

"Sadly, when I finish, you won't see a big band on a television show like mine ever again. It's my tribute to the music that I love"



King Of Chat

In October, the Musicians' Union bestowed honorary MU membership on **Michael Parkinson** for consistently featuring live music on his show. Here, **Neil Crossley** speaks to 'Parkie' and his MD **Laurie Holloway** about their influences, their careers and their enduring love of music

Ever since he first heard the strains of modern jazz on the American Forces Network, Michael Parkinson has been an ardent champion of big band music and the Great American Songbook. As a young man, he spent every spare minute in jazz clubs such as Ronnie Scott's, soaking up the music that he loved. When he secured the first of his near-legendary chat show television series in the early 70s, it was no great surprise that live music would play an integral part.

Three decades on, as he prepares for retirement, The Michael Parkinson Show remains one of the few British television formats to still feature live music. To mark his commitment to featuring live music on his show, the MU awarded Michael Parkinson with an honorary MU membership in October. As he revealed

when *Musician* spoke to him, the award came as something of a surprise.

Early Influences

Musician: Were you surprised to receive the honorary membership from the MU?

Michael Parkinson: I was absolutely gobsmacked (laughs). I can't play a note of music. How could I be given an honour like that? I was delighted because all my life I've loved music without having any talent to play it. And to receive this tribute from the MU is marvellous. The band think it's hilarious, of course. They've never stopped teasing me.

How important has live music been to the success of your shows?

Extremely important. I mean it all started off in a very haphazard way. I was allowed to bring on my heroes. So we

had Buddy Rich, Benny Goodman and Woody Herman. Then of course, as the music changed more pop came in and we reflected that but we've kept well away from manufactured music and stuck with people who can sing and who can play. And I think that's the definition of getting on the show. I mean, can you do a turn? Or can you just go into a studio and be made to sound like a million dollars when in fact you can't sing?

What was the first piece of music that had a profound effect on you?

The first musical sound that stuck with me was brass music. When I was a kid, my father used to take me every Saturday down to the butcher's shop, ostensibly to get some meat, but it was really an excuse to go to the pub at Grimethorpe, where my father worked as a miner. The



Danny Longstaff, Chair of the Executive Committee, presents 'Parkie' with his honorary MU membership

“I’ve loved music my whole life, without having any talent to play it. So to receive this tribute from the MU is marvellous”

Grimethorpe Colliery Band, of course, is one of the most famous brass bands in the world. I used to sit outside the pub and they’d practise in the room above.

Another great influence was *The Messiah*. But my main influence was big band music. I accidentally tuned in the radio to American Forces Network and I heard modern jazz for the first time, the Kenton Band and that sort of thing, and it really opened my eyes. But the big jump for me was big band music, which has always been my great passion.

Music Greats

Are there any other particular musicians from the show that you remember fondly?

Mel Torme with George Shearing was always an event. Tony Bennett as well. And it’s always been a pleasure to sit next to Paul McCartney as he plays *Yesterday* or Paul Simon as he plays *Homeward Bound*. So that’s been the great joy for me, to get up close to people who have played an important part in music. And it was just an honour to get on Woody Herman and Buddy Rich in particular. I mean, I loved Buddy Rich. That was the definitive big band for me.

Buddy Rich did have a bit of a fearsome reputation though didn’t he?

He was fearsome to work for. I mean he came into the studio with this very young

band and they looked at him with fear in their eyes and looked for his approval after each solo. Of course, he was the band leader and by God, you’d better turn up smartly dressed, on time and blow like bloody mad. He was a monster (laughs) but God he was a fine drummer.

And he was properly dedicated. I remember we did one show and one of our directors, who was a bit of a flakey guy, said ‘Okay, that’s fine Buddy. We’ll be back at around 6.30 for the show’. Buddy and the band arrived back at 6.25 and at 6.30 the director wasn’t there but Buddy counted the band in anyway (laughs). They weren’t recording. The director arrived and said “What are you doing man?” and of course Buddy said ‘Listen. You say 6.30, I go at 6.30. Where were you?’ It was wonderful.

