

BILL COTTON JR

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Interviewed by John Taylor, with Stephen Peet and Alan Lawson

Bill Cotton Jr was born on 23 April 1928, educated **Ardingnye** College, Sussex

SIDE 1, TAPE 1

John Taylor: Your father started working with the band early on, before you were born I suppose

Bill Cotton Jr: Absolutely, yes, he started the band in the 20s, early 20s. And I was born in 1928 and I think by that time he was an established dance band, not a show band, he used to work the dance halls. And then he went to the theatres I think in the 30s

John Taylor: And touring a lot I suppose

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, he was away on tour. That's by and large how bands operated. He did his fair share of broadcasts but by and large it was a theatre a week plus sometimes 2 Sunday concerts. They worked very hard in those days. One period I remember the Cine Variety, my father was doing 7 shows a day between the Dominion, Tottenham Court Rd., and the Elephant and Castle, starting at midday and going on until about midnight. And the extraordinary thing about it, and I'm sure it is only to do with your age and your kind of what remains with you, they seemed to enjoy every minute of it. They had a coach, and they'd dive into the coach after one show and be driven down to the Elephant and Castle. In those days you could get from the Dominion to the Elephant and Castle fairly quickly. Now it would probably take you all afternoon to do it in the rush hour. But they seemed to be, to a boy I was then 7, 8, 9, that type of age, they seemed to have an enormous joie de vivre about it and I suppose probably the fellows who run groups now probably have exactly the same.

John Taylor: It must have been a pretty hard life even so

Bill Cotton Jr: In a funny way though of course it was a simpler life. When you think in terms of performers then and performers now, performers then only had very few problems. They, it was either they were on the theatres, there was a bit of broadcasting and a bit of recording, but they were in theatres or concerts, live performances was mainly what you did. Nowadays performers have got so many different things they have to think about, they have got to think about radio, they have got to think about television, they've got to think about video recording, they've got to think about performances, they've got to think about records. I mean there is such a plethora of things. And then on top of that actually living is so complicated, tax and what you do and where you go. I've often said to people the most extraordinary thing I think is that my father only ever earned what he earned, he earned straight forwardly off the stage, he had no investments and he virtually had no royalties. But when the war broke out he'd got 3 houses, he had 2 boys at boarding school, he had a racing car, a grand prix racing car, plus a sports car, plus a Bentley, plus my mother's car, a chauffeur, a maid, and a cook. I had a horse. Down at Sandbanks we had a cruiser and a speedboat and a coracle and a runabout that my brother and I used, and he had an aeroplane at Croydon, he had his own aeroplane at Croydon. And he still had plenty of money in the bank. Now you see that's a very, very simple way of living. He went out and he earned an amount of money, he paid 6d in the pound or whatever it is and everything else went into enjoying himself and there were no problems with it. A mechanic was £1,000 a year, that's what you paid a mechanic, well actually that was the mechanic plus, that was looking after the racing car, everything to do with the racing car, £1000 a year, to look after it once you'd bought it. So life was a very different thing and you required, and I think it was easier for performers than it is now, much easier.

St: Just for the record, for future historians, your father's band was it called the Billy Cotton Big Band or

Bill Cotton Jr: No, it was just called the Billy Cotton Band, Britain's brightest bandleader was his subtitle. Yes.

St: Also, were you a large family, do you have several brothers.

Bill Cotton Jr: No, just my brother and myself. The houses we had, he had a house in Kingsbury which I think he just kept and it was rented out to a friend, the house we originally lived in, and then we went to Willesden. And then he bought a house down at Sandbanks and he had a house down at Sandbanks for about 30, 1936 until he died in 1969.

John Taylor: Did he have a show business background,

Bill Cotton Jr: No he was born in, he was born in Westminster, of a family of 10, and the only thing he had which was remotely musical was that he was a choir boy at St Margarets, he was actually a choir boy at St Johns but he used to sing at St Margarets for weddings and funerals and high days and holidays. And then he joined the army and became a drummer in the Royal Fusiliers, and a bugler

John Taylor: Was that in the First World War

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, the First World War, then he became a pilot, crashed in his plane. And when he came out he played professional football for Brentford and Wimbledon, and he did all sorts of odd jobs and then one day decided to use his ability to play the drums to see if he could make a few pounds in the evening playing local gigs. And of course he couldn't play the drums any more than anyone else could, he couldn't read music, father, really. I think his greatest achievement probably was running a band for 45, 50 years without the ability of being able to read music. And what I suppose was that he was fairly, he could look after himself I think is the way to express it, so there were very few musicians prepared to tell him he couldn't read music or he didn't know what he was talking about and he got away with it.

John Taylor: He must have been an amazing man.

Bill Cotton Jr: My brother and I didn't need a hero, we had one built into the house

John Taylor: He seemed to have everything

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. He did. I watched him score 100 runs at cricket at Wembley. And he could bowl, and he could play golf, he had a single handicap. God gave him this ability to be good at things, not brilliant at anything. And I remember once he and I were talking in the car coming home

and he said they want me to write a book, if I was going to write a book, what would you call it. And I said, I Never Quite Made It. And he said yeah, I know what you mean. And the funny thing after that he probably did make it. I think it was just before really the enormous upsurge of his popularity when he was on television and radio and what have you. But before then he had been a good driver but he was never a great driver. He had been a good bandleader but he was never the number one bandleader until the end of his life. He'd been good at football but he never played for England or anything. I mean he played for Brentford. But above all that of course he was absolutely great at being able to enjoy himself and make life do what he wanted it to do. And that I think is probably the best

John Taylor: How did he fit it all in. Did you ever see him.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, because he used to take us with him. I mean there was a great deal love of my children, love me love my children. So we all, as I remember it I was a proper bastard when I was young. I think sending me away to school was probably the cleverest move anyway otherwise I'd have been insufferable.

John Taylor: He was a very unusual man altogether

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes He was a good man, and he was good fun. And one of the reasons, a lot of people say to me it must have been difficult having a famous father, I said no I think the only difficulty people have in following famous fathers, whatever they want to be called, is if you encounter as you go through life genuine hostility from people to whom your father has been a shit. Not to put too fine a word upon it. I have never encountered any hostility about my father in my life. I mean indifferent maybe once or twice, take it or leave it, but there's nobody whose ever said a bad word about my father to me. He has always been, oh Bill, he was alright, he was a good man, he was fun. Even if you read the book, I remember Sid Cohen wrote a book about band leaders, in which he tore every bandleader to bits, you know Jack Payne and Lew Stone, and he was very, very free in his criticisms. When it came to my father he said it was very hard to write anything about my father other than the fact that the musicians all adored him, they'd go anywhere for him, he played the music he wanted to play and what he believed people paid him to do,

to listen to and you couldn't shake him from any of that. So it's irrelevant what anybody else, and I think that I if you like I inherited that type of feeling. So I was always lucky in the industry that there were no built in prejudices against me based on my father's success at all

John Taylor: How many were in the band

Bill Cotton Jr: He had a band of about 18

John Taylor: And were they there forever

Bill Cotton Jr: Most of them were, most of them stayed there for a good time. They started to drop off obviously in the 60s, and in television, I produced his programmes for 6 years on television and, I think it was 6 years, no it would be less than that, 4 or 5, about 5 years, and we used to introduce other musicians into the band for the television, not least because a lot of the people he used were not brilliant at sight reading quickly, they could read music, but by and large, what they were very good at of course was playing together. And I remember Ted Heath saying to me once, people underestimate your father's band, they play together every day and that does actually count when it comes down to, you know getting discipline in the band, musical discipline as well as physical discipline.

St: When you say you produced his programme, what was the name of the programme

Bill Cotton Jr: *The Billy Cotton Band Show*. And we did a thing called *The Wakey Wakey Tavern*, which I did just to make the pictures look a bit different. The extraordinary thing with my father, because he had a stage show, he had a radio show and his radio programme which started at 10.30 on a Sunday but then went to 1.30 on a Sunday, he had as I say a stage show and a radio show and a television show and they were entirely differently structured but they sold exactly the same thing. You got exactly the same atmosphere from them but they were entirely differently structured. They were obviously because of the nature

John Taylor: How was it managed, did he have a manager

Bill Cotton Jr: He started off with a manager, a man called Dave **Tom**, and then he had, I forget exactly a man called

Gatsby I think managed him. But really during the war and after the war he had a woman called Betty Stanley who was a sort of super secretary who did everything.

John Taylor: And they could cope with all those arrangements, because it must have been quite a schedule.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes but

John Taylor: You said it was simpler in those days. So you had a good start in life.

Bill Cotton Jr: In terms of the industry, yes. My brother went into the film industry, he was a pilot, a mosquito pilot during the war, and he caught TB, and when he was cured of that he went to Shepperton and became a 3rd assistant producer and he worked on *Anna Karenina*. I remember. I'm trying to think of the films. His first film was *Anna Karenina* with Kieron Moore and Vivien Leigh, the Duvivier picture. He did *Outcast Of The Islands* he was on that. I met Carol Reed the other day and I said do you remember my brother Ted Cotton. And he said oh Ted, you can't forget Ted, he was a great boy. The problem was, as I say he did *Outcast Of The Islands*, he did a think called *Rough Shoot* I remember. The last film made at Riverside Studios was *Rough Shoot*, and then the first television programme made at Riverside Studios was a thing called *Off The Record*. And my brother was on one and I produced the other. And I've often meant to go down there and buy some of those seats, you can buy seats.

John Taylor:

Bill Cotton Jr: I think so and put a name on them, in the complex there, which I'll do one day.

So he was in that part of the industry and I became a music publisher when I came out of the army in 1950.

John Taylor: Had you any music background

Bill Cotton Jr: No, none at all, I can't read music. But like my father I understand the nature of the business,

John Taylor: You'd grown up in that world

Bill Cotton Jr: I have a sort of musical taste that is closely allied to

John Taylor: Why a musical publisher

Bill Cotton Jr: Well, I think really because, my father's office was in Denmark St, which was the Tin Pan Alley, so consequently whenever I went anywhere with him I was surrounded by music publishers. And I was a fairly bright fellow and had just come out of the army and I was

John Taylor: Which years were you in the army

Bill Cotton Jr: 1945, 1946, just after the end of the war, I just didn't serve in the war. I was, after the, literally as hostilities had finished I went in

John Taylor: Tell us a bit about the army, what did you do in the army

Bill Cotton Jr: I went into the army, I joined the army at Norwich, in the Royal Sussex Regiment, I did my basic training which was a miserable 6 to 8 weeks. I don't know, it's wrong to say it was miserable, it was a very, very startling experience I suppose would be the word. Because I'd been away to boarding school and the boarding school that I went to was a fairly basic place, nothing comfortable about it. So I wasn't terribly worried about going away into the army, I'd been used to going away.

But when I arrived there, there was a platoon of ex Bevin boys who had run away from the pits. They had done over a year in the pits but they still chose, and they only had to do 2 years in the pits and then they were free, but rather go down for that further year they chose to come into the army and take their chances as to how long they were going to be in it, they were probably going to be in the army another 2 or 3 years. And none of them could read or write and they were a very gangy, close knit community.

And of course I arrived and the sergeant took one look at us all and said, I see that you've got certificate A, which was the thing you got at school if you were in the OTC. So you're in charge of the hut when I'm out, which was like a sentence of death. And there was a radio show on at the time which had a character in it called Rodney, and I was Rodney from that moment onwards. And how was the sergeant's arse Rodney and you know. And it was a pretty hairy. And there was one other boy who was pretty similar to me and he

hived himself off to hospital within a week. He had a nervous breakdown. He just couldn't get on.

I ended up having a fight with one of them which fortunately, and more by luck than judgement, I emerged from victorious. And after that I became one of them to a degree. I was the one who read their letters. And I don't know what hard porn is now but by god I knew what it was then. The most extraordinary letters they used to get from these girls, I mean, and they used to say to me, and they all had their letters, I read all of them, they'd say read that bit again. And then of course what was even worst, I had to write their letters. You know it was an extraordinary experience, and quite unlike anything that I've ever experienced since.

I mean when I left there and went into **Shorncliffe** in the army, it was entirely different, entirely different. It was just this little cameo if you like of these 30 boys who had all decided, if the hut was 30 strong I suppose there were two groups of about 15 each or 12 or whatever who had come from different pits, but they made an entity, they all thought the same, they had not shame about anything. It was

John Taylor: Which part of the country did they come from

Bill Cotton Jr: They were North Country. The north east. But they were, the awful thing is that you're going to say how can he make that out, actually they were the salt of the earth when you got to know them. You've often heard it in jingoistic plays and films and whatever but the fact of the matter was when I became an officer I would have gone anywhere with that lot. I mean they were tough and they were basic, but they had a decent, and they had that wonderful north east sense of humour.

And I did, I know it sounds strange, I missed them to a degree, because when I got out at Shorncliffe it was very much the hubbub of normal kind of boring life of people, and of course the war had ended as I said, national service hadn't started, it was just plain conscription or volunteering so you didn't know when you was coming out. And there was nothing organised. And the army was in chaos. Any of the middle rank of officers, when I say any, most of the middle rank of officers were either over officious because they were hoping to get a long term commission in the army, because they wanted to stay, or they couldn't

give a damn about anything because they couldn't wait to get out, so majors, that sort of rank were very, very unreliable, if you were a young subaltern. You never quite knew where you stood with them. And it was a very unsettling time and it really took Malaya to a degree but then Korea later to smarten the army up.

My brother in law, I had two brother in laws from my first marriage, my wife died, and my second marriage, my ex wife, who were both in the army. My brother in law from my first wife became a brigadier in the military police. I don't know if you saw it in the paper, he was the one, do you read the *Independent*,

John Taylor: No.

Bill Cotton Jr: Did you see a big picture, in *The Independent*, I'm sure it was, of a 70 year old brigadier jumping out of a plane at Sandbanks, well that was my brother in law. Mad as a march hare. He was here when he told me, he said I'm going to do it. He said will you send me some money for it. I said I'll send you some money if you don't do it, but I'll be damned if I'll encourage the silly sod to jump out of an aeroplane at this stage of life. But he was in the army and my father in law from my second marriage was a general, he was in charge of xxx before Horrocks. So I'm only introducing this, it is rambling a bit, but the interesting thing about the army that that time when I was in it was what Dennis said to me and what my father in law said to me, he said that a conscript army is never much good, as regular soldiers by and large we wanted that out as fast as possible and we wanted people in the army who wanted to be in the army. And for example Dennis my brother in law's job was provo marshal of Germany, he used to go to work at 10 and pack it up at 4. Where his opposite number in the American army was up at 6 in the morning and going to bed at midnight, dealing with murder, dealing with rape, dealing with drugs, dealing, because by and large one had a low level of conscripts and the other had many who wanted to be there and weren't going to cause trouble, because by and large this was their careers.

John Taylor: Did you go overseas at all

Bill Cotton Jr: No, I decided I didn't want to do that so I invited the postings officer to see my father at the

Palladium and during that time I suggested a UK posting would be helpful. And I went to Scotland. If there had been any fighting, I would never have, and my father would never have been party to it. Because I remember Wee Georgie Wood, who you will remember, saying to my father, he had come back from the Middle East, from the Far East, and my brother was very ill out there and he had TB which in those days was a killing disease. And the stupid little man said to my father I don't know why you're allowing your son to die out there, why don't you talk to your friends at the Air Ministry and get him out. And my father said you wouldn't understand it but that's just not what you do. And he said I doubt whether he would come anyway. And I remember hearing my mother talk to my father, saying you do a thing like that and the ship gets torpedoed and he gets killed and you'll never know whether if you'd left him alone, and anyway my brother came back and he died in about 1965, 1966, just after my wife died in 1964, just before. Horrific time.

Stephen Peet: What interests me is how much you're conscious of all these various experiences, Bevin boys that you met and so on, did this influence your attitude to your work later.

Bill Cotton Jr: By and large I come from a basic family and I'm a very basic person I think. I think the thing that I'm most grateful I've inherited is most of my father's sense of humour. I'm inclined to worry too much about things. I worry about what people think about me too much, I want to be liked. I know that and that's a very common fault and you've got to be careful with it, because you'd be amazed how you can bring yourself down. Sometimes you'll see somebody, somebody in the office at the moment who keeps on looking at me as if I've come out from under a stone, and she's only a kid. I don't even know what her name is. But one day she'll smile and then I'll feel better. And I'm very like that, but as I say I'm very basic, all my life at the BBC I never took it seriously. I mean to become managing director of BBC Television was beyond my wildest expectations. And when I got I used to stand there and I used to look at the building and I used to say right now all this is yours. But don't forget that in 6 years time none of it will be yours, they won't even know your name. And when I phone the BBC now, I speak to secretaries and I've only been gone 2 years and they say who.

And I remember Huw Wheldon and I was a great disciple of Huw Wheldon's, nearly I suppose, and I remember him telling the story once of the monk who was put in charge of a Chinese prince, or whatever they're called and he trained him and taught him and eventually when he finished he said I've now taught you everything I can think. You now go out into the world and make your own way but I give you this ring, and at the height of elation or the depths of despair I want you to take the ring off and read what is written inside. And inside was written this too will pass. And I suppose I've, with Huw he actually identified something.

And I always remember my headmaster at school, a man called Cross who was a clergyman who in the First World War had won the DSO, the MC, the Italian Croix de Guerre, the French Croix de Guerre, and he was a great man Cross. He and I cordially hated each other for I suppose for 7 years of the time I was at school and then we got very close in the last 2 years. And we became great friends and he married my first wife and I and he christened our children. And he once from a darkened chapel, he was giving a sermon, because it was a church school, a Woodard School, founded by Canon Woodard, there are 16 of these schools. There's Hearse, Lansing, King's, Elsmere, I can't remember the others but a big group of church schools. And once in the blackout in this darkened chapel he gave a sermon in the middle of which he said I always remember when you're in terrible trouble, it's probably going to make a wonderful story when you get out of it. And I do, I actively do that, sometimes when things are really bad I can say to myself when I tell this story I'm just going to change it a bit so that wa, wa, wa. And it's true, if you ask people to talk, the things they will talk about most animatedly are the worst time, are times when they really hit rock bottom and something just happened that pushed the button. And that's very much like the business of this too will pass.

And all the time I was at the BBC I never took any job that I had, I never took myself seriously in the job. I took the work very seriously and I did the best I could. But the position as such, I always knew I would end up like I am now, having to phone them up and take my turn in the queue, to see if they will take any ideas that I've got.

John Taylor: So music publishing, how did you start in that.

Bill Cotton Jr: I started. I worked for Noel Gay which is like the circle

John Taylor: He used to live in Soho Square didn't he.

Bill Cotton Jr: He did, my god.

John Taylor: We had the offices next door to him.

Bill Cotton Jr: That's interesting. That's the first time I saw Noel, he was in Soho Sq. He then moved to Denmark St and my father had an office in his building and he was a great personal friend

John Taylor: Your father had an office

Bill Cotton Jr: In Denmark St

John Taylor: And he needed an, he must have needed an office.

Bill Cotton Jr: Oh yes. So he offered me a job and I took it, we lived at Ham Island then, we had a little bungalow at Ham Island, and for lots of reasons we ended up living in this little place. And it was a little community of bungalows, that in the end my father gave me the one that we were living in and I stayed there after I was married. And Noel lived there and he offered me this job, sailing up the river in his little cruiser thing. And I worked there for a bit with Richard Armitage, his son, who started work at the same time. And I think I was there 6 or 7 months, that's all because I was obviously not learning anything. I didn't quite know what was going on there.

So I packed it in so I went to work at Chapels and there I learned more about music publishing because I was under Teddy Hearn and he was a great music publisher. And I worked for Walt Disney Music Company under them, and I forget, and Chapels itself.

And then I met up with, over a period of time I got to know a bloke called Johnny Johnson who ran the Keynotes and the Bells and the Bells and all that group. And also he was a music publisher with a company called Michael Rain Music, Music Partnership with a woman called Mickey Michaels. And she wanted out, and so I gave him £1,500 for her shares which were, and the company was doing no good at all, it

lost money. And the first song we had became a number one song and we never looked back. And the first song was *Humming Waltz*, which was a filch of *The Bard Of Amagh*, and then we did things like *The Love of Your Life*, *Can't Tell A Waltz From A Tango* and *Bell Bottom Blues* and *Friends And Neighbours*, *Can't Do A Tango With An Eskimo*. All sorts of things. And there were all these novelty type songs, mainly the songs that my father would play on a Sunday. And we got quite a nice little catalogue of those types of songs together.

And we were doing fine, we were making a decent amount of money and in those days you could lay off so many things against tax. I mean you could go on holiday on tax, all you wrote across the form was searching for copyrights in Europe and you went and sent a month on the Adriatic coast of Italy, and you got a few bills from around, you called up at certain places to make it look as if you'd been doing a grand tour. And then commercial television started and Johnny became the biggest jingle writer in the country, JJ Jingles, and he made himself a fortune. Because he wrote them, recorded them, sang in them, I mean he had it each way, which meant that the amount of time he gave to the music business side of it became very little. And music business, song plugging, because that's really what it comes down to and getting your music played and recorded, it's alright if there are two of you doing it but it's, I found it a soul destroying job to do on my own. I didn't want to do it, it's very much the seller

John Taylor: What do you do in song plugging

Bill Cotton Jr: You go round and try and get people to record your music and play it. I don't know what they do know but that's what you did then. You used to go to theatres and go and see people and say to them here is my sheet of music, would you look at. If you've got a broadcast I'd be grateful if you'd do it. And you would take them out and give them a drink and they would insult you and so you get

I must say that when I became the head of light entertainment or indeed when I became a senior variety producer there were quite a lot of people who quite wished they'd been slightly nicer to me, when I'd been queuing outside their dressing room trying to get them to listen to my song. But that is what you did. If you've got a song up

of course it was, there was a lot of money in it, song royalties make stocks and shares look like nothing. I don't know whose earned the biggest windfall out of stocks and shares but I'd still rather have Irving Berlin's income, frankly. Much more reliable. Stocks and shares can go away from you, copyrights can't. You know, they're there.

John Taylor: That is where they money comes from, people playing it, not sheet music.

Bill Cotton Jr: No, in those days selling sheet music was. You see you charged either a shilling or two, it didn't matter which, and you got from a shilling copy you got 5d and from a 2 shilling copy you got 1/5d, because they used to take 7d for distribution, and whatever, whatever, whatever. If you sold 200,000 copies, it wasn't bad loot. And if you got into the half million which a lot of them did you were making really a great deal of money. In those terms, in those days, so yes. Then performance became, PRS and what have you, that was another form of income which was very good, and then records started to become mainly. Nowadays it is all records and no sheet music, hardly at all,, it's all records. But once again, you see once you start getting into the big numbers, and especially if you get a hit in America, you're in big. And we were doing remarkably well, unquestionably, we were having the time of our lives.

