programme, that is the source for the text, though the written word is very different from the spoken word, and in this book the language has been smoothed out to remove the inevitable instances of 'you know', 'really', 'well', 'umm' and other extraneous noises. When there is no audio, the source is the collection of transcripts housed in the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham, near Reading.

Beyond the records of interviews themselves and information from those involved in making the programme, the principal sources have been a small collection of *Desert Island Discs*-related books. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Roy Plomley are taken from the 1977 edition of his engaging and highly informative *Desert Island Discs*. Two more of his books relate to the programme: *Plomley's Pick* (published in 1982 to mark the fortieth anniversary), which contains extracts from forty-

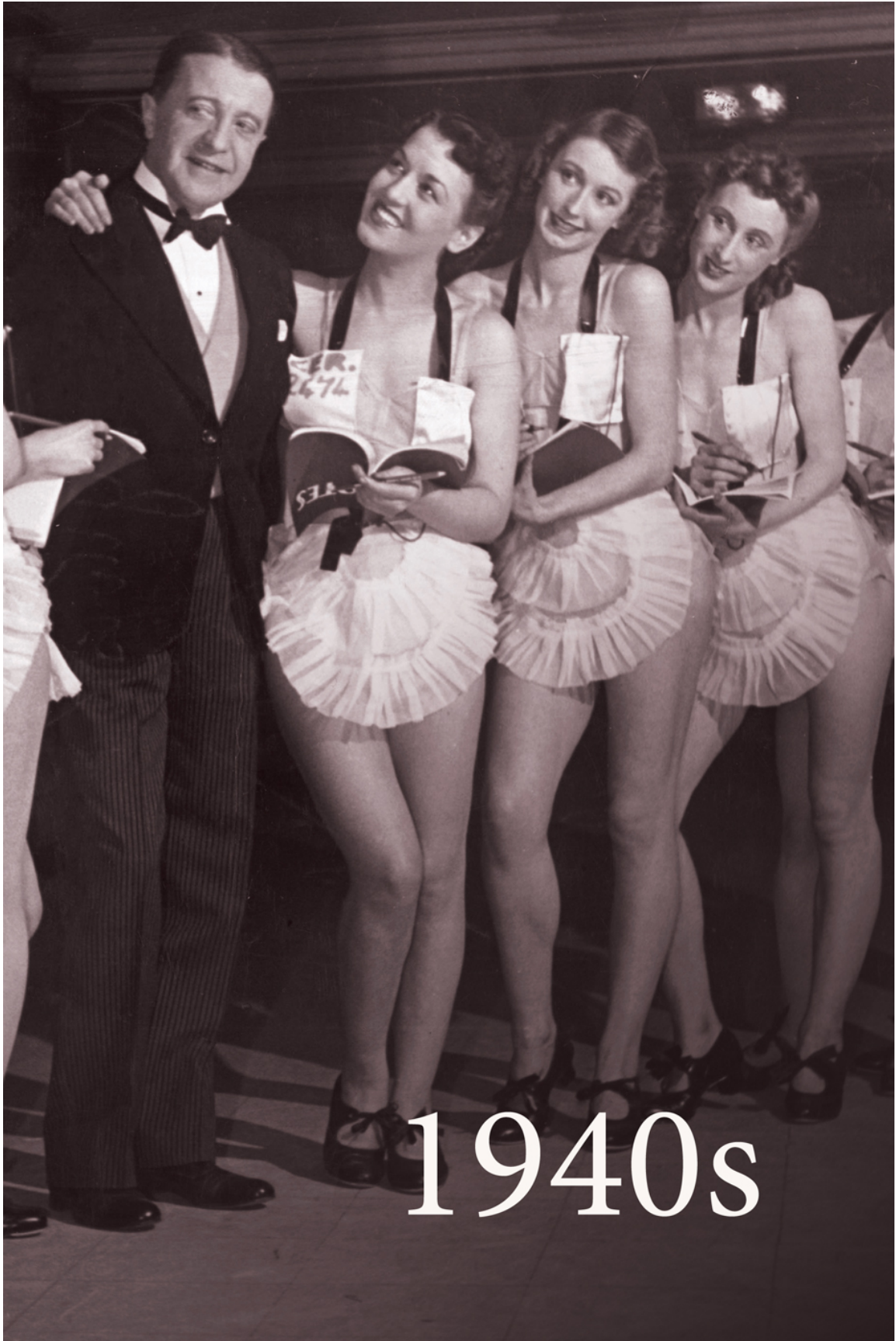
one editions; and *Desert Island Lists* (compiled with long-time producer Derek Drescher and published in 1984), which lists the choices made for the first 1,702 editions. (Of Plomley's other non-fiction, *Days Seemed Longer* (1980) is an account of his pre-*Desert Island Discs* life, and *Roy Plomley's Desert Island Book* (1979) is an anthology of desert island literature, but not concerned specifically with his radio creation.)