MICHAEL PARKINSON PROFILE

UNION MEMBER SINCE: 2007

INFLUENCES: Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker, Buddy Rich

ON NEW TALENT: “It’s a great feeling being able to give new artists such as Jamie Cullum a chance. I mean we got this disc sent through to us on the radio. We get thousands of these discs but I listened to it and said to my producer ‘I think this kid’s got something’ One thing I like about Jamie is that he’s very intelligently adapted his style with a foundation of the Great American Songbook to fit contemporary music. And he’s a hell of a good performer.”

I read a quote by you that said ‘People in television can’t see beyond the Top Ten’.

Well, that’s absolutely true. They’re all geared now musically to hitting that mythical market of 16 to 34. Look at the talent shows and look at the kind of music they promote. What bothers me is the attitude of television toward it. It doesn’t give music a fair chance, it really doesn’t. It has no programme where the kind of music that I love is heard at all.

Listening to your Sunday morning radio show I get the sense that it’s something you really enjoy. Is that the case?

Yes, I love that show. I mean they just allow me to play the music that I want to play. When they offered me the job I said to them ‘I must tell you that I will not play the Radio 2 playlist’. And they looked at me aghast. They said ‘Why?’ And I said, ‘Because that’s the reason I don’t listen to Radio 2 – it’s awful’.

‘If this is going to work at all,’ I said, ‘it’s got to be my music. I must be able to feel that every record I have on I can say something about it.’ Thankfully, the BBC said ‘Okay, fine’. And it’s worked.

You are very good friends with Laurie Holloway, the MD on your television show. That must help enormously.

It does. I mean I work fast and he works fast. He can do arrangements in 30 seconds. He’s brilliant and he’s very even-tempered. I admire him enormously. I think he’s a bloody fine pianist, as good as there is. And whenever you call on him to do an accompaniment, even at the last minute, he doesn’t panic because he’s got all that craft at his fingertips. He’s a fine musician and a very nice man too.

Finally, what are your retirement plans?

I’m going to take a year out and write my book. There are lots of things that I want to do. I’ve been asked to take part in a television series on swing. So I’ll just pick and choose, because I’m 72 now. When people say ‘Why are you giving up?’ I say, ‘Because I’ve been at it for 57 years. And it’s a bloody good reason actually’.

The Fight For ‘Live’

The effort involved in retaining *The Michael Parkinson Show* band

Musician: Has it been an effort maintaining a live band on your television show?

Michael Parkinson: Oh yeah. I mean, you had to fight them every inch of the way, particularly latterly. In the end you’ve got

to stand up for these things. I mean I love that band. I love the thought that I’m keeping 50 musicians off the streets for Christ’s sake (laughs). They know that. I’m their welfare officer.

But it’s important. And sadly,

I think that when I finish the show you won’t see a big band on television on a show like mine ever again. So it’s my tribute to the music that I love basically. And yes, we had to fight for it all the way but we won.

"I'm an all-rounder. It's a matter of making artists feel at ease and confident that what they want is what they'll get"



Laurie Holloway, musical director on *The Michael Parkinson Show* has enjoyed an illustrious musical career. Here, he speaks to **Neil Crossley** about his work...

Laurie Holloway was just 14 years old when he undertook his first paid music engagement while organist and choirmaster at his local church in Oldham. Within three years the talented young pianist had turned professional and was playing summer seasons and cruise liners, moving to London in the late 50s where he became a much sought-after player.

By the dawn of the 60s, he had moved into session work. In 1963 he joined Johnny Dankworth and during a season at a London club he met his future wife, the American singer Marion Montgomery. By the 70s, Laurie was writing, playing and being musical director for singers such as Judy Garland and Liza Minelli, Sammy Davis Jnr and Englebert Humperdinck. He also had a long music association with Stephane Grappelli. Television work beckoned. He wrote signature tunes such as the *Blind Date* theme, and has been musical director on shows such as *The Dame Edna*

Experience, Strictly Come Dancing and, of course, *The Michael Parkinson Show*.