As I said Johnny went off and I, it is very hard, I can't remember the process. But they started commercial television. My father had never done any television at all except the coronation he did and he did another, and I'm not sure it was like a farewell that the queen. To be very honest with you, there were 2 or 3 special shows that the BBC did that he did an excerpt in but he did no regulars, because they couldn't pay him enough money and he was doing very well on the halls, and it just wasn't worth it.

When commercial television came, he was a client of the Grade Organisation, they were his agents, when they were allowed to be. He used to make the rules up as he went along. And they got him to do 6 shows for ITV, for ATV for the ITV Network. I went along to see him doing these and they were produced by a fellow called Bill Ward who was running ATV at the time really, he was the fellow who launched ATV. And it struck me that it wouldn't be a bad idea, it wouldn't be a bad idea, it wouldn't be a bad idea

if I kind of got another string to my bow and learned a bit about that, and maybe do a bit of production or whatever.

Because don't forget, nobody quite knew where it was going in those days. I mean second guessing it now is quite easy but there were a lot of people at the BBC for example who did not believe the BBC would continue with television, that it was going to become so expensive that they were best actually just to stick to radio because people were going to go bankrupt and that the audience would never pay a licence fee to accommodate. There was a lot of that was going on, and a lot of people thought they were going to lose their shirt in ITV.

Anyway I said to Bill Ward what was the, and he looked at me, he said you're no good to me, you don't know what you're doing, you better go to the BBC and ask them, see if you can get them to train you. If they train you, you can come back and I'll give you a job. So I thought it sounded quite. I really don't remember thinking very much other than remembering him saying it. And then in a conversation that I had with my father I encouraged him, I said you're obviously not happy, which he wasn't, he couldn't stand it at ITV. And he was all over the shop. I said if you want to do television why don't you see if they're interested in doing a double contract with you for radio and television. Because the radio desperately wanted to keep him, because his Sunday programme was very popular. So he said I don't know about that, what have you. Anyway, Ronnie Waldman who was then the head of light entertainment, phoned him up and asked him if he would come out, and so we were,

So Ronnie invited my father out and said to him, because he later told me, Ronnie, that he'd looked through the breakdown of audience reaction and my father had always come top in every thing that he had ever done, in these 3 shows on television, even over Gracie Fields which was quite interesting, because at that time she. The extraordinary thing was that when asked who they enjoyed most on the show, always it was him. And he said, it just, all of a sudden I realised there was something which was stable about your father, that the public liked, there was a sort of stability. Gracie Fields by then you must remember had only just come back and probably there were some people who were not all that keen, later it went away altogether.

And so he said, he took my father out to Bertorellis and he offered him a 3 year contract, he said would you come for 3 years. And my father looked at him and said I'm a very expensive commodity. And Ronnie said how much. And I really, when I look back my father was a rotten businessman, he was a terrible businessman except when it came to what he sold himself and his band. And he seemed to be able to judge to a penny exactly what he should ask, which was not only a decent amount of money, an amount of money that you would always be prepared to pay for him. Because he didn't believe in getting the amount of money you would never be able to afford again, especially if he didn't. So he wrote on a paper napkin a sum of money and said I don't know how much work you want me to do but that's now much money I want per year for 3 years. And he said if I was you I wouldn't open it until you've had your lunch because it will spoil your appetite. And Ronnie opened it and said you have a deal.

Now recently at an RTS lecture I said that's the way actually I remember being able to do deals, now you have to phone up the gardener to see if you can get an appointment with the butler to see if you can get an appointment with the wife and the manager, and one day you may see the star but very unlikely. And I think one of the banes of our business is that lawyers are now taking so much a part in everything and nobody thinks about the show. But that was the deal my father did with Ronnie.

And Ronnie told me afterwards that when he went back I knew I had a bargain he said, but I knew I was going to find it very difficult to convince anybody at the BBC that we were going to pay this fellow this astronomical amount of money. And I said why were you so sure that you had a bargain. He said because he was going to turn up. He had a band, he had to work, he was not going to give us any problems, and he was a major star. He said major stars are always well I think I want to go away for 6 months, I don't want to do it then, I'll do it here and you'll have to do this, and I've made too much money this year so I don't want to work any more because everything goes in tax anyway. He said I knew I would never have that problem with your father, I knew that he had to work. So when I wanted him to work he'd work. And it was a relationship as you know that lasted until he died in 1969 and this was 1956.

And he did some things with Francis Essex called *Tin Pan Alley* which was a sort of holding time, and meanwhile Brian Tesler had been asked to develop a show for him. And Brian who I still believe is the best light entertainment producer I came across and he taught me everything that I know, unfortunately he didn't teach me everything he knew; but he developed this kind of basic format for my father's television show with *The Silhouettes*, with the type of comedy number. And he laid the foundations for that show which last virtually in that form all my father's life. I changed it a bit, I'm jumping a head a bit now. He developed this thing and he did 13 shows with it, the first 13 shows. And I meanwhile had joined, I was put, I better go back.

When my father had done this deal and he was, they were all thinking about it, I suggested to Ronnie Waldman, not in any way as a supplicant needing work, because I was a very successful music publisher, I said to him I wouldn't mind coming to the BBC and doing your training course. And I think because Ronnie was no fool, he thought it won't do any harm at all to have this fellow here for 6 months and then we can send him off, but we'll have got a few house marks with Billy Cotton.

And so I joined, I was put under Francis Essex, I didn't actually get on with Francis then, I thought he was too, he was too involved with the mechanics of the things and not enough with the performance of the artists. I'm very much to do with the performance of the artists, the mechanics are important, of course they're important.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

Bill Cotton Jr: So I was first put with Francis Essex.

John Taylor: Did they have a training school in those days

Bill Cotton Jr: Well yes. I'd forgotten that bit, you're quite right. I went on I think it was about a 6 week course and you were spoken to by a selection of people who I remember very well but their names have gone, somebody called Price I think.

John Taylor: They lectured

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, and you were given the opportunity to do a trial programme which we did in the Viking Studio, I remember, in Kensington High St, it was called the Viking Studio, I don't know what it is now. But it was good, I remember Atkins.

John Taylor: A fairly straightforward 6 weeks.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. Just basic things. I don't know that they do it as simply as that now, and I'm not sure, I remember when I was running the Television Centre, I got **Crotten** in who did training under me, and I said I'm not sure actually if we were to get back a bit more to visual grammar because whilst I don't believe that the grammar, the visual grammar needs to be slavishly adhered to, on the other hand I don't know that you can break the rules unless you know what the rules are. But that's a fairly straightforward cliché.

John Taylor: Were you paid while you worked

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. Oh yes. I think I got the princely sum of £15 a week, I think that's what it was.

John Taylor: And that year would be

Bill Cotton Jr: 1956.

Stephen Peet: What were you actually training as

Bill Cotton Jr: A light entertainment, it was interesting because

Stephen Peet: Light entertainment producer

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. I was a trainee producer, light entertainment. It had been suggested that would I like to do some time on the floor to which I said I couldn't understand, what I would want to do that for. I mean I've always worked on the basis if you can start half way up why the hell do you want to start at the bottom. And I think it is highly overrated. I think if you have to start at the bottom fine, I don't see any point in starting at the bottom just for the sake of it, saying I swept up the floor, I swept up floors anyway. Anyway so I did this course, went into Francis Essex's office, and Yvonne Littlewood, I remember, was the pa who just recently did the royal show for the queen mother. And a girl called Hermione **Dietry** was the secretary. And it was alright but I had very little in common with Frances.

However I had a great deal in common with Brian Tesler. I admired Brian and I used to wander down the corridor to his office and I used to sit there while he worked on my father's programme. And I remember him saying to me and he'd been up to see my father at some theatre in which he was appearing and later in the hotel in his suite and he said he was terrified. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to deal with this man

John Taylor: He was very young

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, he was younger than me, so you would have been in his 20s, in his late 20s. And he said they talked through the night virtually, after the show and he was saying all these ideas. And my father was saying I see, umm umm, fine, that's very nice. And eventually it came time to go to bed, and he said he was worried, I was very worried, I wasn't sure at all how I had done. What I was saying, whether he agreed with me or he didn't. And he said as I got to the door your father looked at me and said I'll tell you one thing son, I'm too good for you to ruin. So you have a good nights sleep. There will be nothing that you will ask me to do that we won't do well, so don't you worry about it. And he said it was like a weight was, to find somebody with that sort of humour and confidence in himself, and don't worry, we're going to do this together

and you won't ruin me, there is nothing that you can do that will ruin me.

John Taylor: Tesler at that time would have been a producer

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, he was a top producer, he was the top light entertainment producer. So he did the first 13, I during that period did a whole load of musical shows. After the 6 months, before the 6 months I was producing stuff. There was things called *Starlights* that you were given, a quarter of an hour of who you liked. And everybody used to go round Semprini's piano, that was the thing, could you get right round without getting the cable fouled up and all that.

Stephen Peet: Was this all live television

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, all live

Stephen Peet: Nothing on film.

Bill Cotton Jr: I didn't do anything. And it was done at Lime Grove and I did a series of these. I remember the first one I did was with the Ray Ellington Quartet and Marian Ryan, and I did a Semprini and I honestly can't remember the others but I must have done a decent handful of them I should think.

And then I did a thing called *Summer Serenade* which were big orchestras, Frank Chatsfield, Geraldo, and we had a major disaster with Geraldo. He was determined that he wanted to do Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto with the fellow, he used to be the chairman of that radio programme, a very good concert pianist, he was the chairman of *My Music*, well he was going to come along and play. And we built the set along the wall at Studio G, Lime Grove, had the orchestra along the wall, and put the piano against the back projection down the end. And I was going to have nice patterns coming up while this thing was playing. And we started, and this was done in a day, this 50 minute programme.

And we started to band call it, and we got all that done. Then they went on rehearsing and I thought it's alright, I know where I am, I know where the cameras are going to be. And eventually the lead violinist came and said to me, can I have a word with you. I said certainly. He said unless

you move me to within 2 ft of the solo piano, we have a disaster here, because I think Gerald is a very nice man but there is no way in hell he can conduct this. Which meant I had to turn the orchestra completely round or move the piano down.

And I move the piano down, and every camera shot that I'd got had gone, and the time had gone and we got a run through which was chaos.

And when it came to the transmission we got as far as this particular item. And I said to the cameramen don't anyone help me, just do what I ask you. So he announced this and I said cue music and off they went and I had a wide shot, I remember, of the studio, and at that moment, directly I cut to it, the man doing the captions, a man called Alfred Worthington, walked across the fucking stage carrying his caption, so I cut anywhere. I forget which camera it was, it doesn't really matter, and there was a picture of Andrea **Volkovska**, the harpist reading the paper. And we went on like this. I was like a rabbit in a headlight.

And then I looked up and there standing looking at me over the top of the monitors, which you could do in Studio G in those days, was Cecil McGivern plus members of the board of governors who had come to see a programme being done. It was hysterical and it was dreadful. I don't remember the rest of the show there is no point in pretending I do. I don't, I remember bursting into, you know when you go from being a rather suave young producer to being a terrified sweat soaked fellow who wishes he was anywhere but there.

And I remember afterwards saying when Waldman said to me what happened, I said unfortunately, attack being the best form of defence, unfortunately Cecil McGivern arrived and members of the board of governors and I got slightly put off, he was leaning over looking at me. And some time later Cecil McGivern stopped me as I went past his office in Lime Grove, and said I understand I put you off the other day. I said well. And he laughed and said I'll buy it.

John Taylor: Was Harry Pepper still there

Bill Cotton Jr: No, he'd gone by then. No the people who were around then were people like Afton and Graham Muir, Harry Carlyle, Tesler and Essex. I'm trying to think, there were a whole load more, Duncan Wood. The Bill Lyon-Shaw and

Bill Wards had gone to ITV, a whole load more and I can't remember who they were. T Leslie Jackson of course, was there doing all of Eamonn Andrews work, *What's My Line*. So it was a very happy band with Waldman as the head of light entertainment and Tom Sloan as the assistant head.

John Taylor: After, this is during your probationary period, the 6 months was it.

Bill Cotton Jr: That's right. We did these *Summer Serenades* and then I did a series with the show band, Cyril Stapleton's Show Band called *The Show Band Show* which was designed by Dick Levin. And he'd done it in such a way that on the music stand you could light up show band show and with the camera pulled back on its widest lens I got how and how which I photographed and I said if this is the best that head of design can do for me. And he actually gave it to me and I've lost it in one of my moves. But he actually gave me a give framed photograph of the how and how show. And I used to pull his leg whenever he was in the room, I used to say Dick Levin and I did a thing called the How and How Show. So I did some of those. I did a show with Harry Secombe, a couple of shows with Harry I suppose. And I worked my way up if you like to being a fairly reliable variety producer.

I did *The Perry Como Show* which was a bit show in America and went over there and looked at it and then it was brought over here for American television, and I was the associate producer on it. I did quite a lot of work for them on it. In the end Como was a fairly straight forward sensible man, I learned a great deal from him and indeed from the producer Clark Jones. But he said it is perfectly obvious Bill knows what he's doing, let's leave him to go ahead and do it. I did quite a lot of work on that which I thoroughly enjoyed. And I did shows for **Mort Zaal** which was a disaster, and **Shelley Burn**.

I was also involved in things like *Juke Box Jury* and *6.5 Special*, I did some of those. And *Off The Record*. I eventually got the series of *Off The Record* which was a very good experience. If you remember it was the first of these record shows, and it had been started by Francis Essex actually with a fellow called Stuart Marshall who was a designer and Clifford Hats later took it on. But they kind of thought up gimmicks for all the different records and people used to come along and mime to the record, no

they sang live. That's right Stanley Black and his Orchestra and they sang live to the record which was good fun. We did that at Riverside. And Jack Payne was the man who introduced it who was no better than he should be Jack. He was a pain in the neck actually, but he had been there and he was a star in his own right. And it taught me a great deal.

Then as I said, Tesler left and went to ATV and so my father's show became available. Now I had an agreement with Waldman that I could not be asked to produce any programme in which my father appeared. And so when Tesler went he said to my father we've got to find you another producer. He said I'm quite happy if young Bill does it. And Waldman said to him as I was told later, I'm afraid I'm not even in the position to ask him to do that because he made this part of his contract that he can't be asked to do it.

Stephen Peet: It was written into the contract

Bill Cotton Jr: It was, I've no idea because I never ever read my contract. But it was part of the deal that I had with Waldman that he wouldn't even ask me, I wouldn't be considered, and I would not be put in that embarrassing position. And so my father hived himself off to my home and when I got home my late wife said to me, your father's here, he's come for supper. I said oh good. Now you must understand I knew nothing about him talking to Waldman at all. As far as I was concerned my father had come for supper. And when he wanted to be charming he could be very charming indeed. And he ignored me for the entire evening but he made xxx laugh with all the stories and jokes and the thing and he was at his best.

And eventually it was midnight before you knew what time it was and he'd got his hat and his coat on. And it was a trick he used, as he got to the door he turned round and said by the way won't you produce my programmes. And I mean it was out of the blue. I said what are you talking about. He said I'm told that you won't produce my programmes, is that true. I said well, yes. He said why. I said because you're my father, I love you, you're my friend. I don't want to fall out with you and I said a producer is a producer. The producer is the man who has to bring the bad news, and I said I don't want to row with you, dad. He said I tell you what, I'll never row with you in public. So I said but there are plenty. I will never row with you in

public, there's a decent deal and I'd like you to do my show. So I said alright. So I can tell Ronnie Waldman tomorrow. So I said yes. He said fine, thanks very much, lovely supper, bye bye darling. And off he'd gone. So I found myself doing this.

And Tesler had said to me I love your father, I think he's wonderful but by god I don't know where you're going to get any material from because we really have done everything we can think of with it. And if you like, what I knew better than Tesler did was that you can go on doing the same thing as long as you wrap it up a bit different. The British public don't, if they like a thing it's just a matter of finding a different way of presenting things.

So anyway I can't pretend I was that confident but nonetheless I was pretty sure that he wasn't going to go away. And we started, I started to do shows. I took the format, the Tesler format, and changed it very little, it lasted really until he died. And we had a long period of a very happy association. We only had the one row which I've told publicly many times over when he was, obviously had his mind elsewhere and he kept on making mistakes and the time was going away to when we had to do the run through, otherwise we weren't going to get a run through in. And I was rehearsing this particular, and eventually pushed the button down and I very rarely used to use the button, usually talk to the floor manager which is the way, but I pushed the button down and said could we just do this once more, and I must go for a run through. And turned round to talk to someone and didn't take the finger off the button, and said if he learned the bloody thing we could get on. You see. And a voice came booming back, well now if you're so clever why don't you come down here and do it.

So I got up and went down onto the floor and the band had been waiting for this for some time, to see the battle of David and Goliath. So I said to him I'm very sorry dad, I should not have said that and he looked at me and laughed and he said if I'd learned the bloody thing you wouldn't have had to. And that was the end of that and we were so, our relationship throughout the six years was very good. He became very, we became very friendly. You see my father had been a very good father to us, to me in particular, and to my brother

John Taylor: It must have been nice to have worked together

Bill Cotton Jr: Well to be able to pay him back a bit because he was getting on a bit and he'd lived, he was 70 when he died but he was really nearly 90 in terms of what he'd done. He had, he was older than his years in one way. And I was able, he would do the show and then I would do the next show, get the next show together, and he would have nothing to do with that till he came in to the first talk through and then I'd produce the running order and the bookings and all that; and he knew, he knew that I would never ask him to do something that he couldn't do. And there was just that extra little bit of care. And consequently it was a wonderful relationship.

But he showed me a marvellous side of performers and I've always said, I suppose it's not only just performers, people who are at the top of their profession, they've usually got a large dose of survival in them, self interest in survival and that's the thing that actually carries them through. And when I was appointed assistant head of light entertainment I was very excited, I had not sat a board, I never sat a board at the BBC for any job, never, on principle. People knew me, if they wanted me to do a job if they came and asked me, then I'd do it. If they didn't want to ask me

John Taylor: You refused to

Bill Cotton Jr: I just wouldn't board, not for any job. I didn't go in front of the board for BBC1 or managing director. And the only time I ever sat a board as a matter of fact was for director general, for the job of director general which I didn't want to go, I didn't want the job and I told them when I walked in. I don't know why you want to see me. I don't want the job. I want you to give the job to someone else and I know what I want to do. But anyway that's as maybe.

But when I got this job as assistant head, I went up to his office and said to him and said I've got a bit of surprise dad, I've been made the assistant head of light entertainment. And his immediate reaction as will you be doing my shows. I said no, we'll find somebody. Oh, I see why don't you dig a hole 6 ft by 4 ft by 2 ft and put me in it. I mean there was no doubt about it he was serious. I said oh, alright, fine, I'll see you anon. And off I went.

And I was deeply, deeply hurt and deeply shocked. I'd never seen that side of the survival process.

And I phoned my mother up and my mother listened and she said I'll tell you something about your father. He never got to where he got worrying about his father. She said if I were you I wouldn't worry about him too much. I think you'll find that he'll survive and of course by 5 o'clock that night he was sitting in my office with the pad and the inkwell and all the bits that he'd bought from Aspreys with a thing saying well done son but they should have made you DG, I've still got it somewhere. But just for a second, just for that second his instinct for survival was very, very strong and he was a very open man and he said what he thought.

John Taylor: You didn't go on producing the show

Bill Cotton Jr: No, there was no way I would. Once I became assistant head of light entertainment, I think I did, the only shows I did, I did some Ken Dodd shows because Duncan Wood fell sick up in Blackpool and I was up there and there was nobody else and it was pointless to send for somebody else so I did them. And I did a Royal Variety Performance, but I never produced once I was an executive because I don't believe in it. I think that the business about it's nice to be in touch with what's going on is far outweighed by the fact that if you're an executive in charge of producers, you must be available to them. And if you're busy doing your bit and they are up to here, you're not earning your money and you're not being fair to them and I believe that absolutely. And I've heard, oh I do it because I like to know what, not at all, they're doing it because they like to do it a). And B) a lot of them are doing it because they're running away from the job they've actually taken. And I don't believe in it.

John Taylor: At this time how did you fit into the BBC

Bill Cotton Jr: Well fairly comfortably actually. You see I was much better off than most of them because I still had my music business, so I was taking £25 a week in notes out on top of my salary which was £20 a week. Now in those days £45 a week was an awful lot of money. So consequently I was in no financial problem, I don't know what that's got to do with what your question is. But you know what I mean, I was able to lead my normal life anyway. I liked the people at

the BBC, I like to think that most of them liked me and we got on well.

Stephen Peet: It may seem a strange question but I just wondered in the early days of the BBC when you were beginning and making one or two quite heavy mistakes, were there rumblings behind your back like he's living a charmed life because he is a Cotton.

Bill Cotton Jr: No, I think a lot of them knew I had this, and I think that's why I'm talking about my income. I mean they knew that I had not got the job because I needed a job, are you with me. Most of them knew me as a music publisher, most of them knew I was a very successful music publisher and I was able to say, there were people who, there were people with whom I did not get on particularly well, I don't believe it was because he's his father's son routine, that I avoided I think, but it was because if you like I was part of a new wave of people

John Taylor: Who was the director general at that time

Bill Cotton Jr: What's his name. The fellow who's still alive, the general, the fellow who had been a general in the war, had been secretary of the war cabinet.

John Taylor: This was before Greene became director general.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, he was the one before Greene. I was furious, he is 90 now, and he came to dinner the year that I left the BBC and I've always regretted I wasn't the managing director then, because I would have loved to have dinner with him. What's his name. Funnily enough he was a great personal friend of my father in law.

John Taylor: I know who you mean

Bill Cotton Jr: Anyway, we'll think of it in a minute. So as I say, in real terms I never had any problems with the nepotism line and I always used to announce myself as head of nepotism. I used to say, always got it in first, you must understand I'm head of nepotism around here. And indeed Jimmy Gilbert's son, I remember when Jimmy Gilbert's son left school, I'd seen Jimmy Gilbert's son hanging round the studios with his father for ages, and his father is a very, very talented producer. And I realised that Jimmy

Gilbert's son had taken in a lot. And Jimmy was saying what can I do for him, he can't work in the department because by that time Jimmy was head of comedy, and I arranged for Jimmy's son to go to Scotland. I said to the fellow in Scotland will you take him on, I'll pay for him out of light entertainment budget if necessary. But he is too good to be sent away for a rule that I understand why but it shouldn't damage the BBC. But I believe in, I'm doing a show with Parkinson very shortly and his son is somebody who is in the area and I see no reason at all why. Just exactly the same as surgeons often, surgeon's children often become surgeons, doctors and what have you. If it's in the blood. No I didn't have any problem with that.