Sir Michael Parkinson writes about his *Desert Island Discs* experience in his autobiography *Parky* (published in 2008), and the post-Parky phase is very well chronicled in Sue Lawley's *Desert Island Discussions*, published in 1990, while *Desert Island Discs: Flotsam and Jetsam* is a miscellany of facts and figures from the show compiled by Mitchell Symons and published alongside the present volume.

A word about how the choices are listed in programme entries which follow. It has been impossible in the limited space available for each featured castaway to give exhaustive information about every music choice – composer, librettist, orchestra, soloists, full description of source work, etc. The title of the piece requested appears in bold type. If the composer/writer's name is given it appears above the name of the work title; the performer's name is given below. Soloists are given only where specified by the castaway; larger works (e.g. operas, ballets, musicals) are included where necessary to identify individual items. Well-known classical composers are identified by surname only, with initials or forename if necessary for differentiation (as in J. S. Bach or Richard Strauss). In the choices panels ★ indicates the record chosen by the castaway to be saved when the tide washes away all the others; 📖 indicates the chosen book, and ♥ the desired luxury. More detailed information can be found on the *Desert Island Discs* website.

There is no more eloquent tribute to the status of *Desert Island Discs* than the list of luminaries who have appeared on it ([see here](#)), but this is how Gwyneth Williams, the current Controller of Radio 4, sums up the appeal of the programme: '*Desert Island Discs* lies at the heart of Radio 4. The programme at its best offers up the secrets of a life, the inside track on the human condition. No one with talent and a story to tell is excluded, and the invited guests range right across our society. We are in capable and celebrated hands with Kirsty Young who, week after week, steers us through a personal journey of music and conversation with a twist at the end.'

That is the present. But we should begin at the beginning, on a cold November night in 1941 ...





ON THE NIGHT of Monday, 3 November 1941, Roy Plomley, a 27-year-old actor and freelance broadcaster, was about to go to bed in his digs in the Hertfordshire town of Bushey when he had a bright idea. 'My coal fire had gone out,' he later recalled, 'and I was already in my pyjamas: nevertheless, I sat down at my typewriter and wrote to Leslie Perowne, who was in charge of the lighter kinds of radio programme.'

The letter which arrived in the Gramophone Department at Broadcasting House a couple of days later read as follows:

Dear Leslie

Here is another idea for a series.

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

'If you were wrecked on a desert island, which ten gramophone records would you like to have with you? - providing, of course, that you have a gramophone

and needles as well! Today will come to the microphone to answer that question.'

This is, of course, very much on the lines of the old 'I Know What I Like' series - except that the choice is limited to ten records and the artists should not be confined only to BBC staff. For example, dance-band leaders, actors, members of the Brains Trust, film-stars, writers, child prodigies, ballet dancers and all sorts of people could be included.

All best wishes,
Yours,
Roy Plomley

Plomley was at the time working for the BBC on the music programme *Swing from London*, having been involved over the previous few years with a variety of radio shows - mostly concerned with records. Earlier that year he had appeared in programmes with evocative names such as *Old Stagers*, *Some of the Good Old Ones*, *Radio Rhythm*, *Paul Whiteman's Rhythm Boys* (with Bing Crosby), *When the Talkies Came to Town*, *Out Where the West Begins* and *Vagabond Lover: The Story of Rudy Vallee*. Some of these shows had been born from Plomley's own ideas, and Leslie Perowne was well used to being sprayed with suggestions from this ambitious young man, who made no secret of his aspirations - which he pursued with an enthusiasm undimmed by the severe practical difficulties for anyone living near London in 1941. ('Please forgive the delay in sending you these,' Plomley apologizes in one letter to a BBC executive, 'but these Blitzkrieg nights make things rather difficult.')

Many of Plomley's ideas were variations on the standard record-show format, but a particularly novel one was *I Know What I Hate*. In this, a reversal of the *I Know What I Like* idea mentioned in the letter to Perowne just quoted,

prominent broadcasters would be asked to select records they particularly disliked. The proposal was swiftly turned down by Perowne, though he was not without sympathy for it:

We have all been longing to do it for some time, but you must appreciate that it is quite impossible. The snag is that any one recording by anyone must be considered good by someone, if only the man who made it and the recording company who issued it. The BBC would, I fear, get into great trouble for sponsoring such a controversial performance.

Even shorter shrift was given in August 1941 to another Plomley idea:

The boys and I have now digested your programme on the subject of corpulence - *This Too Too Solid Flesh*. We don't feel that this is up to the Plomley standard - indeed we picture all the fat listeners on this island writing rude letters to complain of such a broadcast.

Still, despite the ideas that never made it anywhere near the recording studio, by summer 1941 Roy Plomley was so closely woven into the BBC's output of record shows that there was internal discussion about putting him on the Corporation's full-time staff. It was decided that he should remain freelance, but even so his importance in this area of broadcasting is clear from a note sent by Perowne to the civil defence authorities in Bushey requesting that Plomley be excused compulsory enrolment 'as he is making a valuable contribution to the work of this department'.

So when this latest Roy Plomley idea landed on his desk early in November 1941, Perowne paid attention. Liking the suggestion of *Desert Island Discs*, he promptly relayed