Early Years

Musician: When you were choirmaster at your local church at the age of 13, where did you think your career might take you?

Well my father told me I should get a proper job. I was heavily into music but I never thought about becoming a

professional musician. What happened was I couldn't afford to buy sheet music so I'd play in the local music store in Oldham. A chap called Eddie Mendoza came to do a week's variety at the Theatre Royal in Oldham and his piano player didn't turn up. He went into the music store and they said "Well there's a little lad...". I did the week at the Theatre Royal and that was my first 'paid'

Inspirational Moments

Musical performances that have left their mark

Which other vocalists have impressed you over the years?

I enjoyed working with Kiri Te Kanawa. I did all her popular stuff. She was lovely. Working with Marion was wonderful because Marion thought more of the words than the tune. It

was a story as far as Marion was concerned and through her I met fabulous people such as Johnny Mercer, who came to stay here. Michael remembers it. He lives just 200 yards away. One night I called him up about 10 o'clock at night. I said 'I think you ought

to come up here'. He said 'It's bloody 10 o'clock.' I said 'Oh alright then, it's just me. I'm playing piano for Johnny Mercer'. He said "I'll be right up". And he came up, rang the doorbell and our friend Gerry Mulligan opened the door. He couldn't believe it.

INTERVIEW

engagement. I got £5 for the week but unfortunately the cheque bounced.

You went on to do summer seasons, play on the Cunard Line and by the late 50s you were working in London. What was your schedule like then?

I did two years in the Astoria, Charing Cross Road around 1959. I doubled that for two years with the Gargoyle Club which was a strip club in Meard Street. So I was doing 2.30pm until 6pm tea dance at the Astoria, 7.30pm to 10.30pm at the Astoria then I ran round the corner and played until 3.15 am at the Gargoyle Club. That's how I know a lot of tunes (laughs).

You became a freelance session player. Were there any particularly memorable sessions from that time?

My most memorable moment from that period is being Judy Garland's piano player. She came over to do the London Palladium with Liza. I kind of lived with them for six weeks and we rehearsed all the time. The Palladium was a late night show and all the pros were in and the atmosphere was unbelievable.

We did an overture of about ten minutes and just the tunes and the relationship with Judy Garland made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, even before she came on stage. I think it was the atmosphere from the audience, from this wonderful band and from Judy. It was a fantastic atmosphere. That ten minute overture was the most emotional thing I've ever done as a piano player