John Taylor: In some ways it's slightly strange that you with your character fitted into the BBC

Bill Cotton Jr: You see what was interesting was, in the sense of the world of the BBC, I had not been to university although I had a place at Clare College if I'd wanted to take it but I chose not to. But I'd been an officer in the army, and I'd been to a public school and I'd done very well at a public school, I'd been the head prefect and you know, I'd got all the right qualifications for the BBC, although of course his father is a band leader which is a bit of a problem. But I had all the other, and I used to make sure that they knew that I had no great aspirations to be a BBC man. I had one foot firmly outside the BBC and I intended to keep one foot firmly outside. And all the time I was at the BBC even when I was a managing director, I used to say to BBC staff, always, you have no talent that anybody will pay 6d to see. So always remember the BBC are the people wish to hear or watch, you are just paid servants of that proposition, to service it. That's all. You bring nothing to the party but a whole load of pig iron, big buildings and a reasonable amount of talent to make the thing work. But people who matter are the performers. And if you can't get on with them, then you have no place in television or in broadcasting. Now that was my line, I was very sure about it. I still am and I believe one of the reasons the BBC are having problems at the moment, I don't think there are enough people who understand that.

If you read anything about the BBC at the moment, all you're reading about is how much they're paying each other. Or whether they're biased or not. Who gives a damn whether

they're biased or not. They've fallen for the biggest political trick of having to justify bias. I wouldn't discuss bias with people when I was managing director. I said of course there were people who were biased, people are biased all over the place. And a lot of people in government are very biased, very biased indeed. Politicians, biased to hell, all of them. By and large we just get the best broadcasters and if they show in their work a certain amount of bias, I believe the British public are perfectly capable of recognising that. Of course you can't have people making outrageous things.

But most of the best dramatists and journalists look at the human condition. Now that can always be interpreted as being left of centre. Always. But I don't know whether they're paid up members of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, if they are writing well and if they are examining from their point of view the human condition, then in my opinion the BBC has an obligation to develop it. And ok you may say after one play put it out I think we ought to have a discussion about that play afterwards and I think you should get in people to just balance it up.

But I remember once I was asked by a member of the Board of Governors who shall remain nameless, who actually said to me why don't you put this other play on so the public can decide. I said what's the competition, what competition have you in mind here. I said I'm telling you professionally that that is a bloody awful play and this is a very good play. Are you arguing with that because if you are fire me. He said no I'm not talking about. I said fine. I said so now what competition are you expecting me to spend public money on. I said I only have one thing, I do, I encourage people to make decisions based on what is good. And if you have an organisation that receives £1 million to produce programmes that in my opinion is the only line that they can take. And if they don't take that line and if they start to think that they can manufacture a false way of balancing what is not balanceable actually, then I think they're doomed.

What I like about the BBC of course is that I think it is a) a lucky organisation, in that it's as good as the people who are in it at the time and nobody is forever in it, and with any luck people who try and steer it in that direction, they go and you get a decent man at time, before the public are likely to object.

John Taylor: Good stuff

Bill Cotton Jr: I don't know about good stuff.

John Taylor: Well it's good stuff to me.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well, it's a very important part of the process. So there we are. So we got up to being assistant head of light entertainment. And the head of light entertainment was then Tom Sloan.

John Taylor: How did you get on with Tom

Bill Cotton Jr: I liked Tom. He was a disappointed man in many ways. I don't, I wouldn't say that he was a square peg in a round hole because he actually did quite a lot for entertainment. He was a very unlikely man to do it, his background by and large, he was a BBC man who'd come up, he was the Canadian representative at the same time as Gilbert Harding was there. This was the great Gilbert Harding, it was during that time that the great Gilbert Harding story about going across to America to buy whisky which he couldn't get in Canada, and as he went over the border they made you sign a document and in it is written I do solemnly swear that I will not attempt to overthrow the government of the United States, to which Gilbert wrote, sole purpose of visit, and was not allowed in. I always thought it was a marvellous Gilbert. But Tom was with him over there. He then came back, and I never got the chronology of this particularly right but he worked with Berkeley Smith on the Olympic Games in some capacity of which I was never quite sure about but I think it was really go along there and help them out.

He also worked for some time in planning and so he was a sort of general kind of gofer for a stage for the corporation, a general worker so to speak of a managerial level. And then he applied for the job as the assistant head of light entertainment when Ronnie Waldman put up an advert for it. He was not very popular with some of the old stagers, the Richard Aftons and that lot, they were all inclined to talk about him as an outsider and stiff military type looking man.

I actually found him, as is obvious, I found him to be helpful and to want to learn about things, but to want to have his own ideas which were fairly decently established. He believed of course that when the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* came over that the world as we knew it had just

disintegrated and he said to me how can you encourage this sort of thing. I said easy. And he had very strict rules and he had a terrible row with Peter Sellers and did one show with Peter Sellers tearing up the captions, he just went to the caption roller and just tore the thing off and the cameraman out of fear pulled back so you saw Peter tearing it and he's saying it's all that bloody Sloan and his lineaments.

John Taylor: Was that live

Bill Cotton Jr: I don't know if it's still around. It was recorded. And so he had a fairly, Tom's time was a fairly secure time for entertainment. Because it was, he was organised. He knew how to work the BBC machine and he therefore was quite happy for us to go and be fairly outrageous because he could get us all of it, and he knew which buttons and which levers to pull. So that was his big advantage in the BBC. And there is a lot in that, that if you have got somebody in a position of authority who knows how the organisation works, it is enormously helpful. So that was his

John Taylor: You did five years as his assistant. Was he head all the time

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. What had happened actually, and I think I ought to just mention it, was that when Waldman, Waldman was told that they didn't want him to be head of light entertainment any more, would he go off and run Enterprises. And they wouldn't tell him who they were going to appoint. And out of the blue they brought in Eric Maschwitz. Now Eric had been, as you will remember, head of light entertainment for radio before the war as a young man and had done very well. He had written all those musicals and things like *A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square*, *These Foolish Things* and *Goodnight Vienna*. But he had become Eric unquestionably a drunk and his wife ran a club in the West End of London and he was always in this club slagging off people in the BBC as much as he could.

And the story goes that when Beadle was made director of television, he didn't move up from the west, where he had been controller of the west region, but he used to stay in his club during the week. And Eric was a member of that club and Eric used to go and sit and talk to him and Beadle had no one else to talk to, and one way or the other

convinced him that he was right for a revival and why didn't they make him light entertainment and he'd soon show you how to do it properly. And so consequently we were all of a sudden confronted with this fellow whom we were actively contemptuous of, had been made head of light entertainment. Ronnie Waldman said to a few of his intimates of which I happened to be one at the time, had I known they were going to appoint him, I would never have resigned. I would have made them sack me.

John Taylor: Why did they want to get rid of Waldman

Bill Cotton Jr: Very, very difficult to know, very difficult. Ronnie and there are a few people who would say there was a touch of anti-Semitism. I have no idea whether there was any truth in that or not, but it is not difficult for people to say that there is that in the BBC. Paul Fox believes there was a great deal of that in the BBC at one time, and I believe left because he believed fundamentally that a Jew would never get into the top echelons of the BBC.

Whether not Ronnie was considered to have done his term and what was needed was somebody, what is true and if Beadle made the appointment and Beadle and Kenneth Adam it would have been I suppose, or McGivern, if they made that appointment on the basis that Ronnie had laid a good foundation both in staff and shows and what was now required was somebody to exploit that, then they were quite right.

Eric actually did exploit, once he got back into the building we were all marvellous, we weren't a whole load of Jews and queers as he used to say we were. But we were his family and he used to throw parties and he would get the press in, and of course he was very good with the press. I mean Eric was very quotable, could always talk to the press, knew how to get round them, they liked him. And he threw parties that they liked and what have you. And there were a lot of things going on that Eric started which Ronnie would never have started.

Ronnie was very, very introverted actually, very difficult. I remember going to his secretary once, could I see Ronnie please. And she said yes certainly, Tuesday week. I said well no. She said I'm sorry the first time he's got is Tuesday week, 10 o'clock, don't be late. And that was the

end of it. But Tuesday week, that was it. Whereas Eric was in and out of your office all the time and he did, I'm a great supporter of what Waldman did, I think Waldman was the architect of entertainment in the BBC.

And one of the other things I've always maintained about the BBC is that its single biggest success is the fact that despite everything, despite its publicity, despite what everybody says, the BBC has always applied quality to popular contemporary entertainment. It has done a lot of it, and it is quite extraordinary. They will never boast about that because they like to boast about everybody believes us all around the world which is completely irrelevant to me. The people who are paying the licence are the people who sit at home in little houses and who are looking to radio and television to entertain them and make their life a bit better. So information and entertainment to me are what they're looking for, but I know perfectly well what they pay the licence for and it is adding quality to that, not looking down on that, not talking about it as though it's easy. I mean the Rupert Murdoch line about give them what they like, I have no time for at all. I've no doubt he'll make a lot of money out of it, but I don't believe that it contributes to the cultural life and the well being of the nation. Whereas I believe the BBC's line has done. And to a degree that in terms of television was what we inherited from Ronnie, because I think he understood that, Ronnie Waldman. It was exploited as I say by Eric Maschwitz. And we had a very good period with Eric and Tom as the assistant head. That was a very good period because there was one fellow off charging around slapping you on the back. If you did a bad show, you went in to see Eric and he'd tell you I liked it, I don't care what the others say, I knew what you were trying to do. And then you'd go and see Tom, and Tom would say what was that appalling. Well he liked it. If it was a good show, you went to see Tom first, and he said I liked that and then you went and got your, so the two of them, it was a fairly, it was a decent set up.

And then Eric decided he'd had enough and wanted to retire. I never understood actually quite what he thought he was doing. I think he wanted to get out of doing a massive amount of work that it was becoming. It was becoming quite a heavy job. And so he decided to apply for a job upstairs on the 6th floor as a consultant, which never was going to work. And Tom and I became head and assistant head. And of

course you see you can't have an adviser to the controllers or to anybody in their own area, the adviser is the head.

When I left the BBC Checkland said to me, I'd like you to stay, I'd like to have another managing director obviously, but I would very much like you to stay on board of management and become director of enterprises whatever whatever, and be my adviser. I said no, your adviser will be your managing director, I don't wish to get tangled with other people. And I've seen it all happen before and there is no job and I don't want to be in a no job.

BILL COTTON JR

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

Bill Cotton Jr: We got to the stage where I became assistant head of light entertainment which was quite interesting. There was unquestionably at that particular time a slight resentment I think among some people mainly because, at my getting this job, mainly because I hadn't applied for it, as I said earlier. And there had been a board held, and I think a lot of people had wanted to do the job and for some reason best known to themselves the board found them unsuitable, and so no appointment was made and then I was appointed. I have to say it was greeted with silence when it was announced, there was no great hurrahs, which suited me quite nicely, actually. I always think if you start at the bottom, you can only go up.

And I was very lucky during this period, because there is no doubt about it that a) the BBC was in a position that it had by now fully taken on board television, it had fully taken on board that to survive in television against commercial television it was going to have to have a very powerful entertainment arm to it.

Sp: What year are we talking about

Bill Cotton Jr: I suppose about 1962.

John Taylor: And it is 5 years that you remained in the job.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. Grace Wyndham-Goldie had delivered of herself the marvellous statement at a time when ITV were trancing the BBC in the areas in which it was operating, that the problem with the BBC was that it was considered vulgar to be popular. And that had had the desired affect.

So I arrived as the assistant head with BBC2 on the horizon, it wasn't fully decided but it looked as though we were going to get another channel. With a decent number of really fixed slots on BBC, on BBC1 as it was later known on the television, with decent budgets and in the nicest way a decent amount of clout. We certainly weren't the poor relations in any way, shape or form. And it was during this period that I was able to develop a lot of things in

variety and I'm terribly bad on dates and times and what have you, but during this period and the period when I was head of variety, we had all sorts

John Taylor: Assistant or head

Bill Cotton Jr: I was assistant head of light entertainment. There were three things, there was assistant head of light entertainment, then light entertainment was made into a group, this was all BBC structure, and I was then assistant head of a group which was senior to a head of a department, so I was told. I then met in 1964 Frank Muir one evening and he was looking for something to do and so he joined as the comedy side of it. And we had then got a head of group, assistant head of group [variety], assistant head of group [comedy]. They later became known as head of comedy and head of variety. That's the way the thing developed.

So during that period, as I say, it was a very good period of expansion. We did, there were the Doonican Shows, these were the ones that we started, there was the Doonican Shows, there was the Frost Report, there were shows with Morecambe and Wise, Corbett and Barker, there was people like Kathy Kirby. I was only thinking of her the other day, I heard a record of hers, it was a tragedy because she was of the Marilyn Monroe type. I brought back Vera Lynn again, and it was quite extraordinary. We started Top of the Pops

John Taylor: Would this be the time of Greene

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes

John Taylor: Did his appointment bring a big change.

Bill Cotton Jr: Not really, it's very interesting, changes happened around him. But he is often attributed with a whole lot of things that he had no idea were going on. And it is very interesting, if you talk to Alasdair Milne, and I think you ought to talk to Alasdair Milne, because on this he would be quite interesting, the sort of legendary idea that the director general had a hot line with everything they did. Well a bit of that went on, the director general, but the idea that he invented the show does not go down as well with the people who did. But certainly, he created an atmosphere in which a lot of things could happen.

John Taylor: This seems to be his general reputation, did he hold the ropes kind of thing, things that wouldn't have been allowed before, happened while he was there.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes I suppose.

John Taylor: What about the other people, Grace Wyndham-Goldie, did you have any contact.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. Loved her, she was great. When Tony Jay left she came up to me after one weekly review, you know the BBC have this Wednesday weekly review programme, Wednesday review meeting where we used to talk about, she said Billy, I've decided that you must come and work for me. Tony Jay is going and I want you to be head of his department

Sp: What was her position at that time.

Bill Cotton Jr: She was head of talks or head of current affairs. No head of talks group.

I said what makes you think that I would drop my seniority to become a head of department with you. I'm doing quite nicely as I am thank you Grace. She said Billy you will never get anywhere unless you've worked for me, and there was a lot of truth in that. I said I appreciate your offer but I think I'll do what I'm doing. Years later Ian Trethowen, when he was director general, she said I told him he would never get anywhere. And at that time I was the deputy managing director. And he said well he hasn't done badly Grace. She said I'm talking about your job Ian.

John Taylor: She was quite a character

Bill Cotton Jr: She was very good. And she lived down, she had a friend who had a house at Farnham Common, and it was when I was living at Burnham. And every now and again I would get a call to go and have drinks with her, to have a sherry before lunch on Sunday. And I would go over there and it was a lady somebody, Lady Violet or somebody, whose house it was who was a terribly nice woman and she would serve out all the drinks. And Grace and I would start talking about things, and all of a sudden this poor woman in whose house we were drinking would venture an opinion.

And Grace would say be quiet, professionals are talking. That was it.

But there is no doubt about it, I don't know anybody who could claim to have had any greater effect on British television than Grace. I believe that she had a greater effect on British television than Hugh Carlton Greene. But on the other hand I have to accept would anyone else have allowed her to do it, and if Hugh allowed her to do it. But she was the free spirit to me, and she was also, she could take apart an interview without the aid of a recording, she could remember what you'd said. And how you'd let him off the hook here and there and there, and don't ever do that again. And she also found a great many talented people, Wheldon was one of Grace's boys, Wheldon and Milne and Baverstock and Peacock, there were quite a lot of them who were very talented.

John Taylor: It was a golden period really.

Bill Cotton Jr: It was a golden period of television. And when people say to me it it's not like it was in the old days, we had an enormous advantage, we were the only one there at the start. So anything you did, everybody was going to look at, you didn't have to worry whether or not you got the hook in and whether you could keep them against opposition, none of that, what you did is what they watched. And when ITV were on, so you had one other alternative.

The problem with television at the moment is that there is too much of it, far too much of it, it's all there and nobody can make up their mind what they want to watch. I can't and I do it for a living, and I'm damned if, I come back here at night and I look, and I get the paper out and find my way through the whole of BSB, the whole of Sky, and all the 4 terrestrial networks, I and look to see what's on video, cassette, that the kids have recorded and I think oh I don't know if I want to watch any of it. Whereas if there was one thing or two things on, I'd think I'll watch a bit of television, I wonder what they're up to. And you'd turn it on and you go out of your way to try and understand what it is they're doing or saying, you don't have any of that today. You just zap around to find something.

I remember the first time it ever happened to me was in Toronto, years ago I went to the Commonwealth Broadcasting

and they've got 26 channels or something in Toronto because they have all the American channels. And in the end I zapped around, I was ill one afternoon and I zapped around these channels and finished up watching *The Lady Vanishes* because I recognised it. And it was this old black and white film and that is the big problem that television production as an art form is going to face. That slowly we've being squeezed into you must made things that are instantly recognisable and have instant appeal. And it is going to be very, very difficult for the people who are following on behind us, it doesn't mean that they're any less dedicated or any less talented, it just means that they're not given the freedom that we were given to make the programme and know, know that at least 50% of the audience are going to watch you.

John Taylor: And money was freer

Bill Cotton Jr: Well no one was grasping at it you see, performers were on a scale and they knew what they were going to get.

John Taylor: But the BBC also had a fairly generous budget at the time did it.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well, they had enough money and they still do, there is no problem at the BBC with money, it's only the way they spend it that they have a problem with. As I left the BBC with you are centralist, what did they used to call me, anyway they didn't like me, the people who worked outside London didn't, when I say they didn't like me. There's one man I understand I was up for some award, and it's amazing how these things get back to you, and this fellow said I will not be party to him getting an award, he never cared for any broadcasting outside London. And so I didn't get it which is a terrible tragedy. But I was centralist, I was, and I still am, I still believe that the BBC is fundamentally a network organisation. And I believe that is why ITV was made a federal organisation, I think that the BBC's constant wish to be everything to all men with local radio and regional this and regional that, and most of the money is poured down the administration, it has damn all to do with what the people are getting in that area, because most of the stuff people are getting in those areas is pretty third rate.

I've gone off on this tangent I know and you'll think we had more money then than they do now. They get a billion pounds now you know, that is an awful lot of money a year. And by and large if you can't run a couple of networks and decent radio on a billion pounds you ought to pack it in and let somebody try who can. And I just think they're trying to do too many things. And what they ought to do is secure the networks and then whatever is left, but they've got it the wrong way round.

John Taylor: To go back, what about Wheldon.

Bill Cotton Jr: And some of the the people, well there was Grace and Wheldon. I also thought a great deal, Kenneth Adams was at that time the Controller of Programmes. I had a bit of time for Kenneth as well actually, he drank a bit too much but he knew what he was doing and he was very encouraging. Wheldon of course was a one off, he was fun, I used to play a lot of golf with Huw

John Taylor: He had a considerable reputation with everybody who worked at the BBC.

Bill Cotton Jr: And he was a great encourager, he was very Welsh, he made everything up as he went along. And he was a complete and utter thief. I always remember he always used to talk about casting, when he was pontificating, which he would do a lot of, for example he said I went into the rehearsal rooms of *Dad's Army* and I couldn't understand what they were on about until I realised that Arthur Lowe was the officer and John Le Mes was the sergeant which is completely the opposite to the way you would imagine. You would imagine that Le Mesurier would be the languid officer and Arthur Lowe would be the sergeant. And sitting in that rehearsal room, I realised that this was a great piece of casting. Now David Croft has said to me Wheldon never came into a rehearsal room of *Dad's Army* ever. He said I know, I would not have missed him had he come. Or he would have told me that he was there. That is what I mean when I say Huw was very Welsh.

But his whole effect, Huw, of wandering around, being seen in studios and slapping people on the back, was a very inspiring sort of leadership. He also had the ability, he was military trained in these things, and he believed in structure. He believed that he was here, and he needed somebody here below him, and he didn't want to hear all

about there was no job, as far as he was concerned if he said there was a job there was a job.

And he as you will remember when he became controller of programmes, which he became, just to go back over it, when Kenneth Adam; when McGivern went, Kenneth Adams became managing director or director of television as it was then know. Television services were very surprised when Stuart Hood was appointed as controller of programmes. Nobody, he had no experience of television at all. Mark you, neither had Beadle who was made director of television and he hadn't even got a television set, let alone anything else. But Stuart Hood came, and he was a very, Stuart was and remains a very enigmatic character and very difficult to get to know. And he sat there like brooding in his tent, or he seemed to be brooding in his tent. And they appointed Donald Baverstock remember as a sort of assistant controller of programmes, as being, and it seemed to be that the establishment had wanted Stuart Hood because of his depth of intellect and what have you and some how or other they thought they would have a levelling with a down to earth boyo, Welsh smart arse called Baverstock and that these two would get on very well with, it was just impossible. The chance of them getting on was minimal. And eventually it lead to Hood going, Stuart Hood, and he went in a very dramatic way. We all woke up one day and he'd gone to Associated Rediffusion.

They then had a scout around and all the runners in seniority terms were not acceptable, because Huw was only then the head of a department, a small department of documentaries, he wasn't a group head. And to be controller of programmes for 2 channels was coming it a bit. But by general consent he emerged, if you like, rather like the new archbishop of let's go, and he became the controller of programmes.

And he immediately, before then there had been two posts when BBC2 had been started, chief of programmes of 1, and chief of programmes 2, they weren't controllers, and the controllers of programmes. Baverstock was of 1 and Peacock was 2. And Wheldon was made controller of programmes, he immediately suggested and got that they should be called controller of BBC1 and controller of BBC2, which was a very generous act because controllers are controllers are controllers and he was only a controller. So he was appointing 2 controllers to work to him, but full of

confidence Huw. I am the senior, we're all equal but I'm a bit more equal than you are. And he also suggested that he would like to make Baverstock 2 and Peacock 1 and Baverstock went. And he made Peacock 1 and brought David Attenborough in to be controller of BBC2. Peacock eventually went to London Weekend Television and Huw made Paul Fox controller of BBC1 and that was if you like his reign so to speak, until Attenborough pushed off because he wanted to go back to production.

And as I understand it and I'm sure I'm right, Huw wanted Paul to become director of programmes, Paul didn't because he didn't believe he was, that it was not a proper job, that David had said being director of programmes, you're not in charge of anything with that. So he said no, I'll stay as controller of BBC1 and then Huw brought Alasdair down from Scotland to be the director of programmes. And then Paul realised you could never petrify yourself in a position and that being controller of BBC1 with Alasdair as director of programmes was not the same as being controller of BBC1 with David Attenborough as director of programmes. And so he went off to Yorkshire,

John Taylor: The manoeuvring inside an organisation like the BBC must get very complicated

Bill Cotton Jr: Well it did, it's one of the big problems you have of everybody auditioning. When I went to the BBC, when I was appointed as managing director, I went to the board of governors and I got 4 years to go before I was 60. And I intended to go when I was 60, I intended to leave when I was 60 but I asked them for a 5 years contract. And they said why, and I said because I want everybody to be sure you are appointing me because you want me rather than because it's buggins turn. And I don't want everybody auditioning for my job within two years of my being there. And if they know I'm there for 5 years, at least you get 3 years and then comes a nice surprise to them that I leave a year before and it will be done much quicker. That was what is behind it. I also said you had the ability to appoint me last year, you didn't, so you can give me the money the other end.

But as you say the problem with the place is obviously that as long as they have all these different departmental jobs in this very, very long structure, by long I'm talking about wide I suppose, people are constantly looking to see

self advancement which is to do with ambition and what have you, and you're often moving people away from where, from jobs that they do very well into jobs that they don't do very well and you don't need anyway just actually to get themselves up the promotional ladder and you have to be careful to criticise them for doing that. The reason they're doing that is to get themselves in a position for the big job and they can see, people see I'm no good here, I'm never going to be considered for that job if I'm here, but if I move over here my profile will be higher, I'll have a bigger exposure and yes.

John Taylor: It must complicate life

Bill Cotton Jr: It does. I actually believe you see that the current idea of having independent producers and independent production

John Taylor: Outside

Bill Cotton Jr: Outside, is a very, very good thing for the BBC. I'm not sure that it's going to work because I'm not sure the BBC will take on the opportunity that they have here. If you go back to the position that in America whatever the independents do and however they do it, they're doing it for a system that works on a commercial base. Here you're doing it with a system where the BBC have got a billion pounds that comes in rain or shine every year for production. I can see no reason at all why they don't seize on the opportunity to get rid of a whole load of promotional problems by moving it out into independent companies where the talent now wishes to be employed.

I've always maintained that talent will go, will want to be employed the way it wants to be employed. You can always get people to fill jobs, there's never a problem with that, especially in the exciting business like ours, but if you want the real talent they will want a piece of the action. Now either they will want a piece of your action, in other words they want to be promoted within your scheme, or they want a piece of their own action, of making a company into a very good financially stable company. And the BBC have got a marvellous opportunity of doing that. And you know fine, nobody is saying, everybody will complain that they're not being fair, but then you're saying that anyway about whom you employ on the staff. There is no difference between saying no, I'm very sorry, I quite like your

company, I understand but you have no more right to be employed as a company than you do as a pa, and I don't fancy the look on your face and I'm not going to employ you. It's nasty and what have you and you have to wrap it up better than that. But that is actually what you're saying when you people onto the staff.

There is no reason you can't go to somebody, like in our company there is Paul Jackson who is the managing director of Noel Gay Television, who is a very good piece of talent. I know that that's why I became the chairman of the company when I went back to Noel Gay at the end of my time. There is no reason why the BBC don't say to him, look would you like a job back at the BBC which they keep offering him, will you come back and do this or that. No, I don't want to do that. Oh what a pity and off they go. Not commissioning him to do anything. They want him to be a major head of one of their upward, but when he says no they don't say hold on a minute we'd like to use you. We'd like to use you therefore we will give you strand will you do it within your own company. And if you work out financially they'll be better off and they'll have him doing the job he does best which is producing programmes.

John Taylor: Without all the hoo haa

Bill Cotton Jr: But they can't see that, and when I was leaving, one of the things I wanted to do before I left the BBC. When I became managing director there were certain things I wanted to do. I wanted to do daytime television which I did, I wanted to get Michael Grade in which I did because I believed the BBC needed that kind of person to stir it all up. I wanted to clear up the early evening which I did. And I also wanted to create controllers of output rather than channels controllers, because I think the channel, it's too narrow a gap and you've got two people running BBC1 and BBC2 and they are terribly powerful and they control the money and the output. You've got 50 people who are entitled to offer programmes, now these 50 funnelling through these 2 is too small, it's too small a decision making process.

And I wanted to have a controller of drama, a controller of entertainment, a controller of sport, a controller of documentaries and a controller of news and current affairs. They would be given money and air time and they would be able to make ultimate decisions. If you had a drama, he was your man and that man could employ you any way you liked and you knew who you were going to, and he would have proper staff obviously and you could clear away a whole load of the centralised thing which doesn't work anyway, because nobody knows who anybody is.

It might be worth just remembering my visit to Uplands. Uplands was a senior management course that they sent you

on when you were promoted into middle management. To give you an idea of what it was like to be moving up the scale. I remember the year I went there, I'm not quite sure, it was the end of 1962 and the beginning of 1963 I think. And I went with Fisher, I'm trying to remember his first name, he is the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time

John Taylor: Humphrey

Bill Cotton Jr: That's right. He went later to Australia. He and I got on like a house on fire and played snooker through the entire operation which was later commented on by the director general of the day. Where else but the BBC would you find a bandleader's son playing snooker with an archbishop's son.

But it was a very interesting period, it was a very interesting course for one reason, I think it was the last, no I'll start again, it was run by a saintly man whose name I've forgotten for the moment, and he had convinced Reith to come and talk to us and I think it was the last time that he ever came to that type of occasion at the BBC.

The background to it was that *That Was The Week That Was* had started. That there had been an enormous furore as to whether or not the BBC should be indulging in that type of satire. The chairman of the board of governors had been drawn into, reluctantly, drawn into comments about programmes, and so it was a sort of, life was at a bit of a boiling point as far as the BBC were concerned. And I remember very clearly the last week, all those courses were quite emotional courses. A lot of very good people came to talk to us. And the BBC's position in society was being examined in a very real way.

And the Wednesday and the Thursday and the Friday, the last day being the Friday, we were all leaving Friday night, we had Arthur Ford who was the chairman on the Wednesday, Reith who was Reith on the Thursday and Hugh Carlton Greene on the Friday.

Ford was unquestionably very, very troubled and said that I find it very difficult that I have been pushed into the position of having to make decisions and express opinions about programmes and that is a situation that I do not believe that the board of governors should get themselves involved in. As far as we're concerned we are there to

obviously keep an eye on the programmes and the running of the corporation, that it is in the benefit of the public. He was obviously agonising and he agonised in front of us in a very, very frank and decent way.

The following day along came Reith and he explained that he had come because he had some time told this man who ran it whose name I've embarrassingly forgotten, that he would come and as a gentleman he always kept his promises and here he was, to fulfil his promise to come. He had no intention what so ever of making any sort of speech but he was perfectly prepared to answer a few questions. But before we asked a question, he just wanted to say this, he then went on for 2 ½ hours in which nothing that we were doing was any good at all, that we had completely and utterly sold up the river his entire conception of public service broadcasting, that the lord would look upon us in an unkindly way and probably strike us with his mighty sword and put us to death

John Taylor: Did he actually say things like that

Bill Cotton Jr: That was the way that you got, everything he talked about. And I remember I said to him is there anything we're doing that you're remotely pleased about, because I have to say as a member of the staff of the BBC I'm very, very dispirited to think that you've invented this organisation which seems to be doing awfully well actually and you don't seem to have enjoyed any of it. And he looked down, and said oh I see, obviously looking at a piece of paper to see what my name and what area I came from, he said I see we have some one from the entertainment area, do you know that they even put entertainers on the front page of the *Radio Times* now. To which I said could you in one sentence, could you tell me exactly what is wrong with that, the BBC is represented probably better by the entertainment profession than any profession than any other prfession that is in.

Well that went down like a cowpat in Queen Victoria's xxx and he was going rubbish, rubbish. So we got through that day which as I say was actually fascinating to see this man who in his youth had created what is unquestionably the model for broadcasting organisations all over the world and has remained a very powerful part of the international broadcasting scene, but who personally had been brought to his knees a bit. When he left the BBC, he thought they were

going to rush and make him prime minister or something and he ended up running British Airways or something like that. And then by and large vanished from the scene. Churchill couldn't stand him and therefore he kind of passed out of sight during the war in real terms and never regained anything other than the fact that he remained very cantankerous and got invited most places because he invented the BBC which apparently he couldn't stand any longer. So it was, that was a very interesting experience.

So the following day in came Hugh Carlton Greene, explaining that everything he'd done he'd done for the best and the right as far as he was concerned that was the way it should be and we needed to wake ourselves up and realise we were part of the real world and not an imaginary world. And it is I suppose unquestionably that is the thing, when we were talking earlier, that is what Hugh Carlton Greene brought to the party. And it turned out very good.

John Taylor: But Reith, it is strange this difference between Reith as the starter of the BBC and the later man because undoubtedly it was a very imaginative and socially exact thing that he did in founding the BBC, and public service broadcasting.

Bill Cotton Jr: Absolutely. I think people are inclined to forget however that Reith did a deal with Baldwin, I'll keep out of politics if you keep out of broadcasting. And the BBC did nothing about politics, they just actually read what the government wrote. In that area until, I think Richard Dimbleby was the first political correspondent the BBC ever had. And that was very late on in its life in real terms. It's not a criticism of Reith, I think he was very clever. I think he realised that if he dabbled in politics then the Home Office would take him over.

Churchill wanted to take him over in the General Strike, and he managed to keep out of it because they trusted that he would not actually deviate from the government of the day's line. In the general strike they made announcements about but they never deviated politically from the line of the government of the day. And they read what it was the government of the day said, that was the official explanation to any enquiry and the Minister had said, every now and again in a mocking way they show that first interview of television with Anthony Eden. You know, good afternoon sir, it is very kind of you to grant us the time

in your busy schedule. May I ask you one or two searching questions like what is the name of your wife. It was quite a mockery up to. And this I suppose you can say made things like *That Was The Week That Was* was so enormously important, they were the break through.

John Taylor: Considering the attitude of the government and things at the time he wouldn't have stood a chance, if they'd put their toe into politics. It was the only way that a service like that could possibly survive. The attitude of people like Baldwin, even Atley probably and so on, couldn't conceive that you could have a government controlled thing, well not controlled, a government organisation which could possibly criticise anything. Sorry, you're meant to be talking

Bill Cotton Jr: No, I think we're round to that now. I think that what probably this government's problem is, they can't believe that they have to allow the BBC receive all this public money and the BBC should be in a position to criticise them. They find that to be, they find it to be uncomfortable and something that should be changed

John Taylor: And no government can

What about the time they changed Greene for Hill. That must have caused a certain amount of shaking.

Bill Cotton Jr: No, they didn't change Greene for Hill, what they did, Lord Normanbrook died. Normanbrook was the chairman when Greene was director general. And Normanbrook actually, when people say the governors' interference in programmes recently has been without equal. They're absolutely wrong, the governors have been interfering in BBC programmes from the day they were started. And there's always been a fight between the governors and the executives. There is one marvellous thing in a book called I think *Governing the BBC* in which it says that in Reith's diary, or somebody's diary, it said that no member of the board of governors is presently talking to the director general and fewer are talking to each other. So there has always been this tension within the place.

But the Hill thing was that Normanbrook, who actually said about either *That Was The Week* or *Not So Much A Programme* I forget which one it was, apparently said to Hugh Carlton Greene, I'm going to lunch, either you've taken that

programme of by the time I'm back or I will. So there was no question of interference from the board in that particular case because that's what they did, they just told him to take the programme off, which he did, he took it off. And he gave good reasons for why he'd taken it off, and I've no doubt Normanbrook had good reasons for telling him to take it off.

But when he died Wilson who had long harboured resentment against the BBC for *Yesterday's Men* among other things, thought up a nice little wheeze of I know how to bring them to heel, I will appoint the present chairman of the IBA to be the chairman of the BBC. And Hill was transferred.

And it is interesting that the parties were close enough together for Wilson to genuinely believe that the next Conservative minister who was a politician would be on his side when it came to the running of the BBC. And the consensus then in politics was such that he genuine thought I'll put a politician in there, he'll understand what I want and he'll get it, he'll give it to me.

And I remember when Hill arrived at the BBC, we were all invited to a small tea party, certain members of the senior staff were. And we asked him, and this has all been said before and I've no doubt you'll have it else where in your archives, but this marvellous thing that directly it was announced Hugh Carlton Greene went on 6 weeks leave, took all the leave that was due to him and just left. As it happens so were the senior staff of television staff away and Attenborough was the most senior member there and Hill presented himself to have a little look round 2 days after he had been appointed. So David Attenborough went down to meet him and when he said how have the staff taken my appointment, David Attenborough said it was a bit like the 8th Army being told that you'd fought very well under Montgomery, we now have a new general for you and his name is Rommel. And there was a lot of that going on at the time.

And I remember at this teaparty we had, he made it very clear at least that I've never taken a job on which I haven't left my mark. And Wheldon who had put this tea party together said you mean you will be personally interfering in the running of the organisation. He said I cannot see a situation where the chairman is not involved rather than interfering but involved with the running of

the organisation over which he is the chairman. And he said you must make out of that what you will.

And then he said, and I always remember this bit, because I didn't tell a lie, but it was a slight exaggeration, and he said you must understand you have a lot to learn, for example I doubt whether anybody in this room would ever last long working for Lew Grade, given that he had been chairman of the IBA and had been slightly taken in by Lew. And I said well if that is the case why does he keep on phoning me up and offering me a job. And he looked at me and said who are you and I told him who I was. Oh he said, he's offered you a job, I said he keeps on offering me a job. I said I wouldn't work for him if he was the last man on earth to work for, because first of all I don't think he is very good. After that he and I got on alright actually, he used to go oh no.

SIDE 4, TAPE 2

Bill Cotton Jr: He said to us that none of us would last long working for Lew Grade to which I said why does he keep on offering me a job. He said he offered you a job and I said yes, almost every day, or every week I get the offer of a job and the reason I won't work for him is I don't think he is very good. And by and large the BBC at that time in terms of entertainment were giving ITV a trouncing and I could see no reason at all not to make sure, to hide our lamp under a bushel. And he and I got on fine after that.

John Taylor: He settled in after that

Bill Cotton Jr: He was like a converted Catholic. He was a BBC person. Where Wilson made a colossal mistake was the man had come out of the BBC, he was the radio doctor, he knew all about the BBC. And of course once he went back, being chairman of the IBA was ok but it was not half the international job that to be the chairman of the BBC, the BBC chairman can go anywhere in the world and he's a figure. Whereas chairman of the IBA they don't even know who he is in Birmingham. It's a very, very big difference.

And old Charlie Hill he knew the difference and my god he revelled in it, he loved it. He had his nice little flat up in Broadcasting House so he could stay the night and live in the West End of London and he went round and saw things. And he was an extraordinary chap, I remember once he came to a show and said can you tell me why my wife who has never had an evil thought in her life, why does she laugh at that dreadful Frankie Howerd. I said probably because he's funny. But he used to, he was a very real character and I don't think he ever damaged the BBC badly.

It is very difficult to damage the BBC too badly because by and large it's like a big sponge, it can absorb all the punishment it gets from anybody and eventually it turns you slowly round, you get tired and you start to do roughly what it's there to do. The BBC, as you obviously gather from what I'm saying, the BBC to me is one of the great ideas in the world, it has a great basic proposition, pure money from a customer to make programmes to his satisfaction and his education, it's a pure idea and when

run properly by people who understand that they are servants to that idea is undefeatable

John Taylor: Even today.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, I think the people are doing it a bit wrong. I think they have got a lot wrong in certain areas, they have ideas above their station. But they'll go and other people will come in and there'll be great people who will turn up who will use it because it's a great idea. At the moment they're too busy playing, I remember the director general, whose a great friend of mine, or has been in the past, I don't know whether he is now, once saying that he was running a billion pound business which is a load of rot. He'd get eaten alive if he was running a business, he's not capable of running a business. What he is running is a service that receives a billion pounds which is very different from a business. A business you don't know how much you're going to receive and that's part of the trick. You've got to make it. So I think at the moment they're a bit off course

John Taylor: What about the pressures from outside.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well if you want to give in to the pressures, there will always be pressures on you. If you receive a billion pounds of public money you will have pressures. And it depends which way you want to react to them. You've got to react. My last 4 years at the BBC as managing director of television were 4 of the most wretched years of my life, I hated it, because by and large my job was to try and divert as much as I could all the political shrapnel away from the programme makers. And I think I succeeded in going that in many ways.

And the reason that Thatcher's onslaught on to the BBC which undoubtedly was there didn't work because by and large we were producing such good programmes, how could she say we were dreadful when everybody was watching what we were doing and enjoying it.

Now at the moment they've gone over towards news and current affairs and that's a very dodgy area to get into, no one's really interested in them, apart from anything else. Every now and again, you want a decent news service and decent reporting because if there's a crisis on, but day to day people want to watch television for

entertainment and to make the quality of their lives a bit better. That type of thing, not to hear one person pontificating after another. Even now how many times, you hear what the news is from these places, how many people have they got scattered all over the world sending all these reports in. And in the end they're only telling you what you know what you're told what the news is. And it seems to me a colossal waste of money to have all these bureaus and people charging around doing what.

And I've always believed and still do that the people who want to turn the BBC into that type of service are the ones who don't know how to do the other side. Because it is easy to do news and current affairs, very easy to do it, you just keep booking people to be editors. Reporting news is just what it says it is, isn't it, you go out and you find out and you take whatever the news is. And it depends what, if the Chinese all of a sudden invaded Japan at the moment, all of a sudden you'd find that the Iraqi war became page two. And that's actually what happens with news, it just moves around. And it is easy to do, the administration of it is very difficult but you don't have to be very creative to do it.

Whereas the creative side of the BBC are doing plays and comedy and documentary and these type of things where you really have got to sit down and work out, you know, from a blank piece of paper what you're going to do, that's an entirely different kettle of fish and very few of them want to get involved in it, because it is quite hard work and you do it wrong you don't half get hurt, you know.

John Taylor: This is Birt is it

Bill Cotton Jr: I don't know. By and large it is the way, the director general in the end is the person who is the chief editor and he is responsible for which way the BBC goes I think, and I think they've got it wrong, but I don't think I ought to go too far into that.

Getting back to the stage we were in, I was still in the entertainment business, wasn't I.

The sort of shows we were doing were really what the title variety sums up, it is called variety because it's meant to be a variety of things on one, in one theatre, you went and you saw a juggler and a singer and a comedian and trick

cyclist and whatever, whatever. And that if you like was the same type of thing as the variety department became when I was involved in it at the BBC. And we did all sorts of shows out of variety, we did the obvious ones like *Morecambe And Wise* which every body understands perfectly well, *Morecambe And Wise* were basically theatre trained comedians who adapted themselves to television in a most brilliant way. And in my entire career I suppose I probably stood on Everest and looked over a colleagues shoulder maybe once or twice. And certainly once was *Morecambe And Wise*, the Christmas shows with Morecambe and Wise were about the most important things that were happening to television over that period, and it was very heady and wonderful stuff. And what was good about it was that the two boys actually worked very hard at it. It wasn't a fake show, a lot of people can be popular for a short while and if you actually scratch it you don't see much talent you think god almighty, later you can look at it and think how did they get away with that. It wasn't very good and it wasn't properly rehearsed and it was chucked on. But you can look at a Morecambe and Wise show now and you'll just look, and I still wonder at the work they put into it, some of those dance routines they did, and the sketches, they were beautifully rehearsed and beautifully thought out, I have enormous pride in the fact that I was involved in it, albeit in quite obviously only in a neighbourly way.

So getting them from ITV was funny. Because they'd been on the BBC and done a show called *Running Wild* which was one of the great disasters of the time. They went to ITV and did a few series of half hour shows and they were just beginning to break through. And I'd seen one or two of them and quite liked them and I realised that the half hour format was not actually any good for Eric any longer, because Eric needed time, he needed time to be able to do his business. I mean Eric was getting 10 seconds out of looking at you. And by and large what they needed was longer time. And Michael Grade actually phoned me up, who was then working at London Management, and Billy Marsh who was their agent was away at the time, and the boys had said they weren't going to work for his uncle at ATV for the same money again and they wanted a rise and they wanted a decent rise, because they thought. Lew didn't take them seriously. Michael phoned me and I was up there within minutes and sat down and made them an offer they couldn't refuse.

And they didn't and they came to us, and it was the use of BBC1 and BBC2. They were actually on BBC2 first. We made the shows and put them on BBC2 and then showed them on BBC1 6 months later. That way I could pay them, because the policy of the BBC is that you got paid the same whether you worked on BBC1 or BBC2. That way I could pay them considerably more than ITV even if they doubled their money were going to be able to pay them, because I could guarantee them a repeat which ITV couldn't at the time, guarantee that, they might have repeated them but they couldn't guarantee it. So that's how I got the money.

And of course I'm talking about a time when the definition of complete privacy was a programme on BBC2. There weren't too many viewers, but it didn't really matter to us, we got them and were able to pay them.

So they came and they stayed and they stayed with us until actually until I went to BBC1 as a controller of BBC1. And I understand that Eric said well Bill Cotton's looked after himself so we better look after ourselves and they went for a massive offer from Thames Television which included a film. And it was just like a divorce to me. I was lying in bed ill in the Bel Air Hotel in Beverly Hills when I was told they'd gone. And I lay there and thought I now know what a divorce is like and I couldn't bring myself to actually, I couldn't bring myself to talk to them. Not least because I had, I believed I had when I left, this was January they went, and the Christmas thing, although I admit we both had had too much to drink and Eric said we've had this enormous offer you know. I said how much is it for. And he told me and I said alright, I will match it but I want 3 years and I don't want to hear you mention money again. And he said alright fine. That was it. And I thought I'd saved it. But I think I was then that Thames threw this film in which we couldn't match. And in the end, life is like that, there was no reason at all why they shouldn't go. It's not World War 3 if they got a better offer somewhere else. I was silly. It was just that I, it was like the end of an era. I'd changed my job and this seemed to be nearly a harbinger of worst problems. So that was them Other shows

Sp: When you said you made them an offer, did you have to refer this kind of thing upwards or were you able to do that entirely on your own bat

Bill Cotton Jr: I was meant to refer, I didn't. If I'd referred everything, we would never have got anything. And of course I suppose I'd have to say subconsciously I realise that's how Wardman got my father. And this is one of the problems at the moment at the BBC, if you have too firm a financial control everywhere by bureaucrats, then in the end you will not allow people who have the talent to book and the talent to produce, they will get stifled. In

truth I don't think I ever referred anything. I always used to mention it that evening that I'd done it. It never came as a shock to them, I didn't deceive them, I just didn't refer until I'd done it. Then I'd say I have actually booked these people, and I explained why. In the end I knew they wouldn't fire me, but I always used to say if you don't agree with me you have the option to fire me.