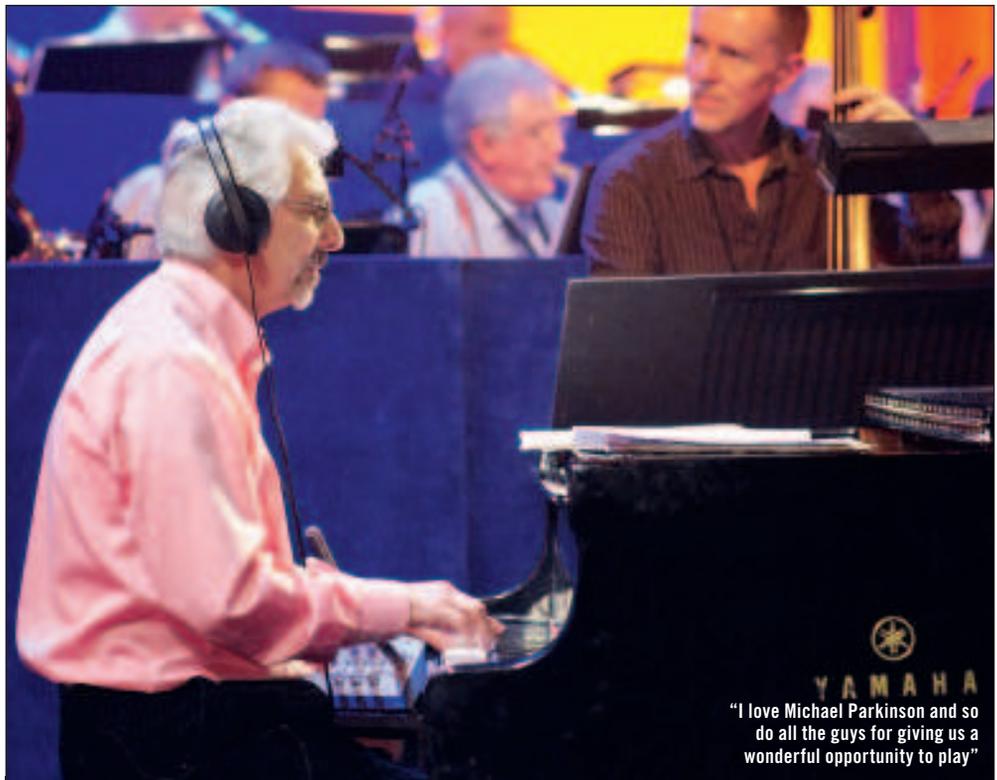
Television Work

How did you get into being MD on television shows?

It was through sessions again. Harry Rabinowitz was musical director of London Weekend Television. And I was his kind of arranger and piano player. He was my mentor really. We did *Frost On Friday*, *Frost On Saturday* and *Frost On Sunday*. And Harry gave me one of those – I think I did the Friday one. And I started writing all kinds of signature tunes at LWT and doing a lot of MDing.

You wrote the signature tune for Blind Date. How did that come about?

Alan Boyd was the producer and I was his sig tune person and he said we're doing a new series called *Blind Date* based on the American series called *The Dating Game*. He sent me a video of *The Dating Game* and it started with a song. So I wrote a song called *We're Going On A Blind Date*, like a 16-bar piece. And the director came down and I played this thing and sang it to her and she said



"I love Michael Parkinson and so do all the guys for giving us a wonderful opportunity to play"

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY Laurie Holloway



1993 About Time



1997 Showtime



2000 Live At Abbey Road



2004 The Piano Player



2004 Strictly Come Dancing

"The Michael Parkinson Show is the only programme I've ever done where the band's actually got bigger"

"Eugh... have you got any boogie?". And I immediately went "Da da, da da, da da da da da da... 'That's it,' she said. In just a fraction of a second, it was there.

What attributes do you need as an MD?

As well as obviously doing the music properly, you have to be quite political. I think the word 'yes' is quite a good one to use (laughs). 'Can we change that to?' 'Yes'. You do it, you can't say 'No, you can't'. And if you've got a band like I've got, which is the top guys in the business it's just wonderful. You can actually say to this band of mine, 'He wants us to do it down a tone' and they just read it down a tone. They're just amazing guys.

It's hard to imagine *The Michael Parkinson Show* without a live band. And the fact the band is so visible seems to add to the sense of occasion.

Yeah, that's true. All through my life producers have been cutting the band down as the show goes on. With Parkie, we started with five, then we went to eight and then he said 'Do you want a bigger band?' So we went to 11. And we are now 16. It's the only programme I've ever done where the band's got bigger. If

I asked for a guitar or some strings he'd say 'Yeah, let's have 'em here'.

What do you think your greatest strength is musically?

An all-rounder, writing, composing, arranging, conducting and being amenable with artists. It's a matter of making them feel at ease and confident that what they want is what they'll get.

Is there anything else you want to add?

Just that I love Michael Parkinson (laughs) and so do all the guys for giving us a wonderful opportunity to play. In the warm-up, we play three big band numbers and the band is unbelievable. I just wallow in it. It's good. It's a good gig. Unfortunately, he's finishing of course. There is a void going to be made because he is a one-off isn't he? I'm hoping he'll do a Sinatra and do loads of comebacks. I imagine he'll do some specials.

Finally, what plans for the future?

I've just done a pilot with Bruce Forsyth and Vernon Kaye for BBC. That's my 12-piece band. So that might happen. If not, there's lots of other things coming round the corner that you're never expecting.