John Taylor: But you knew the limits anyway

Bill Cotton Jr: You won't find too many people walking around the business saying Bill Cotton was an easy touch. Morecambe and Wise, I made them this offer. There was a raising of the eyebrows and when I explained how I worked it out by doing the guaranteed repeat from BBC2 to BBC1 which gave BBC2, a thing that they got these comedians. And I said it is very, very expensive for the first year unquestionably. It is mind blowing for the first year. I said I think it is about right for the second year and if I'm right the third year you've got the biggest bargain, and if I tell you the third year they were working for us for I think it was £2 ½ thousand pounds and the lowest offer they were being made was 10, that was the lowest offer that ITV were offering. And I had to go to 10 to get them for the fourth year. And there was no question. And the price that they were talking about that they went for was 20. But, and you have to put that all in the context of the time when we were doing this, those were big sums, big sums of money and 2 ½ thousand pounds for Morecambe and Wise in the third year was peanuts, absolute peanuts. And Ernie used to tell me every time he appeared, he used to come and say of course you really caught us didn't you. And I said I didn't do anything of the sort. You signed. I have to tell you, I never, I thought I would do well, I never dreamt that the thing would sky rocket like this. And indeed I'm not sure that I didn't make some concession, and I'm not sure that in the last year we didn't pay them 5. But I remember the actual price was 2, 250 and 2,5 over 3 years and I'm not sure we didn't put it up.

So I did know what I was doing in those things and I was very careful to keep, although even just recently when you do these jobs you've got to have, there are certain things that you have to realise. You have to know the difference between workaday people, people who are good, who need the work, they need you, you need them and there is a price for them. And it's a proper price that you pay.

Then you have got the really good things that you have to negotiate for and you have to be very careful and you have to go up. And there are also things that are crucial to you that you just can't put a price on, you can't afford to lose them, it doesn't matter what you pay, you've got to pay it. Morecambe and Wise would come into that category. When I paid them £20,000, the next highest fee in the BBC was probably something like £7,500.

And recently when I came back to the television service, I was deputy managing director in 1982 and they appointed Aubrey Singer to run the television service and there is no point in me staying, Aubrey and I were contemporaries and if they wanted him to run it I quite understood it but there was no real place for, I was an embarrassment for Aubrey, in as much as I didn't want to work for Aubrey. I like him but I didn't want to work for him. So I said I'd go.

And they created a job called Managing Director DBS, I was unique, I must be the only person whose ever had a managing directorship at the BBC created for him which died directly they took me back to the television service. They didn't bother to keep it going they just wrapped it up. And I started a managing directorship at the BBC people with 3 people and I finished it with 3 people. And people often said nobody else, every body else would have created a whole staff and I wouldn't have anything to do with that. I know what there is to do and 3 of us can do this. But I was obviously on board of management at that time and I was a very senior member of staff. And it was a very imaginative thing done by Stuart Young who later became the chairman. He said if you want to keep Bill Cotton you've got to actually make him something that stops him being if you like seen to be junior to people who he can't afford to be junior to. And that is what they came up.

But what I was going to say was when I came back, the first thing I was told was that we would get no more of *Yes Minister*, and Tony Jay had said that the trouble with the BBC was it didn't understand market forces and he wasn't going to sit down and write these plays for the dribbling money the BBC decided they were going to pay him. He would use that time to earn a great deal more money and as far as he was concerned his fee for writing the scripts would be umm and that the then head of entertainment came in and

said I'm sorry Bill that is out of the question, we cannot pay that, that is twice as much as we've ever paid any writer to write anything and it will completely shatter the structure. He went on and on and on.

I said to him would you ask Tony Jay to come in, and that I did not intend to lose *Yes Minister*. Now the reason I didn't intend to lose it was that it was the, now I'm not as green as I'm cabbage looking, and I realised it was the one show that the BBC had that Thatcher kept saying was brilliant. And Thatcher was quite the flavour of the month at the time and everybody thought that she was god's gift. It was an internationally known show.

John Taylor: Then

Bill Cotton Jr: Oh yes, the prime minister of India went out of her way to say to Alasdair Milne that she was appalled to find out that the BBC wouldn't sell and could she have, could she do a deal with him, India wanted *Yes Minister*. Like an idiot he didn't phone me, I was then chairman of Enterprises, and say what is all this about. I would have told him certainly we'd sell it. We wished to sell the package with it in and that's called business. And he sold it separately. Anyway it didn't matter.

I was not about to lose it. And so what I was being asked to pay was this enormous amount of money for 6 shows. When you're put in that corner the only thing you can do is make the best of a bad job. You're going to have to have it. Now the art is, if you like to me, is to say how many of these can I get because what you want is bulk.

So when Tony Jay came in with his business about market forces and all this and that, he really came in to tell me that no he would not negotiate with me, and he was not going to have a penny less, because he knew perfectly well he'd asked a price which was out of the question. And so I said to him Tony, you're perfectly right, the problem with the BBC is that we don't understand market forces and I'm actually in for the market forces bit and I'll pay you that amount of money for the thing and I'd like 26 by Christmas please. He said whh, ahhh, I said yes, 26 by Christmas. You've set your price, you're not working on the BBC's normal thing of we make what we want to make and we pay the sort of prices, you have that nice arrangement. You're into market forces, I'm into market forces, I said you're the

force, I'm the market and I want 26. And can I have them by Christmas and we're wasting time, can you start writing now. And he said hold on, he said wow, wow, wow, I never said. No, I said, you said you've a price for your product. I want your product Tony, and I have to tell you I'm not going to be bugged about here. You made a price, I'll make it very public that I've made you this, you've asked for this money and I've offered it you and if you're telling me you're a prick teaser and you can't actually deliver, then I have a problem with you. And I said I've known you a long time and I don't intend that problem to stand in front of my career, let's be clear about it.

So in the end I ended up with 16 shows over two years, but I got out of 6 and I got 16 for the same money. It is a lot of money but it will earn its money back without any question at all. And anybody, and when the head of entertainment at the time said to me, I'm going to have trouble with writers I said send them up, send them up to me. If they can show me the international implications and the prime minister thinks this and the enormous audience this thing gets, very, very prestigious, if they can show that I'll pay it to them. I can't afford not to.

Unfortunately not many are in that position, unfortunately for them and fortunately for us. And when you do these things it is recognising those three levels. And being fairly consistent within those 3 levels and being able to look a man in the eye and say look, you and I are both the same, not too many people want us, he's a bit different, a lot of people want him. You and I have actually to take what we can get and he takes what he can get and he can get more than you and I. And once you've explained that to people you'd be amazed. And I never had a query about paying Morecambe and Wise and I never had a query about booking Tony Jay

Let's just move onto the *Top Of The Pops* thing, I think *Top Of The Pops* is interesting because if you remember there was *6.5 Special* had started with the kind of people dancing and I was a kind of very good onlooker, when I first became a producer we had caravans in the carpark behind the design block, which is all that had been built of Television Centre, and a whole lot of light entertainment producers had these caravans which I have to say Max Bygraves and my father used to link up to the back of his Bentley and try and tow away every now and again. But *6.5*

Special was invented by Josephine Douglas and had, hold on, who was the other man who produced it, oh dear, this is what comes of age, isn't it. I'll think of his name in a minute as well. But it was the first of these shows where everybody was allowed to just go wild around the studios and the cameras just followed them, and you got a lot of cameras in shot and this was the first time it had been done. Jack Good, Jack Good is the man who actually invented *6.5 Special* and it was the breakthrough in pop music.

Then there was *Juke Box Jury* and then ITV had a programme called *Ready Steady Go* which went on a Friday night, it was the weekend start to the air, *Ready Steady Go*. One day we were sitting at weekly review and the figures for this show were very dominating in terms of pop music. And Baverstock said to me you can't even beat *Ready Steady Go* as a programme. And I went home and thought about this and decided to do a programme called *Top Of The Pops* where the only way you could get onto it was if you were in the Top 20. And it was at a time when you could do that because by and large most of the Top 20 was made up of British records. It was the Beatles time, the Beatles were around, and of the top 20, 16, 17, maybe 14, by and large in that area were British songs and the performers were available to be booked. So I got hold of Johnny Stewart, well first of all I told Donald Baverstock I'd got this show. And he said oh, I was only really joking. I said you may be joking but Thursday, 7 o'clock I will give you a show. And it will be the top of the pops

And he said you think you can make it work. And I said I think I can. He said let's look into it. And then they came back from planning and said they hadn't got a studio for it. I said anywhere. They said you can do it from Dickinson Rd in Manchester if you like, which was a converted church. I said fine, we'll do it from Dickenson Rd, Manchester. I got hold of Johnny Stewart and I said I wanted him to produce this. He went away and came back and said I don't think this is, from Manchester, will people go to Manchester. I said look, we're an itinerant profession, and by and large you will go where the work is. I think they will. He said can I call it *Pick Of The Pops*. And I said no you can't call it *Pick Of The Pops* because I knew what he was talking about, we'd end up with just anybody who was available.

So anyway we started this *Top Of The Pops* programme in this church in, and I realised either it was going to be successful within 6 weeks or it was going to be off. And within the 6 weeks Bryan Epstein phoned me and said I like this programme that you're doing there. I wonder whether you would like to play one of the boys records, you know the Beatles. So I said if they turn up to perform it. He said don't be silly, if they came to Dickinson Rd in Manchester there would be a riot. And I said yes, that's right. That's what I had in mind. They came and we didn't have a riot but we had an enormous amount of publicity and the programme never looked back. And here we are now in 1990, and this has got to be 1963, 1962, and there it is, it will certainly get to 1992 I would have thought, so it will be a very long running programme. And I only wish I'd put it in the wife's name.

There is another one, among the other programmes, as I say if you take Morecambe and Wise being one part of variety, *Top Of The Pops* being another type, of pop music. Then there was *The Frost Report* which was more your sketch comedy done with a front man and people illustrating sketches. It's a very popular type of method. And David had done *That Was The Week* and *Not So Much A Programme*. But those were done for current affairs, they weren't done for entertainment, they were done within the current affairs department. And Alasdair Milne and Donald Baverstock had created this team who were really very much the same team who had done *Tonight*, the programme which was used to close the toddlers truce.

And he was free and he wasn't actually very employable, come to think of it I don't think he could get himself arrested at the time. And I saw him once and I said I'll do a show with you but I don't want hear what your opinions are, I just want you to do what you're told. Jimmy Gilbert will be the producer and he will have the last word on any of the material which goes into it. And we put it on on 5 past 9 on the Thursday and it was instantly successful. It just worked very well. It had a marvellous supporting cast, Corbett and Barker, John Cleese, Julie Felix.

And it was, one of the interesting parts of it after about two series I said to David, it's going well, I think we'll enter it for Montreux this year. And he looked at his watch, as his is way, and said it is now 20 to 3 on the 17th whatever and we have just won Montreux. And by god he

did. And he is a remarkable person David, I'm very fond of him. And I admire him tremendously. I know David Cook said of him, Peter Cook said of him once, the only thing I really believe that I've done in life that is inditable is that I once saved David Frost from drowning. Anyway that was that type of programme we developed.

Then there was, I was also interested in talk shows, when I'd gone to America to look over the *Perry Como Show* I'd seen the *Jack Parr Show* late at night in America. Indeed I was there when he walked off which was a wonderful pantomime. He told some joke that they considered to be unsuitable and they cut and he objected to it. And he waited until the network was in, he started at 11 and the whole network went in by half past 11 and the show was perfectly normal till half past 11 and at half past 11 he said right you're all around, he said I have to tell you that I've been told that I did some material last night which was not acceptable to the British public, to the American public. He then started to cry as I remember it and said I have never done anything that I am ashamed of and I find myself in an impossible position and I'm leaving the show. I want to thank every body who has been part of this show for what they have done for me and I'm afraid there is nothing more for me to say. These people I begged them to let me a normal cross section of the public see this material and if they voted it out, then fine, and off he walked. And of course I could see it happening in Britain but I wasn't quite prepared for what happened.

Hugh Downes the announcer immediately took over and kept the adverts going, here is this bottle of beer or whatever it is that we all drink. He then went round the studio talking about it to everybody, everybody was asked, and on this particular show was a man called Orson Bean and he launched into a savage attack upon the hierarchy of NBC saying who are these faceless people who have done this to this wonderful man, I mean how dare they, who are they, who cares about them, who cares what they think. And he really rampaged on. And a little French girl on the programme, what are they doing to my poor Jacques, oh my poor Jacques, what have they done to him. And this went on for about an hour. I was absolutely and my eyes were out like organ stops with this pantomime went on. And eventually they got round, they'd asked the band leader what he thought about it and he said hoped Jack would reconsider. And they asked various people, and then they went down the audience.

And eventually they came to a man I can only describe as an American taxi driver sitting there with his arms folded. He said I don't know what I think about Jack Parr leaving, what I want to know why is Orson Bean still sitting there if he feels about it, why doesn't he go to. By now Orson Bean has kind of thought maybe he was a little previous and premature and over the top in making this criticism of the hierarchy of NBC and he tried to back track. And this taxi driver, or taxi driver type wouldn't have any of it. He kept on saying you said that these people are grey faces, no, no, what I meant was they'd made a grey decision. They are very talented people who run NBC. And it was an absolute pantomime. It was wonderful.

And the following day I went into the Perry Como offices and I said what about that last night. And they said oh well, he'll go down to Florida, and he'll stay at this hotel and he'll have a holiday and **Zarnof** who runs NBC will come down and stay in Florida at that hotel, they will meet in this hotel and he will be back on the air in a fortnight's time with a couple of million more people watching. And that is about what happened.

But I was very, very struck obviously with that type of programming and I first did it with Simon Dee, and we had an enormous success with Simon. Simon Dee actually was a very considerable property and I, it is difficult to say he was a performer, he wasn't but he was a man of his time, he was a man of that particular 60s period, and old people liked him and the young liked him and he covered the years and he seemed to be the quintessence of this change, in the clothes he wore, and he look good and he was outspoken and he was inquisitive. And we had many fights Simon and I, and he was like having a young unruly brother but eventually, and we had a 3 year contract, and half way through the second year I really did believe he was here to stay and he would be a major broadcasting figure for the rest of his life if he was clever.

And unfortunately he decided he wanted to go. I heard that he had been attracted by ITV and he had also become very, very undisciplined and unruly. And his agent came to me with him and said that they had had an offer for £1000 a show from London Weekend Television. And I was paying him £250 a show at the time. And he said what is your counter offer. And I said £200 a show. And the agent's saying hold

on, Bill you're paying him more than that now. And I said yes, I want to be absolutely sure that he wants to stay. And they said this is your final offer. I said yes, I think it's my final offer. And he went.

Now I do blame myself a bit maybe but I knew that unless I paid more money I was never going to hear the end of I could have got this, I could have got that if I'd gone. And if I'd have paid more money he would have just become more and more unmanageable. And that proved to be right, he went to ITV and vanished without trace after about 13 shows. And I think it is a great tragedy and he has often blamed me for it, and I know he has and he does. I still think he believes I should have done something. I'm not quite sure what I should have done, but there you are. But anyway he did 3 years at the BBC and I got a taste for that kind of programme.

And some time later, probably about 3 years later, maybe longer, Parkinson came to see Tony, who I'd appointed, I'm terrible with names, but the man I'd appointed assistant head of light entertainment, to look after, who had been a great planner, who had been the right hand man of Paul Fox, when he was controller of programmes, and later went with Paul to Yorkshire as a matter of fact. I invited him to run light entertainment really because he knew where the bodies were buried in planning and that's what I wanted. Tony Preston his name is, he was killed in a car crash, he was a super bloke. And he had, Parkinson called in on him, he'd known Parkinson, Parkinson just called in to have a conversation and he came into my office. And I don't know within about literally I should think of half an hour of him being in the office I said to him would you like to do a later night chat show on Saturday. And he said I would die for it. So I said OK fine.

I went up to see Paul Fox and Paul Fox said Parkinson, we had him on *24 Hours*, he's idle, don't touch him, he's idle. I didn't ask you what the man's like, I asked you whether you, because you remember Paul came from current affairs, Paul was the head of current affairs before he was controller, I said just because you haven't got people who know how to handle people doesn't mean to say that I don't have people who know how to handle people. And so anyway, to cut a long story short, because Paul and I were great mates, he said well it's up to you, on your own head be it. So we did I think 8 years with Parky and they were good years and they were the forerunner of most of the talk shows here, that that type of talk show, he was the first person to do it.

And I was very sad actually that he got, he got himself into a degree, he got muddled up in TVAM which was a decent

thing to want to do, and he went to Australia but all things come round and I think I'm doing a show with him for BSB in October this year. So there you are

Sp: Can I just ask you about a phrase you used just now, the toddlers' truce

Bill Cotton Jr: At one time the BBC used to close down wasn't it from 6 till 7, they went off the air so people could put their children to bed. Because the idea was that no child would go to bed when television was on, so they just closed the network down

Sp: That was while the BBC was still a monopoly

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, and when they closed up that time it was closed up with a programme called *Tonight* which was invented by Grace Wyndham-Goldie and produced by Donald Baverstock, from a programme that, based on a programme that they'd previously done called *Highlight*. That's how it started.

BILL COTTON JR

SIDE 5, TAPE 3

12 October 1990

Bill Cotton Jr: We're going from Montreux. The Swiss invented this Montreux festival for entertainment and I think it is very sad, so the Swiss invented Montreux and I think it is very sad that we don't have a here a festival of our own of kind other the Eurovision Song Contest every now and again, because the Swiss got entertainment, and the Italians with the Prix Italia got drama and music and documentaries.

But the Montreux Festival itself has grown and become quite a major event in the calendar for entertainment people. We didn't enter it, the BBC didn't enter it in the first instance but we went in I think in the second year, and the programme that was entered was *The Black And White Minstrel Show*. Now *The Black And White Minstrel Show* had come about because George Innes had volunteered to do it at the radio show, they used to do a television programme every now and again and all the machinery used to break down and the audience used to get in the way, so none of us particularly wanted to do programmes. But then George had volunteered to do this programme that he had his mind set on, a minstrel show. We all thought it was a terrible idea, we thought it was a terrible show until the audience reaction came back which said that they loved it. So we all changed our minds and it went on forever. But he took it to Montreux and by then he had perfected it with the music and the dance and the girls and the men and the scenery. And it was a very, very clean and very well thought out musical shaner really. And it walked it, it got the Golden Rose, and they all came back, peace in our time, waiving this Golden Rose at every body. And after that we took it very seriously

John Taylor: This is when you were head of light entertainment.

Bill Cotton Jr: While Tom Sloan was head. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was put in by Eric Maschwitz who thought it was wonderful when he was head of light entertainment. And then Montreux was then fully supported

by Tom Sloan after that and we took all sorts of programmes.

John Taylor: You were head of variety at the time.

Bill Cotton Jr: Not during the *Black And Whites*, I was just a producer, I was just another producer.

John Taylor: Were you a producer for *Black And White* at all

Bill Cotton Jr: No, no, that was George Innes, George Innes did that. And so eventually it went on. We did quite well, we've been robbed many times we've always believed. Marty Feldman, everybody thought he was going to win and he didn't. Not with us. He won later with the ITV companies doing a very similar show. And I think that the jury at Montreux that year were ashamed of themselves because his was by far away the best show, and every body kept saying it will be the winner, it will be the winner. And in the end on a split vote the Swiss to their enormous embarrassment won with a thing called *Holiday Time* which was dreadful, and one can only assume it was a fairly political vote on the basis that the BBC always win everything, which is just not true actually. The BBC don't win everything because people make sure the BBC don't win everything.

Anyway, we've had a lot of decent amount of success there, things like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and various other programmes have been put in to great effect. The one that I was most involved in was *The Frost Report*, having started *The Frost Report* as head of variety after I'd done a couple of seasons I said to David that I it would be a good idea to enter it in for Montreux. And he looked at his watch and he said the time is now 11 o'clock on Thursday whatever the date was and we have just won Montreux. And sure to his word, true to his word, we put it into Montreux and it got the Golden Rose and it got the comedy award. And the press prize, sorry, it would have got the comedy award but in those days you weren't allowed to win all three, you are now and programmes have done it. So we won it with David.

It was a fascinating experience. I was on the jury actually, and I remember this Russian sitting opposite me and it was the height of the Cold War and he nodded at me when he put his vote in. And I wasn't sure what it was that he expected in return, but it seemed to me he wanted

something in return. And sure enough there was a sort of a lobby for the Russian programme, and god help us all, I think we all voted for it for the Golden Rose, and it was about a department store and it was incomprehensible. It went on until it finished sort of thing. They were told they could only do 60 minutes, but at 59 they just stopped shooting it, right in the middle as far as I could gather of the story and what have you, but one way or another they had enough votes with Iron Curtain countries, and there were one or two people who felt that by voting for Russians would keep the Russians in and that seemed to be important.

It was quite extraordinary, I remember going one year and the Russian leader of delegation was a marvellous fellow, and we took him out and got him drunk most nights. And he told wonderful, wonderful stories, and he loved it. And the next year we all turned up and went looking for the Russians to find our friend Ivan or whatever his name was, and he didn't exist. I mean it shows the stupidity of totalitarian type regimes. Instead of saying he'd got a cold and leaving it at that, they just denied that he'd ever existed, that he was anybody, that he'd ever been there. They didn't know what we were talking about, and they all moved out the hotel and went down the road. I mean it was extraordinary, it was quite, it worried me actually a bit, it was one of those things that when you come, diplomats and all these people have it all the time but I'd never actually, I'd never actually been confronted with the appalling idea that somebody just did not exist and that there were people who were prepared to lie in their teeth and say it. And I suppose that's all part of the package, that you're told he doesn't exist.

And since then I've met, a man called **Vashta** I met in Hungary, who was, when the Hungarians were being, just before the Russians entered, they were being very free and very liberal. And when the Vashta who was a very good director, was just stripped of all his work, he wasn't allowed to work at all. He just had to go every day and collect his money to get enough food to live on from some place, some state place. And even then I used to ask after him with the Hungarian delegations and they didn't know him. They didn't say he didn't exist, they just said they hadn't heard about him at all. And eventually one young girl I remember came up and in a darkened bar in Montreux, it was very weird, you see it on the pictures and you think it doesn't happen, she just sat next to me and said you

always ask after Vashta Mr Cotton. I said yes, he is a friend of mine and I said I would like to see him again, will he ever come here again. She said he will not, he will not work again, they will not let him work. Please do not, I just tell you, but he is well, he is fit. But he is destroyed. But it is very interesting that in the world there are those type of occasions, they're obscene actually, the obscenity of it is just awful. But there you are

John Taylor: Montreux was important was it

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, it was much more important to the people who were there than it was to the people who weren't. When you're in Montreux even now you think we must win, who is going to get this and who is going to get that. But when you get home nobody gives a damn one way or another whether you've won it or whether you haven't won it. There was a time when it used to get a bit of press coverage but it gets very little press coverage now. The press all go down there but they use it to write the stock in trade type of gutter press stuff stories, they're always looking for a bit of dirt.

John Taylor: But in the television industry it's important.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. I think people like to win it. And I remember taking Morecambe and Wise and they were determined they wanted to go. And I kept saying you won't win it, there is no way they will vote a British star show which is mainly to do with talk and that type of cross over comedy. But they insisted on coming. So I said if you want to come, I mean come. And I remember I put *Monty Python* in that year or *Concoran* and I put the boys in because they wanted to go.

And we all went over there and they showed the show and it was quite well received. I think Benny Hill was on the same, I think Thames put Benny Hill in. And there was a marvellous show also, an American show. When it came to the voting there was a leak, or they said there was a leak which said Morecambe and Wise had won, Benny Hill had come second and the Americans had come third. And I said that is out of the question. They could not possibly vote for three programmes in the English language, by two British and one American, out of the question, it doesn't work like that.

But they convinced Eric and kept on being cancellations of when the announcement was made, and they convinced Eric that he'd had won. And Eric was jumping about the place accepting congratulations from everybody and Ernie was sitting there with me saying you don't think so. I said I'm bloody certain, let alone think, I know we haven't won.

And of course when they came to the announcement they announced the bronze first, the third first, and they said it was Norway. And Ernie ran to the funicular, he just turned and ran, Eric stood there and just looked, and they said the second was Polish, and the first was the American show, the American show won it. Poor old Philip Jones was heart broken, he really thought he was in there with a chance with Benny Hill.

Eric was stunned and I remember we walked along the river, the lakeside and we came to a restaurant which is no longer there I regret to say, because it was a nice restaurant, they used to serve perch there, perch and chips. And there was, as I remember, I think it was Bill Ward, I'm not sure if Brian Tesler was there or not, Philip Jones was there nearly in tears. And we all arrived and it was like a wake, and then we joined them and then Eric started to be funny and there were howls of laughter coming from these tables as Eric was just performing at his best. And all the continentals said if the British are like this when they lose what are they like when they win.

It was good. It is a good place, it still is a decent place for people to meet up. It has become more of a market place now than what it was invented for, which was the meeting place of producers so they could talk to each other and exchange gossip and technical advances and methods of production. It was very idealistic when it started as most things Swiss are, but they all end up in what it is, and now it is much more of a market place.

John Taylor: Which shows did you win at Montreux with

Bill Cotton Jr: I forget to be honest. We won *The Frost Report*, you would have to check with the BBC, I'm getting old now and we had so many we nearly won with and I'm trying to remember which other ones won the Golden Rose

John Taylor: Did *Python* win at all.

Bill Cotton Jr: The trouble with *Python* was that I'd shown *Concoran* the year before and I put it in the following year and another three programmes turned up which were copies of it and the Viennese one won, and that was called *Somebody's Fleamarket* I remember, and he kept going round saying I have never seen *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. And he said it to me and I said I bet you haven't. He said thank you for agreeing with me. But they never won it. Feldman won it with ITV as I said. I know that. And I can't remember, it would be interesting actually to ask the BBC some time.

And it is quite interesting to maybe talk to somebody like Tapolet, who ran it for many years who is the Swiss man. Because old Frank Tapolet who like most Swiss is all things to everybody. We had the most marvellous, when he left after 25 years or how many years he was there, we gave him a lunch, the British delegation gave him a lunch, we all took him out for lunch. And he made the most touching speech about how during the war as a Swiss boy he had been kept in touch with the realities of the world by the BBC World Service. He said as you must have realised we were surrounded by the Italians and the Germans what have you, we kept in touch and I'm grateful for all my life for the way the BBC in particular and the British people, and he did a marvellous turn about the British people and we were all very touched.

And the next day I happened to see that he was being taken to lunch by the Germans and we made up the most wonderful speech for him about what a tragedy it was when things went against them all, because by and large I think he spoke German better than he spoke English, but there we are. He is a nice man and I'm sure he meant what he said, but it was very funny the juxtaposition of the two lunches. And as I say he is a man who is a man for all seasons.

John Taylor: Who else did you take, did you take other people than Morecambe and Wise there

Bill Cotton Jr: Oh yes, we used to take whoever we entered, we used to take. David came when we put *The Frost Report* in. We had Corbett and Barker there one year when we put them in. There was a problem actually with Corbett and Barker in as much as my secretary had got it wrong and when we flew them across, when she went to book me for the aeroplane she was told there was no first class, it didn't worry me one way or the other, but I used to fly first

class in those days. And so she said, so when she came to book Corbett and Barker she booked them in business class, I don't think there was, I think it was economy, she booked them the same as she'd booked me. Now what was true was that there was no first class on British Airways but there was on Swiss Air and she had booked them into the economy in Swiss Air.

And when they got on the aeroplane all the ITV delegation were in first class and these two were in economy. And we picked them up, Jimmy Gilbert and I picked them up from the airport and when we got to the other end, I'd driven the car, Jimmy Gilbert came and said there is something wrong with the little fellow. So I said what's wrong with him. What do you mean there's something wrong. He said I don't know, but he is off, he is definitely off. So I said we better find out what the problem is.

But anyway I had arranged that evening, they arrived in the afternoon, to go out with all the British press and producers. And I'd said to them that the economics of the BBC at the time was such that I really found it very difficult when they were on an expense sheet for the BBC to be paying for a dinner for 30 people, and I was perfectly prepared to do the wine and bring the people and fix and arrange it but I would expect them to contribute to the dinner. I mean the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, are very wealthy, they can afford it, and on top of which you know they're charging them anyway. So you might as well get it.

So I had this whip round and that did Ronnie Corbett in absolutely, and he said what is going on here, he really got very indignant. He is a great mate of mine now and I'm very, very fond of him, but he got very indignant and he cleared the room really. They all got so embarrassed, everybody went.

And he and I walked round by the lake, with him getting, he was very, very indignant about it all. And I had to explain to him in words of one syllable, I said you know it's no good your talking like that Ronnie, I have to actually live 52 weeks of the year a) with these people and b) with the fact that they will go back and say to their people the BBC spent umpity ump hundred pounds on a meal for all of us people, aren't they idiots. And their editors will pick it up and they will say to Nigel Dempster why don't you write

a piece about the BBC seem to be getting too much money from the licence fee because they're just throwing it down. And you just have to realise this is my real life. Dealing with you is not my real life. My real life is dealing with them.

So he agreed it in the end. And then we got back to the hotel and every body else had gone back, and Ronnie Barker had gone with Jimmy Gilbert and he went up to his room, Ronnie Corbett, and it was then Jimmy Gilbert came to me and said Ronnie Barker had told him about this thing in the aeroplane. So then I apologised to him. I said it was not intentional, that part of it certainly we would have flown them, so everything ended quite happily.

But it is, when you go away like that, I remember going once with Tom Sloan to do some shows in Sweden and we stopped off in Copenhagen. And Georgia Brown was going to do one of the shows. We were going to do them in colour in Sweden. Sweden wasn't in colour at the time but they'd asked us to come over and make some in colour to give them experience. We did *The Generation Game* with Rolf Harris I think it was and we did 3, not *The Generation Game*, *The Young Generation*. And we did 3 specials at Burns, one was with Georgia Brown, one was with Bassegy I think and one was with somebody like Rolf Harris. But the Georgia Brown, we stopped at Copenhagen, we'd chartered an aeroplane because there were so many of us and the plane had broken down and one of the dancers had phoned her father and said she was frightened and he phoned the director general. We were kept at Copenhagen and Georgia went into the restaurant and ordered a coffee and a bun. And we all queued up and eventually a very arrogant man behind the counter said you have not paid. So she I said yes I have, I gave you the money and there is the change. He said you have not paid. So she said I have paid, and Georgia Brown has got quite a short fuse. And she said don't be rude, just get on with your work. He said I will not serve this group until I am paid. I was by now a bit fed up, I said group, group, what are you talking about group, I'm not a group, I'm an individual. I have my passport and you will bloody serve me. I said now get off, I started to get very angry with this fellow. And Tom Sloan arrived and said I'm in charge of this group, what's happening.

And you always kind of get these very, it's the same in any business, I suppose once you go abroad, once you leave

Dover, you enter into an entirely different world, money is all monopoly money and civilisation stops at Dover. But some of the trips around were, the song competitions were always taken very seriously and people charging around the place. I remember a little man from Spain used to sit behind aspidistras and go pss, pss, you like to take your wife to a holiday in Spain. In the end we had to bar him, there was no question at all, he was bribing you. You are on the jury, you'd like a holiday in Spain. You can bring your wife, I arrange it, very nice sun, I arrange it. You look as you need some sun. And he apparently had got his job because during the war he had been a double agent in Spain, and he happened to be on Franco's side when he won so his reward was he was given broadcasting, or part of broadcasting. But he was a remarkable character, Tapolet, funnily enough, the old Swiss fellow would not sit on the jury with him, he just said I won't sit with that man, he is dishonest. And every body used to take it all that seriously when you look back, but it's not all that serious.

Funnily enough yesterday I was at a lunch for British song writers, and sitting at the lunch was Bill Martin, who wrote *Congratulations* with Roger Greenaway, Roger Greenaway was sitting next to me and Bill Martin, and I was telling them the story that I had told Bill Martin before, that when we were doing that, we did it at the Albert Hall, the Song Contest, and Tom Sloan who had never produced anything in his life and had come up if you like through planning and had become the assistant head of light entertainment to Ronnie Waldman, and then became head of light entertainment was very sure that he could produce it better than anyone else. I can produce it. I don't know why you make all this fuss, I'm going to produce it.

So I took over the shop, I was then his assistant head and he went off to the Albert Hall and got this big office and had Stewart Morris actually producing directing the show, Jim Moir who is now head of light entertainment was the pa on the floor. And do you know, it was an organisational type programme, you needed to organise it and administer it well and Tom was a very good organiser, a very good administrator. So it was going like clock work, it was all going fine, much too well for all the rest of us.

And so I was at the canteen, I said why don't we introduce into the equation a delegation from Albania. And it was

Terry Henebery, Brian Whitehouse and Roger Rawdish. They said fine, I said you get some clothes and we'll go down there and we'll pull their legs. And they came in to see me about 5 o'clock and they were not made up, they were not disguised. They had certainly they had different clothes on and one had a moustache on but it was a very, very minor makeup. And they did look Albanian, no doubt about that. And Roger Rawdish had a girlfriend who worked for the *Daily Sketch* as it was then who could speak Russian, and if you remember the Eastern countries always used to send with their delegations pretty girls over to interpret, and so she was going to be the interpreter. And I said hold on a moment, they got some clothes for me and I said no, I will go and mastermind all this because if there is trouble down there, we've got to be careful. We don't want to do it if we're in the middle of chaos.

But I went down there and everything was going very smoothly and Tom was well there you are, these things are dead easy. And so I pressed the panic button, the button for it to work, and said by the way have you heard from the Albanian delegation. And he said, Tom said Albanian, what Albanian. I said well they all turned up at Television Centre, it's nothing to do with me. I told them to come down here. Albania, it's not even in Europe. I said don't talk to me about it Tom, how would I know, you're in charge of all this. And he said well where are they, I said I don't know.

And I looked out the window, we'd got a Rolls Royce which had been on the Simon Dee Show, which I'd extended the hire of. And they were all getting out of this Rolls Royce, which was absolutely wonderful. I said I don't know but they've certainly got a bob or two, look at the car that they're in. And he looked out of the window and there they all were looking at the building and waving their arms around. And Tom was like this, Albania, and there was a fellow whose name I've just forgotten for a moment but he was in administration at the BBC and Tom had brought him with him to do all the administration with him. And he sat there and he was very efficient this chap and he stood up and said shall I go and handle it Mr Sloan. And he gave the whole thing credibility, because once he said that Tom said yes you handle it and you let me know ba ba ba.

So out he went this chap and out I went following him saying I was going to do a pee. I said just you keep out of

it. You stand over there, it's alright, don't you worry about it. I got hold of Jim Moir and I said you take them in and say Mr Sloan, the Albanian delegation.

Jim Moir knocks on the door and says Mr Sloan the Albanian delegation are here and they wish to see you. And in comes this young girl followed by three of Tom Sloan's producers, in very minimal makeup. And Tom stands up, he was a bit pompous Tom, I loved him dearly, and I miss him a great deal, but he was, and he shook this girl's hand and she said Mr Sloan, you must understand it is a great honour for us to meet you, the head of the BBC and she laid it on with a trowel. And we hear of you a lot and we are delighted to be taking part in this wonderful programme. And he went well now, hold on a minute, I just have to tell you, I'm afraid you are not a part of

And to cut a long story short, because she did it brilliantly this girl, she kept trying to translate in Russian and they kept going ja, ja, ja. And eventually Tom got quite, he said would you please explain to them that Albania is not a part of Europe. Meanwhile I have to say, I am sitting there just looking at this. Jim Moir who is a big fat fellow as you know, he wouldn't like to hear me say it, now is a slim handsome man, but then he was a big fat fellow, and he was in the corner and he was shaking like a jelly, I mean his whole body was shaking like this. And I could see him and Tom had got his back to him, and so had Queenie, Tom's secretary, who later became my secretary. So it goes on, it was marvellous dialogue with Tom getting more and more angry as he said I don't seem to be able to get through to you, that this competition is controlled by Eurovision in Geneva and if you have not been entered. And she said have you any idea Mr Sloan what it will be like for us to go back to our country not having appeared. And do you know what they do to people in Albania when this sort of thing happens. And Tom said well I'm dreadfully sorry for you, I really can't, ask them if they would like a drink and they all went ya. And then she said I would like you to meet them.

Now he walks across. Up to now there was a room's length between them, and now he is shaking hands with his own producers. And they can't look him in the eye so they all bow to the waist and he follows them down, and he bows to the waist. And eventually they're all drinking and she says we must sing you our song, it is a wonderful song, Mr

Sloan. And he said there is no point in your singing it. And she said we must. And she turns round and they all start to sing On Sclafen..... and they're all singing these gobledy gook words to Congratulation. And half way through it Tom is still looking at them, Queenie his secretary looks and says that's Terry Henebery. And it was the most wonderful spoof

John Taylor: What did he say

Bill Cotton Jr: He loved it. He loved it. And my mother was coming up to London from the coast, and I got her picked up and she arrived and he insisted that they did the whole thing for her and acted it all out. I mean it was marvellous. After that I always used to try and make sure that there was in the Eurovision Song Competition about half way through, something to make people laugh.

I once, up in Edinburgh, when we did it in Edinburgh, it was all going far too well and I was actually producing it myself, or not producing, I was overseeing it, we had proper producers, Michael Hurll I think was the producer of it, and I used some people from Scotland and I used some of my own producers that I'd taken up. And Alasdair Milne was then, he was then the Controller of Scotland, and we'd had a hysterical time with the provost of Edinburgh who wasn't at all sure that they wanted this Eurovision Song Contest in their lovely city but in the end they thought they would.

So we had this set up and it was all going very, very well a slight problem about the party and I'd been informed that of course the party would take place after the show finished at half past 10 on Saturday night and therefore drinking would go on through into Sunday and that wasn't allowed. And I said well you've got a problem but it ain't mind. We're having a party and if you've got a stupid rule, law, you'd better sort it out, I said to BBC Scotland. And it was sorted out one way or the other, we weren't too worried.

But I had a producer coming up whose since died and he's a greatly missed man in my life, and he was a great friend of Jim Moir's, his name was Colin Sharman and he was super, he was a super fellow. And he was a very down to earth boy who had been a musician in the brigade of guards and had been in the Salvation Army and he'd worked his way up and he was

a very, very effective producer. And he was coming up to help. So I arranged that he would receive a note from me and the way it worked was that I took a piece of paper with the police heading, a letter sent to me by the police which was just an ordinary note that they'd sent about car parking arrangements, or something like that. And I photographed it with a blank piece of paper over their bit. I then typed on the photograph a letter to Alasdair Milne from the chief of police saying that I was sure that Alasdair Milne understood the situation but if this party went on they would have to have somebody to be arrested so that they could appear in court and answer the charge and they hoped there would be the minimum of disturbance when they did it.

I then did a letter from Alasdair to me saying dear Bill, I'm sure you realise it would be disastrous for a member of the BBC staff who lives in Scotland to be arrested. Is there any chance that you could supply anybody to be arrested on this night.

I then wrote back to Alasdair saying I think this was a bit strong but on the other hand Colin Sharman is a man who has the best interests of the Corporation at heart and I'm sure that he will make himself available on the night. And I then did a note to Colin saying dear Colin sorry about this but I'm sure you understand the situation. And left it for him in his hotel. So he got all this wrapped up when he came in.

I said sorry about that Colin and he said oh well, umm, yes, it will be alright though won't it governor. I said of course it will, of course it will, but take a case with you to the party because they may keep you for a bit and you'll need to have your clothes with you, I should think. I said I don't know what they do in prison these days.

And then there was a situation where a man called Graham Wadsworth who was a personnel officer, who had been a district officer in Africa, took him to one side and said you know I think Bill Cotton is being a bit cavalier about this. I'm not your personnel officer but I've been a district officer and when you leave England things are different and I'm not quite sure whether they actually do it the way they do it in England. Maybe they'll keep you in prison for maybe like a week, who knows.

And then Michael Hurlll was saying things like I wouldn't if I were you, I'd tell Bill Cotton to sling it. And Terry Hughes who was another producer, who is now producing *The Golden Girls* in America, he said to me I can't keep jokes. He said I really, really can't, I don't know how. I said laugh, just laugh and say I'm terribly sorry, because I know it's serious Jim but it is funny the idea you're going to prison. Just laugh, don't try and keep a straight face.

So anyway it all went on, and two things happened, first he phoned his wife who was a very, very strict member of the Salvation Army who said if you go to prison don't bother to come home. And the other was he phoned up Terry Hughes in the middle of the night, 3 o'clock, and said Terry I can't get to sleep. I'm so worried. So he said why, what's wrong. Colin said when you go to court do they bring up your previous convictions. So Terry said well I don't know, I suppose they do. He said well I was had up for not paying my licence. He said do you think they'll sack me when they find out.

So anyway, it then became obvious that he was getting too worried about it for me. I mean Michael Hurlll wanted to, Michael Hurlll had got an actor to act a policeman, he got everything, he was going to do it. But I actually thought that we were probably, there is a moment when you have just have got to be a bit careful.

And we all had a big meeting, the production team in my office and they were all there. And I said how are you doing Colin, he said fine, fine. I said good. I said I think it is going to be a great occasion this, pity you're going to miss a bit of it. But it will be, you will get the best bit, but it would be so much better if this other things wasn't happening, wouldn't it. So he said well yes, but. He actually on cue brought it up, not going to happen, look at all this. So I said well, let's just talk about all that. That letter from the police, if you were to take headed paper, police headed paper, put a blank piece of paper over it, photograph it, and then type on it, then photograph it again it would look like that you know. Then the letter from Alasdair to me, have you ever seen Alasdair's signature. And then my letter to Alasdair, how do you know, you've only seen the copy. And he looked at me and he said if this is a practical joke, it's the best one I've ever been in. And we told him. But it was a marvellous and it worked like a charm.

And of course, you may wonder why I think it is important, in some ways I do. In some ways I do believe we're inclined to take our business a bit too seriously at times. We live in a plastic world really. And I do think people go over the top and I do think a good laugh and a bit of fun and comradeship is something that we sadly miss now. I was only saying the other day to two members of the board of governors, I'm now an independent producer, I do find life now like it's to do with everybody behaving like shits to each other. And I find that very sad, very sad indeed.

In the business that I'm conducting at the moment, I'm astonished sometimes at the way that people, in the atmosphere that this administration has now created, really believe that the market forces is to do with behaving appallingly to your fellow man. And I find that very difficult. I'm not a political animal, I've always voted as a matter of fact right of centre but I do believe that this very market force orientated force life leaves people with the idea that they've got to be cut throat to everybody all the time and it doesn't matter what happens to the fellow next to them. Anything goes, and I find that very, very sad, very sad indeed.

So I don't apologise wasting public money having my practical jokes because I do believe actually that the result was that the people who made the programmes didn't take themselves so seriously and made better programmes. So there we are.

That really covers those type of occasions like Montreux and the international side of my career. But after I left the BBC light entertainment, I was invited to run BBC1

John Taylor: That was when you were head of light entertainment group

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes.

John Taylor: What came under you as head of light entertainment.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well there are two departments, there's comedy and variety and you're responsible for if you like the overall output of both those departments. I, most of the time I was my own head of variety, I kept the job of

head of variety as well because I believe a head of group needed to have an outlet himself otherwise he was slightly cut off. But the heads of comedy that I had during my time were Michael Mills, and Jimmy Gilbert, Duncan Wood. And we worked very closely together and they had a great deal of autonomy.

John Taylor: What did the job consist of

Bill Cotton Jr: Being head of group. It's really that if the way the BBC worked was that you had a director of programmes and two channel controllers and then the heads of group, with departmental heads. And the heads of group really in an ideal world talked to the director of programmes about the quality of the programming, in the area, in the professional area he was responsible for like drama or entertainment or outside broadcasting. And if you like, I always used to regard it as a sort of stand off situation. That the channel controllers had the money and the airtime. And the output heads and the group heads had the staff and the talent and the programmes and the ideas. So that you could have a free and frank discussion about the weight of the programmes in your area that were being commissioned for that network and the amount of money that you were being given for it. And you able to like push at a high level your kind of corner of the cake, so to speak, your slice of the cake. That's really what it was about.

It was a very, it was not a particularly well defined job and it worked quite well when the people in it were substantial people who the channel controllers were respectful of to the point of view of fear, if you follow me. It doesn't work if the channel controllers don't have any respect for any output heads because by and large they have all the ammunition and if you don't have an active director of programmes then the channel controllers can run wild if you like through the output.

When I was managing director what I wanted to do was change the system and have controllers of output so that I would have had a controller of drama and a controller of entertainment and they would be on the same level as the channel controllers. And they would be in the same seniority, although of course the channel controllers would have the last word in what went on their own channels. But that mainly the director of programmes would lay down exactly how he wanted each channel to be run. And you would

then have a cabinet, this may sound a bit Chinese, you would then have a cabinet which would be the director of programmes would be the chairman of it and the two channel controllers would be aside of him and the output heads would be part of that cabinet and decisions would be much more on the basis of consensus than it is now.

SIDE 6, TAPE 3

Bill Cotton Jr: That really was that job finished.

John Taylor: How much of it was administrative. Could you go into a day of being

Bill Cotton Jr: By and large you appointed people to do all that, there's administration with the group,

John Taylor: Administration in what terms

Bill Cotton Jr: Well just making sure, the internal administration between the two departments, there wasn't a lot

John Taylor: BBC 1 and 2

Bill Cotton Jr: You made for, yes.

The departments would have administration which was to do with making of the programmes, they had their own staff. I would have an assistant and really all that he had to do in the group head terms was keep the group together, we had group meetings

John Taylor: Who would be at group meetings

Bill Cotton Jr: All the producers

John Taylor: How many would that be

Bill Cotton Jr: About 40

John Taylor: 40. What was a group meeting like

Bill Cotton Jr: Well a fairly good robustious bang around it should be. About how the group is being run, and the programmes we're doing, who's not working. You get a lot of very disappointed producers whose programmes weren't getting in the schedules. And you'd get, you'd have quite a lot of jealousy with a small j as to how much airtime had been allocated to drama as against entertainment or too much news and current affairs which was always the cry. And then there would be the normal day to day things that happen within a department

John Taylor: What normal

Bill Cotton Jr: Just the domestic type of thing.

John Taylor: What is domestic

Bill Cotton Jr: You know what the secretaries, whether they should be upgraded, the secretaries. And whether a pa should be on this grade or that grade. Whether she should be called a secretary or pa and at what stage she becomes a pa and whether if she is going to be called a pa, what are the pas going to be called, because they were different so they're going to be called production managers. That type of thing would go on.

And I always used to say when the BBC Television Centre fell down, the last meetings held would be to do with credits in the car park. You know because by and large that seemed to obsess everybody all day, can I have a car park pass. Can I get my car in. Can I be in that car park and not this car park. And I was saying recently to somebody, if I really wanted to keep somebody quiet all I had to do was call him an executive producer, tell him he could take a credit and give him a red car park pass and he was mine for life. And nothing else in the world seemed to matter to him. So there was a lot of that.

There were quite a lot of meetings. I suppose because it was not a highly defined job, everybody would have done it a little different. I used a great deal to talk to performers because by and large they're the ones who earn the wages. The BBC to the outside public are the people who appear on television. And I think that the hierarchy at the BBC seem at time to forget that. Who cares who the director general is. What they really care about is who is reading the 9 o'clock news or who's doing *The Generation Game*. That's what they pay the licence for. So a lot of my life was really to do with having one foot in the entertainment business and one foot in the BBC making sure that both understood the other's point of view. But other people, if you spoke to somebody who had been group head of drama he probably had other fish to fry. He may well have been more involved with bringing writers on, and script editors and that type of thing.

Alan Lawson: Touching on writers, did you have any responsibility for writers

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, well of course, the head of comedy mainly, but head of variety, as I say which I did most of the time, you were always looking for sketch writers, and we had a script department. And I mean, with things like this the great thing is to find good people, appoint them and let them get on with their work. The BBC is full of people who seem to think that the watchword is alone I did it. Well, alone I've never done anything. By and large at the BBC you've had, an expert was a phone call away, so you never had to actually make terrifying decisions without very good advice from people. And the trick was to find good people, as I say, trust them, and be fairly firm with them, but you've actually got to tell them what it was you expected them to do,

John Taylor: How do you go about finding them.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well within the BBC there's an enormous number of people of all sorts of disciplines, and you'd find it very difficult to think of a job you couldn't find a fairly decent pair of hands to do it.

John Taylor: Well performers and writers and so on, did you go out looking for them

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, there is an element of you look for them, you rely on agents outside, it's getting increasingly difficult but when I was doing it, there were big organisations like the Grade Organisation and Fosters and there are a lot of big independents like Richard Stone. And you trusted them, they were good people who went around and looked at things and if they phoned you up and said I've found a new comedian you go and see him and you trusted them. But nowadays the trouble is that if anybody's half way right he's got managers and god knows what surrounding him. It's slightly different, I think they do have a much more difficult job to find places to go and see talent being either good or bad. In my days there were lots of clubs and variety theatres and various places where they used to go and perform. But there are fewer places for people to be bad in now than there were then. So it is difficult, it is difficult but that is what you're paid to do, you've got to find a way of doing it.

John Taylor: How do you find writers

Bill Cotton Jr: Most of them write into you. A lot of people do. You need to have readers who will tell you.

John Taylor: You must have so much sent in to you, how do you sort it out.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well that's the problem. It's is exactly the same as the problem of picking people. It was easier in my day to pick people because not everybody applied for a job at the BBC. Nowadays if you put a job up in the BBC, if you advertise outside for a job in the BBC now, the world and his wife applies. You know perfectly well that a lot of people who have applied for a job at the BBC have also sent to ICI and they've sent off to British Airways, and they've sent off to any major thing because they just want to get a job. They've come straight out of university or they've just left school and the number of people who's now phoning me up, it's been happening to me over the last 15 years, saying my sons just left school and he's decided he wants to get into broadcasting. And you say what make him want to do that, well it seems to be a good idea. Well before when you said what makes him do that, you would normally get a very, very positive answer, whereas now it's just that he wants a job really. So it's much more difficult to pick people out, to select people into who you want to see, because you look down their academic achievements and you look what they write and they write some fancy stuff. And when you get them there the fellow could be talking to Shell, he just wants a job. It's very difficult to find people who've got if you like the bug in a way in which they're going to make things happen rather than they're going to sit there and wait for the telephone to ring.

John Taylor: With writers, can you think of one particular one.

Bill Cotton Jr: The only one I can think of is, and I always forget his name, but he is the one who wrote a very, very , he was moving furniture on the Isle of Wight at the time and he wrote this very short but effective script. I sent it to Michael Mills, Michael Mills read it and thought it was wonderful and showed it to Norman Wisdom. Norman Wisdom said he didn't want to play that character any more or whatever, so he then showed it to and here I go again with the names, *Some Mothers Do Have Them*. Michael

Crawford. Michael Mills saw Michael Crawford in *No Sex Please We're British* and said that is the character I want. And then they all got round and wrote these scripts. And they were remarkable and these scripts came from a fellow who had been moving furniture on the Isle of Wight.

John Taylor: What happened to him after that

Bill Cotton Jr: Not quite sure. I'm not quite sure what he did after that. But every now and again they emerge and usually they emerge because a producer will see them or somebody will adopt them. And you've got to find a patron. I have to say, when writers have said to me who do we talk to at the BBC. I used to say, I'll be very honest with you, I can't give you a name really. There is a script department, if you want to do it, do it. It's there, but in truth if you really are keen, if you are a writer, I used to encourage them, I'd say you really do, half of your job is writing and the other half of your job is finding your outlet and it is really up to you to go to all the television companies or try and find a way in. Try and get into the audience of a show, try and find out the type of people, get a list of producers, write to them at their homes. Anything because it ain't going to come to you and there is no way the BBC can appoint a whole load of people to read all these scripts and give value judgements, because by and large the patron you want is somebody who's got air time. And if he's got,

Alan Lawson: You were saying you needed a patron with airtime.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, basically in the end. And it can come all sorts of ways, it is very interesting. And you can become very bitter and believe that you are being kept out, but there is no way, there are no way in our industry, and it's always been the same, in films, whether it's the stage, there is no way you can organise it that everything is fair, I don't think life is fair anyway. And certainly the ability to, they all say all we want is a fair judgement of our script. And you give them a fair judgement, it's a load of rubbish and then they say well you know, we think that, my neighbour tells me it's much better than anything you put on, you get these sort of conversations. It goes round. They're probably right.

John Taylor: But how do they deal with the volume of stuff

Bill Cotton Jr: Well they just plough through it, we have readers who do it and they all mark the thing and then we have script editors. There is a whole load of different ways of doing it. I would imagine that something like *East Enders* would have their own little area where people would be writing in bits to them and saying I would like to be able to write some episodes. And then they will have people who will be looking to major writers to see if they want to write for it. It's a fairly common sense kind of situation, but there is no doubt about it, it's a sort of high profile business, and everybody believes they had the right to be considered and that has always been the same. And everybody thinks it's not fair if they're not given their opportunity, until they're given an opportunity and then the system is wonderful. And then they say why are they always looking for new people, I'm available. And I've already done it, why don't they give me the work, why are they looking for new people. So you know,

John Taylor: How does a thing like *Monty Python* come into being.

Bill Cotton Jr: That was a slow process, wasn't it. they'd worked together, some of them had worked together in Cambridge, and a couple of them worked together at Oxford. And then there was a programme on Associated Rediffusion that some of them were on. And then somebody else put them together here and there and slowly they became a sort of team and did things together. And then somebody had the idea of putting them all together in one show and off it goes to the races. Who actually put them together I don't know but a man called McNaughton was the producer. And he may well have done it.

John Taylor: You were then

Bill Cotton Jr: I was then the assistant head of entertainment and I was aware that it was going on but it wasn't really directly under my auspices

John Taylor: This is 1977 now is it

Bill Cotton Jr: 1977, 1978, something like that. So the end of

John Taylor: How were you promoted

Bill Cotton Jr: Well the hierarchy at that time, Trethowen, Ian Trethowen had become director general. And Alasdair Milne had become managing director of television. And Brian Cowgill who had been the controller of BBC1 was being moved into a job as director of news and current affairs and put on the board of management. So the job of controller of BBC1 became vacant. And Alasdair asked me whether I would be interested in it.

And I have to say, there is no doubt about it, BBC1 is one of the great jobs in television in the world. You really do have enormous opportunities, you're not really responsible to anybody other than the managing director. And it is the main network, and a lot of people say, and I think it's probably true, that BBC1 earns the BBC the licence fee, and if BBC1 fails then the BBC will be in considerable trouble with the majority of the country.

So you're in a fairly powerful position although in terms of the hierarchy, there are lots and lots of controllers in the BBC. And I remember I wanted when I became BBC1 I wanted a certain type of car and I actually managed to get money off a car that would put me within the amount that a controller was allowed to spend. But Trethowen said to me they'd be most grateful if I didn't do it because all the other controllers would want to have a similar car. I said it's up to them, if they can get the money off, surely. He said well you're all controllers. I said I'll tell you this, Ian, I'll do what you say because I understand your problem but there is only one controller of BBC1 in the BBC, and I said quite frankly everybody else comes a long way back. Even the controller of BBC2, the importance of him getting things right wasn't half as the great of the importance of BBC1 being right. So it was quite a hard job to inherit.

I wasn't all that keen actually. At the time I was having quite a nice time as head of entertainment, I was king of my own castle. I also had very strong ideas about the fact that the controllers of the network should be, as I said earlier, I tried when I was managing director to implement it, to make the output heads controllers and cut back the power of the channel controllers. But I really did believe they needed to let the output heads develop the programmes in their own areas rather than interfere. But I was

convinced by my wife and friends that I ought to take the job and in the end I took it.

And met up with Michael Checkland who is now the director general who was then in charge of really the money, he was controller of resources, and he was in charge of the money in the television service. And he and I had a very free and frank conversation because my predecessor had really gone on a spending spree and had gone miles over in his budget. And Alasdair kept on having to go back to the board of governors and ask for more money. And Checkland said to me, I remember it very clearly, obviously Alasdair would be our choice as the next director general and he wasn't going to get the job if we kept on sending him back for more money, did I think that I could maybe run BBC1 within budget. To which I said I never, never actually run anything other than within budgets. And smiled and he looked at me. I said if you like to look back, I may have cheated, I may have put in for more money than I needed, I may have done all sorts of things, but actually at the end of the year, I always used to come out with the amount of money that had been agreed that I should spend.

And that's what we did. I don't think I was ever over spent on BBC1, although I did go and get quite decent chunks of money out of the governors every now and again on the basis of what I said previously, they could not afford BBC1 not to be a major competitive attraction.

John Taylor: Were these difficult years for BBC1

Bill Cotton Jr: When I was controller of BBC1 it wasn't too bad.

John Taylor: How were the ratings going

Bill Cotton Jr: Well the ratings at the BBC have always been up and down and by and large you don't have to worry too much about ratings in the BBC. Oh no, I lie, in those days, I don't know about now, but in those days you didn't, because I could always by putting on for two or three weeks two feature films at strategic points during the week, I could always guarantee to get 50% of the audience over the week, and so it wasn't. It was much more the BBC wished to look competitive, and that competition was going on, which to a degree it was, although it was very confined competition. You had two monopolies, the company that had

the monopoly of the licence fee against the company that had the monopoly of the advertising. So it was nowhere near a free market open ballgame.

And I frankly don't think that it should be. I see nothing from getting people like Rupert Murdoch in just to rip more money out of the country, I don't see that that is the best way of getting decent television to the country, I just don't think that it's the best way. And I believe, there is, and I've been accused of being **unrealistic** and avuncular about it but I think there is proper job, I think there is a profession of being a broadcaster, just like there is one being a lawyer. I mean people can't say I'm going to set myself up as a solicitor and I'm going to go in and get the cases, I will fight the cases the way I want to fight them and there will be no rules what have you. I don't believe any of that. I believe there are proper broadcasters and I think they should be properly funded and I think they should be kicked in their bottom if they don't do it right and removed.

But I don't believe that the power of the switch is necessarily the best way of getting decent broadcasting. I don't think you can just rely on audience size, you have to rely on audience quality and all of us are a majority at one moment. We all want to see *Gone With The Wind*, going back, we all want to see that. Equally, you want to watch football, I want to watch jazz music, he wants to watch something else. I mean there are minorities within the majority and both have to be satisfied. And that is the task if you like of broadcasters. Whereas the task of the free market enterpriser is to find out what the majority like and keep giving it to them. And then their competitors will keep doing the same thing, all doing the same trick. Now that is the problem. And when people say keep saying it's not happening like that, let's wait and see. Just wait and see, that's what happens in the end.

Alan Lawson: Did you put a bid in for your annual budget yourself.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. What you do is you get allocated a certain amount of money to run BBC1

Alan Lawson: It is allocated to you

Bill Cotton Jr: They divide the cake up and you get this kind of money.

John Taylor: What kind of sums were they

Bill Cotton Jr: I can't remember actually, they must have been

John Taylor: But large

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. I mean something of £200-£300 million I suppose I was spending then. Yes, I would have thought so.

John Taylor: Can we just break the job up into the parts, part of it must have been political

Bill Cotton Jr: Not really, the channel controller doesn't have a problem with that. That's handled by the managing director.

John Taylor: You must have been involved in it in some way

Bill Cotton Jr: To some degree, but you're not on board of management as a controller of BBC1 and board of management handle political things. What BBC1 is, you've got the network, you inherit a schedule, you have got all these output heads who will come and make offers of you of programmes they would like their departments to make. You have meetings at which you say yes, that's a nice idea, that's not a nice idea, I don't want that but I'll have that or that or go away and develop it and we'll talk about it. And you get together a kind of a list of programmes that have got to be a decent proportion of everything. But you obviously over commission, or over, you express interest in more than you want obviously so that you've got a choice. So now you've got all these ideas, you've then got to look at your schedule and see what it is in it that you're going to keep. And what is in it that you've got to keep. You can't move the news and you can't move *Panorama* and you've must have this and you've got the test matches, and you've got the football and you've got this and that, so probably you're only talking about change within at the most about a third of your schedule

John Taylor: Which is quite a lot

Bill Cotton Jr: Quite a lot but isn't as much as everyone. Then you've got, I don't know if they still do it this way round. Then you take your planners away, I used to go and take them to a place on the Isle of Wight

John Taylor: How many planners

Bill Cotton Jr: You'd have your main planner, two main planners for the channel and then a head of planning who would be there to make sure that what you are doing fitted into the overall picture. And you do the night of the long knives

John Taylor: what kind of man is a planner.

Bill Cotton Jr: He's an administrator, they come from all sorts. And it's quite an interesting job planning, and they're very powerful

John Taylor: It must be very skilled.

Bill Cotton Jr: Well there are a lot of them. I had a budget woman, whose name is, it is awful, I wish I could remember people's names, who was a magician, an absolute magician. And always I remember when Brian Cowgill, who was an absolute pirate, nice fellow but he was an absolute pirate, just before he left it was the Queen's jubilee and I was doing the show down at Windsor in a tent, a mixture of circus and variety for the Queen's jubilee on the field outside Windsor. And Brian came down and said I've got the most wonderful idea, on the night of the jubilee I'm going to play *My Fair Lady*. What do you think of that, do you think that's a good idea. I thought it was very kind of him to ask me, I wasn't in the job yet. I said yes, I think it's a marvellous idea. He said oh good, your show and *My Fair Lady* and we're home and dry, and off he went.

And he is, they were quite frightened of him, Brian, and when he left, because he never took up the job of director of news and current affairs, he decided to leave and went to Thames. Anyway when he left, what was her name, Elsie, anyway she was a big woman and she came thundering in and said you do know don't you that when he came down to see you, what he didn't tell you was *My Fair Lady* is your Christmas film and there is no money at all for you to buy another one. I said well we'll put it on again, they'll all turn up again. She was a very good finance girl, and you

get finance people from financial areas. You find them, they emerge.

And then you get planners, If you get a man called Roger McCarr was my planner, he was very good at jigsaw puzzles and he loved. I used to send down at his home in Folkestone and tell him sit under his apple tree and come up with three different schedules so that I could have a look at them. And he could do it, it's like a knack scheduling, you're moving things around, and you look at the opposition and you see what they're playing and you try and get in the cracks. It's quite a good game. It's a trade not a profession, I always used to say, because I wasn't any good at it, so I would always refer to it with disparaging remarks. I mean I wasn't a bad scheduler, but I was a good scheduler because I would listen to people who could do it. And got them to do it.

So as I say, going back to the job, you've heard what they call editorials, where they all come in and tell you what it is that they have in mind what they would like to do. You go off and now you sit there and you know you've got £300 million or whatever you've got, and somebody in planning, the finance people in planning have put a sum on everything that you've told them that you will take, and that sum is £400 million. And now you've got to take £100 million out. So you start to, it is called the night of the long knives and the blood runs in the gutters. You start to say I won't have that, and I don't want that and I don't want this.

So now you've got a whole load of schedules that you are interested in progressing with, and the output heads are told that. And they then get proper offers together. There is a proper offers document which they say how many of it they want to do and how much it will cost per programme and who the producer is, and when it will be ready, and all that type of information.

You then have a meeting which is called offers where you sit and you talk and you bargain with them, because you're often in a situation of he's actually got a show in the schedule and you want to get one in, are you going to drop that one to take this one. So sometimes you want the programme but you haven't got a hole for it. It's quite interesting, because I'm at the other end of it at the moment, I'm sitting as an independent with 2 dramas in

development waiting to hear from offers this month whether I've got none, one or two. So it's quite, they keep on phoning me and telling me things that I know aren't true. I keep saying you do know who you're saying that to don't you.

John Taylor: It must cause quite a lot of anguish

Bill Cotton Jr: Umm, and bitterness, and people will go and see the managing director or the director of programmes and say I don't think this is right. Also, the down side to it is that it's a very cumbersome process, as far as people outside are concerned. Because you come to me with an idea and I'm head of entertainment and I say I like that idea. Now unless I can force it into the schedule quickly because something's fallen out, or because I've got this, or whatever, or there's a bit of flexibility, you've got to wait until October before I can even tell you whether he is interested in talking to me about it. Now you may have told me this in May. I will hear about this drama which is the life of Merlin as written by Mary Stewart, I actually started to do this over 18 months ago, and it is just now being decided whether they're going to do it or not.

John Taylor: It would have been the same at the BBC

Bill Cotton Jr: It is the BBC I'm doing it with, within the BBC. But in truth you see when I ran entertainment I used to tell them terrible lies and say that I had programmes that I hadn't got and then not tell them that I hadn't got them. And then I always had air time, I used to tell them how lucky they were I'd found something. They knew I was, but they couldn't find anybody better than me to do the job. And it was much more flexible than it is now.

This is one of the great problems you see once again of the mood of the era we live in. The BBC in my opinion are being far too businesslike about everything, they don't need to be. They're not a business, they're a service. They get money to be a service. What is the point of appointing all these people to run it as though it's ICI when it isn't ICI. They spend a fortune, they spend £1,000 trying to save £100. And it's just silly. And they all know I feel like that and it doesn't suit them because the type of people who are running it are good at doing that. Not many of them are much good at doing programmes, that's the problem. There you are, there's bitterness for you

Alan Lawson: A fact of life

Bill Cotton Jr: So that's the BBC1 thing, so you then have the offers. You then have to schedule the, once you've got it, once you've got everything, you then have to put it in an order which is called scheduling. And you have your different seasons, you have your autumn season which is the main

John Taylor: Do you do a year at a time

Bill Cotton Jr: You do. A year is done for you if you know what I mean. You can sit down and say that is going to be Grandstand, that's going to be the 9 o'clock news, this is going to be the religious break, this is going to be. So a lot of it you sit there and you've got a skeleton. Then you start to write in that will be comedy, at 8 o'clock I will play comedy and I will comedy right the way through from September through to April. You don't know what the comedy is so in offers you commission enough comedy to do that or you get them to make or you put in repeats but you are keeping comedy at that time. So some of it is scheduled 6 months ahead, some of it is there, some of it is scheduled 6 months ahead, some of it is scheduled just before Radio Times goes to press. You say I will put that in there. It'll probably be you're putting something in which is part of a strand, you've got a lose box or something that you can put anything in, but you know that it's there.

John Taylor: Do you have a large board with it

Bill Cotton Jr: No, some people do but I never used to

John Taylor: How did you do it, bits of paper

Bill Cotton Jr: Bits of paper and you look at it

John Taylor: Backs of envelope

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. I'd send them off to do it, and if you made a mistake swear blind you were meant to. It's not World War III you see, that was my problem, I could never take it all too seriously. I think the reason that I'm able to go and sit in the smallest office you've ever seen in your life in the middle of a whole load of people producing programmes for BSB without being in the least bit down

trodden or indignant or undignified or whatever is because I never took any of it very seriously. Because I really, really, really don't believe that you should take this kind of life seriously. I believe you take the programmes seriously and I think you do your best and you try and make sure that the programmes are honest, decent and of high quality, are well written and people are trying hard and they're getting rewarded for what they do, all that I think is very important. But I don't actually think these jobs. I always knew that one day I would come to work owning Television Centre with my staff car and my secretaries and 8,000 people at my beck and call and the following day I would be nothing. I always knew that was going to happen. And when I left I took the keys out of my pocket, at the dinner I gave, and I gave them to Paul Fox and I said there my friend are the keys of the kingdom, I'm going home.

John Taylor: How firmly in your mind was public service broadcasting

Bill Cotton Jr: Very firmly. I always believed it was the greatest proposition. I didn't agree with a lot that Reith did or said, but equally he did invent a wonderful proposition, and that was that broadcasting was in it's own right a thing to sell to the public, or that the public should pay for direct, that there should not be an intermediary and that broadcasting should not be a platform for other people to sell their goods on. It should be a platform which sells its own goods, the making of programmes. And that is a proposition that I've always believed in and I think that the more that it gets chipped away the worst the programmes get in terms of, and good programmes still emerge, the comedy that is going on at the moment, there is some marvellous comedy going on at the moment. It's all getting a bit lost because there is too much of it around, too much television. But if you look at the stuff which is around the edges of the good programmes, it is getting more and more rubbishy.

Obviously Cecil McGivern once said that television will live on its peaks. And you can't peak all the time. You will have a few decent programmes that are good, you will have a few brilliant programmes, and then you will have the day to day programmes that are made by people to sustain the service. It's the quality of those that is in doubt and at the moment anything will do, anything will do. A) that

and B) you're getting to the stage where the deal is much more important than the programme and that I find

John Taylor: What do you mean by the deal

Bill Cotton Jr: You know they all sit down there and they'll argue about how much money it is going to cost, da, da, da, and eventually the fellow will say, the commissioner will say, ok I'll do it for that price in that studio and he thinks he's brilliant. He's got them down to, the effect on the programme he hasn't considered, but he has actually got them down to a price that they say they can produce it for. He doesn't know they can, but they say they can, now it's not his problem any more, it's their problem. He's screwed them in to the ground, so he goes and opens a bottle of champagne, I've got them down to that. The fellow who got it has got it, goes back to the office and open a bottle of champagne because we got the show, we're in the business, we've got the show.

They did it once with me and I said you can put that away, we do that when the show's good. This is not the beginning, this is only the beginning of the beginning. What you've just been through may have been very hard but you will see none of that on television. What we've got to find out now is whether that deal was a good deal. And he's got to find out now if that was a good deal, because if the show stinks, it was a rotten deal for everybody, because he's wasted his money, and you've wasted your time. I mean this is the down side of this very competitive way of scheduling.

And when I ran BBC1 I used to say to the output heads, some of them used to come to me and say here is list of programmes, what would you like, and I used to say what do you want me to take. One of them said to me nothing to do with me you just pick what you want and I'll make it. I said well you better go away and think again because as far as I'm concerned I want to hear, I want to hear excitement in your voice. I want to know who the producer is and why you think he can produce this, because he is your producer, I've no idea who he is but I want to hear why you think he's the man to produce the show, why you think this will fit in BBC1, what is in your balls that tells you that this is a programme I should have. A list of 18 programmes is no good to me, it's a lottery.

And by and large you see with BBC1, going back to BBC1, it's a job you can do for about 4 years because it is a very, very remorseless timetable and everything falls, January you do the editorials, or whatever it is, and then you do this, and then you do the Christmas schedule, and then you do the Easter schedule and it comes up like a calendar. And after you've done it 3 times you think oh my god, here we go again, because no sooner do you get off one thing than you're on to the next one. And then that one seems to come round again. I can remember saying one October, I'd just come back from holiday, I can't believe we're talking Christmas again. Because by and large you stop talking Christmas at the end of January when you've seen the results of all the programmes and what have you and it wasn't that long ago, and then all of a sudden off you go again with what's going to be on the front page and is it going to be this, and is it going to be a BBC front page, those sorts of things. And you can run 2 longer than you can run 1 but 1 is a very, very remorseless treadmill and you go round and round and round on it.

John Taylor: How much assessment did you do on the work that you'd done. Did you look back and say that's right and that's wrong.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, you're constantly looking at the output. And you look at it and you think that's ok, that sat nicely there, or that programme didn't work. Now you've got to work out was it badly produced or did you put it in the wrong space or if it was a popular audience and it didn't get an audience what was against it. You've got to look and see that, because if you put *Fawlty Towers* against *Coronation Street* you're not going to get the same audience for either that you would if you put them against different programmes, if you follow me. So you have to take all these things into it and you look at the figures but by and large it's common sense and if you've any sense, you've got a gut for it and if you haven't got a gut for it you shouldn't be doing it and you can look at it and say.

BILL COTTON JR

SIDE 7, TAPE 4

John Taylor: What else did the job consist of.

Bill Cotton Jr: You go to departmental meetings, everybody wants to meet the controller. You have to take into account obviously all the aspirations in programme terms of the regions, that's a job in itself. You speak publicly about things. You don't have any staff, you're not responsible for any staff, you have nobody only your secretary, because the planners are run by the head of planning, and the output heads. So you don't have any of those sort of responsibilities at all but you, every producer feels that if only he can get to you, then you will buy his particular programme.

John Taylor: How do you keep them off

Bill Cotton Jr: If you've got any sense which a lot of the channel programmes haven't, you don't get involved, you just say to them I'm sure you understand. People will actually take it if you're honest with them, I always used to say to them I will talk to you about any programme you want me to talk to you about in front of your output head if he wishes to bring you. That is his job, and when you're an output head I'll expect, you'll expect me to say the same about you as I'm saying about him. I really will not have producers going behind their output head's back.

I remember once a channel controller met one of my producers when I was running entertainment and said oh I like that idea, I'll have it. And the fellow came rushing in the following day and it was an idea that he had told me about that I had not passed on because I didn't think he was capable of doing it frankly. It was not a bad idea I just did not believe it was within his capabilities to do it. And he said I saw the controller and he wants to do it. I said fine, wonderful, I'm pleased. And I'm sure he'll find you a secretary and an office and an organiser and a studio. And he said no, no, do it here. I said not as long as I'm here. I said so you better go and tell him he has to find you somewhere to go and work now. If you think I'm going to have a situation where the lunatics run the asylum well you're wrong, and by and large everything in life has to have certain disciplines. And so he asked, the

controller asked me up for a drink. He said there seems to be some misunderstanding. I said there's no misunderstanding at all, you've commissioned him to do the thing. That's right. If you have you've got to find him somewhere to do it because he's not doing it for me. That was the end of that.

John Taylor: How far possible was it to go into the bar of the BBC at this time

Bill Cotton Jr: You can always do that, and it's alright. It's amazing that when you get those jobs you don't finish work much before 7 o'clock at night and you're bloody tired and you really don't want to hear tittle tattle, you don't want your ear pounded and yes I think you're right, that is the first job where by and large you either have set piece hospitality sessions where you sit and talk to people over a drink in the hospitality room rather than going down the bar and getting a table.

John Taylor: You had to begin to put a certain distance between you.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, yes.

John Taylor: Especially in an organisation as large and complicated as that one

Bill Cotton Jr: Sure, but it's a funny life, because you're in a sort of a limbo, because as I say you have no staff of your own. You're in a limbo. You're not on board of management although you're making decisions that board of management are talking about all the time and so the managing director keeps rushing into the office and saying is it true that you're going to do this.

And if you're very ambitious, and some of them obviously are, you get very upset that somebody's actually, you're having to write briefs about what you're doing rather than being allowed to go and tell them. So you're as bad about board of management as the producers are about wanting to see you. It all kind of knocks on up in the pecking order routine.

And of course the other thing about the controller of BBC1, when I was there as the controller of BBC, there were no ex controllers of BBC1 at the BBC at all. By and large, when

you finish with BBC1 after 4 years and if you've got it too young, you're pretty useless actually because unless you're going to be made the managing director what else is there. You can't go back to being a producer or the head of department. All the departments have got their heads now, you couldn't possibly go back to doing that. You take, Michael Peacock went to London Weekend Television, Paul Fox went to Yorkshire Television, Brian Cowgill went to Thames Television. And then there was me. As it so happened when I packed it up, we now pass on

I think I've really told you everything there is to tell you about that in real terms, because there were all those odd bits and pieces you did. You were called in front of the board of governors every now and again to do this. You went in front of the advisory council

John Taylor: What would you be called in front of the board of governors about

Bill Cotton Jr: If a programme that they were interested in and how it had got there, what have you.

John Taylor: Could you give us an example.

Bill Cotton Jr: Later. I was called in front of the board of governors because I wanted to put Parkinson on 5 nights a week on BBC1, take off *24 Hours* and we'd arranged that *Newsnight* would start on BBC2. And so I wanted to develop a late night chat show on BBC1 and it was all agreed, the board of governors wanted to hear about it and in the end they banned it, they stopped it. So it is that type of thing. And you went in to hear what they had to say about the output every now and again, because they used to talk programmes at the beginning and then you went. That type of thing. The advisory council would be the same. They would ask you to prepare a paper on the power of comedy on BBC1 or something, they would ask you to do some conceptual thing

John Taylor: And you had to write that yourself

Bill Cotton Jr: Not if you were clever, you would find somebody to do it.

John Taylor: I thought you had no staff

Bill Cotton Jr: Oh you can do that. You can find people to do that. They know you can give a lot of favours so you can get a lot of favours. Don't have any problems with that, in planning there are always people who can write.

Alan Lawson: How much television did you actually watch when you were controller.

Bill Cotton Jr: It's strange. My controllership came when VCRs first started and I thought that would be wonderful, because before then you saw quite a bit, and you could get playbacks but you used to have to go down and see them in a place where they were doing the play backs or have it on the ring main or whatever at a certain time and you watched a bit. But you did rely on, I relied on people greatly, there were people I trusted. I would say did you see that last night, what was it like. If Jimmy Gilbert told me something was funny I would believe him. And if he said it was well written and it was worth another throw I would believe him. And you've got to, because you can't watch it all. Because if you watch it all, you get to the stage where you can't tell good from bad. Although I was told that Silverman who was the American genius at scheduling, they said he used to see everything that went out, he had these three machines going and he could watch everything. Part of his ability was that he could see exactly what the audience would think about everything in that area. But I can't pretend that I did. My taste is not bad in terms of knowing roughly where the British public will stand with certain types of programme. I think I'm as good as anybody at doing that.

And of course when the VCRs came I thought well this is fine, but then I had 60 hours worth of programmes on my desk within a month. And people saying when you've got a minute would you just have a look at that. What they actually meant was if you've got an hour and a half would you mind having a look at that. I always used to say to them, yes I've got a minute, put a minute on and I'll watch it. Well, no, no, what I meant. I said I know what you mean, you make it sound as though it isn't an hour and a half and it is an hour and a half. And I haven't got an hour and a half for all these. And if you walk through this house now, I think you'd probably find 100 VCRs. I should give them all back and I must do sometime. But they used to come throttling in, and still do, from Noel Gay, I still get a whole load of stuff.

John Taylor: What programmes do you watch yourself

Bill Cotton Jr: Now, mainly sport, mainly sport, I like sport. Only because it goes on a long time, and if I'm going to sit down I'll going to sit down a long time. And it's the one thing. If we move on now we'll come to why I watch it, but it is the one thing that pay television can do well, because you can see it all and it doesn't get interrupted. I've always, I shouldn't say it, I can never stand Grandstand, it drives me up the wall on a Saturday because you just get into something and then they go charging off to show how clever they are, they have cameras over there as well and they've got cameras over here. I would much rather sit down in the afternoon, the other day I sat down and I suppose it would have been about 3 o'clock and I sat there till about 7 o'clock and I watched the whole of the round of the German masters which Torrens won. Lovely, I sat there and I watched the match, I was into it and it was a proper use of the television set for me. Because I wanted to see Torrens win, I was into it.

John Taylor: Do you watch the news

Bill Cotton Jr: I try and watch one news a day in I can. But by and large my broadcasting experience, I turn to Radio 4 every the morning before 7 o'clock and then I hear the 7 o'clock news, and then if there is anything really, every now and again, about a dozen times a year at the most I'll turn on the television because I want to see pictures of that particular story if you can.

John Taylor: Which do you watch BBC, or ITV

Bill Cotton Jr: Which ever one. It's much more likely to BBC or Channel 4 than it is to be ITV because I will be looking for a story.

John Taylor: When a programme comes along like *The Jewel In The Crown* do you ever watch a bit of it.

Bill Cotton Jr: Oh yes. We started to watch this new *Tutti Frutti* thing, but I was too tired, it has this very Scottish accent and I just couldn't understand what they were talking about. I said I'm going to bed. Funnily enough last time I read a script, my daughter's written, a comedy script, it isn't bad, not bad at all.

Anyway I finished with BBC1 and what had happened then in the sequence of events at the BBC that Trethowen went off to be director general, Alasdair was about to run to become the next managing director and he asked me if I would be deputy managing director. I said I wouldn't do that if I were you Alasdair because I'm a rotten deputy to anybody, a deputy has to know what they're doing. And I said I have no idea what I'm doing and I'd much rather make my own mistakes, I don't want to make somebody else's. He asked and said would you please do it for one year, I promise you that's all I want but they are very, very anxious that I should have a deputy, the board were, have a deputy that they trusted because I'm going off doing other things. I said alright I'll do it for a year. It was a miserable time, I didn't like it at all.

And so I was the deputy managing director for a bit and that really is just running around behind the managing director and doing bits and pieces. It was alright. It was as close to being an administrator as I've ever come and I suppose I must have understood what I was doing, but I couldn't tell you now if you asked me, now what I did in a day, I can't remember, other than count it. And by and large I should think if I were to go back and people were to tell me the decisions I'd taken, I wouldn't be ashamed of them. But I'm not built to remember formulas and that type of thing. Everyday is a new day to me, I wish it wasn't but it is. And I often have to start again and say to people how do you do this, I've forgotten. How do you run the television service. Alasdair then became director general.

John Taylor: You had good relations with him

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, I was very fond of him. Yes. We had a, the BBC gave a lunch for his 60th birthday last week which we all went to. Very nice.

John Taylor: How is he getting on

Bill Cotton Jr: He's alright. You've got to remember it was pretty rough.

Alan Lawson: A bruising experience.

Bill Cotton Jr: He prepared himself all his life. He doesn't do anything though, he hasn't found anything else he wants to do I don't think. Back to the plot, and he became director general and then there was a reshuffle. I waited to see whether or not they were going to make me managing director. They chose not to, which was quite reasonable, they gave it to Aubrey Singer who had left the television service to go and run radio and had done that reasonably well and they were quite pleased so they believed he had earned a turn to come back to television and run television, which left me quite spare. I said I would go, but they didn't have to worry, I wasn't going to stalk out or anything. There was plenty of time but I would put myself on the market and then I would go, which seemed to worry them. I don't know, I think they believed, and I think there was an element of truth in this, that I had a vulgarity, I use that word in the nicest sense, that fitted quite nicely into a place where vulgarities were a bit short in supply. So it was quite useful to have somebody who had that type of attitude

John Taylor: Had flair.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. And I think they thought that I had a decent effect on Alasdair because he and I got on quite well. And one way or other the chairman, or the board of governors actually who included a man called Stewart Young who later became the chairman and I think that he was very outspoken about the fact that to lose me would be a very silly thing to do having invested that amount in me.

So nearly reluctantly and I mean that I sat up at home until about 1 in the morning with them phoning offering me certain jobs. And in truth I couldn't work for Aubrey, that is the problem. I didn't dislike him, I just couldn't work for him and I explained to them, I have no objection to him being in the job at all but there are certain people that you just cannot work for and Aubrey would be mine. We think entirely differently and I would find it very difficult to support him in certain things that he does and I don't want to have to do it. And I said you would have every right to say to me if you're taking the money, well I don't want to be put in that position.

So they came up with a formula which was quite interesting. That I would be the director of programmes of the television service, which gave me a title which gave you

plenty of clout, and in that title I would actually obviously be under Aubrey Singer. But I would also be director of development for the Corporation which would be a job with its own seat on the board of management. In other words, when I sat on the board of management I sat on it as the director of development, not the director of programmes, the director of development, and I had my own set up, so to speak.

And of course it was a meaningful job because satellites were just around the corner, the BBC was getting these two satellite channels and so it was a fairly meaningful job. So I said I would give it 6 months. I'll do that for 6 months. And I said to Aubrey I don't intend to do anything as director of programmes at all, unless there is something you wish to give me to do, of which I would have the final say. If there is anything you will say I don't want anything to do with this and anything you say I will support and you don't even have to refer to me, I'll do this. But I said you understand Aubrey, which he did, I said I really would find it very difficult to come and explain to you why I've done something. He said yes I understand.

And to be very honest the first thing that he did was to get himself into considerable trouble over that, if you remember it was when *The Jewel In The Crown* came out and we put out that American series, *The Thorn Birds* and he over sold *The Thorn Birds* and it blew up into a kind of major scandal about the BBC putting out this rubbish while ITV have stolen their clothes. All a load of cobblers, because what was dreadful was that *Life On Earth* was out at that time, David Attenborough's, which was a much, much better proposition than *Jewel In The Crown* in international terms. And they didn't do any publicising of that at all. And he would have been home and dry. He would still have been managing director if he'd done that. But he got, and everybody started getting worried about him and what have you.

Meanwhile back in the jungle, what's his name, Stewart Young had been made the chairman and no, I lie, he hadn't, that's right he hadn't, Stewart Young was still on the board. And at some board meeting, whether or not I had, there had been a problem over something I had said or done, or whether or not Aubrey had queried whether he as managing director of television was actually overall involved with

programming which would go on the satellite or whether he wouldn't so to speak, whether Bill Cotton would be doing that, whether or not, I don't know, but there was something like that happened, I'm sure. I never bothered to find out because there was no point. But all of a sudden Alasdair came to me and said I feel you ought to know the board have decided to make you a managing director of the Corporation and they have created your own directorate and it will be called DBS, Direct Broadcasting by Satellite. So I became a managing director, I had a staff of 3

John Taylor: Moving up in the world

Bill Cotton Jr: And of course then all of a sudden it became clear that anything to do with the satellite channels would be to do with me and nobody else would have anything else to do with it, which I think upset Aubrey a bit. And I think if Aubrey had known that BBC were going to take that line he would probably have accepted the job he was originally offered by Alasdair which was deputy director general and then be in charge of all the pay television.

So I became the managing director of Direct Broadcasting By Satellite to develop satellite programming within the BBC. In case I haven't said it, the BBC had been allocated 2 of the 5 channels, Whitelaw gave them to us, he thought that's fine, that's got that fixed. So off I went to start, and I took with me Gunnar Rugheimer because he was the film man, I wasn't going to have him charging around not working to me, so I took him. And a fellow called Irwin, who, Chris Irwin, who was a very clever chap from Scotland, known to tittle tattle I was told. So I got him in and said you will have a lovely life with me, because I'm desperately easy unless you tittle tattle. If I catch you tittle tattling I'll kick your arse straight right back to Scotland, and that's not an idle threat, I said, I will have you out of here in two minutes. So I don't want any tittle tattling except to me and to me you can tittle tattle all day, I love tittle tattle. So the 3 of us got on fine and we sat there and it looked very good.

I had a problem obviously as managing director of DBS because the director of engineering believed this was going to be his knighthood. All directors of engineering got knighthoods for something. They get it for colour, the introduction of colour or the introduction of CEFAX, and

poor old Bryce was the first one not to get a knighthood. But Bryce was obviously a bit put out that I'd been made this and came to see me and I said look I have to tell you I don't know how electricity works, so you have no problem with me in terms of technical. You look after all the technical side, I'm only interested in the introduction of pay television to this country because that's all it's about to me. How does the BBC introduce into this country pay television. And is there a market for it.

Now the extraordinary thing was between the time we'd applied for these and the time that I was made the managing director of DBS, a major factor had emerged. Because when we applied for them, when Alasdair said to me what did I think, I forget which job I had then, I may still have been controller of BBC1, I said unbelievable, it will be like printing your own money, if we can get the film channel going people will pay anything to see films and you will be able to make. I reckoned and we did the sums on the back of an envelope. I said you can charge £10 a month to see a film a night, plus all the other stuff around it, you get 2 million people, and I said you'll get 2 million without any problem at all, I'm sure you will. And you started to see these vast sums of money coming.

Between then and when I became managing director, the VCR and the use of the VCR by the film rental business had completely transformed the ballgame, because there was already a film channel. And it was very selective and you could go to the shop, you could buy what you want, take it home, play it and take it back and get another one. And you could choose what you wanted. And the film companies whom I believed would come running up to our door to do a deal with us for the film channel were not in the least bit worried, they were getting the money now out of the rental shops. Whilst there was an awful lot of piracy, they stamped on that if you remember very hard and they spent a lot of money on it and they had, not to put it too fine a point on it, I think they had a few people going round these back street shops saying if you want your place burned down to the ground, I think it was quite brutal

John Taylor: Was it really

Bill Cotton Jr: I think so, I think so. They employed people who on the surface were perfectly, but I think there were one or two threats, which I imagine would have been

carried out. Because you see it was on a massive scale, they were sitting in the back rolling all these things off and charging £2 a time, they were making a fortune.

Having stamped on that, the film companies had a very good cash business where they got the money on Friday. They weren't waiting for you to pay the bills, the money was there. So they weren't all that keen.

So I had to say to the board, who were all, by now the only thing people talked about, if you remember, was satellites. I went through all that bit and people were making a fortune out of running conferences about it. Nobody knew what they were talking about. I used to go and sit and listen and unbelievable things were being said. Kenneth Baker was talking out of his backside. I said I don't think you quite understand what you're talking about. So we went through this extraordinary period when people were imagining things were happening in America which were things that had been mentioned as might be possible in 10 years time. People were saying in America, for example, they have 150 channels in Dallas, a load of cobblers. It was completely and utterly unreal.

And everybody got on the bandwagon and if you remember, it was going to be the cable society at first, first it was going to be cable. And I believe, I'm sure Kenneth Baker believed that Thatcher would put money into that. When she told him no money in that, the enormity of how much money it would cost you to dig up the roads and the environmental lobby and all that bit. So they all changed onto the satellites, quite wrongly, we should be actually a cable society, that is what we should be. It's much cleaner and it's much more economic and what they should have done, they should have laid down, the government, the country, through BT should have laid down a cable network and owned the network and let the rolling stock be private. That's how it should have worked and it would have been sensible.

John Taylor: You were dealing with the government over this

Bill Cotton Jr: Well we were dealing with, not half, the Home Office. I had to say that in my opinion without the enthusiasm for the film channel that I had expected from the film companies who were busy seeing if they could beat each other by taking. If you remember they all went and bid for a couple of BT satellite channels. And I sat there

while they were bidding for this and I said what are you bidding for. They said well, you know. I said nobody is going to be able to receive these. You do know that. What. It was, it really was *Alice in Wonderland* stuff. So I had to tell the board of governors and the director general and the chairman that the main source of income for this had gone in the short term. That in my opinion, I think you could get away with selling it to somebody but you were not going to get to 2 million this fast, but nonetheless we would press on, what have you.

They then had something called the Part Committee. They had 2 committees, they had the Hunt Committee which was really motivated as a political committee, motivated to say that all these things should happen and that just over the crest of the hill was this wonderful world of plenty of television and it was going to be wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, which I think Thatcher enjoyed because I think she by and large wanted to cut the wings of the BBC and ITV. And she thought they'd get a lot of it out there and then they'll get lost in the crowd. So the Hunt Committee.

But then the Part Committee came along and to our astonishment they decided that they would award the standards, the standard that they would say had to be operated, because they were set up to examine what standards should be used on the satellites. And we put in a thing for extended PAL, that's what we believed we should do, where you would be able to get it on your same sets as you've got now. And the cameras would all be, you wouldn't need any problems of receiving. All the technology was available.

And to our astonishment they came up with D MAC. And it didn't matter how many times we said but who do you think are going to make these sets, because for the first time in broadcasting there was going to be a service going out which relied on people going out to buy the sets. Before the BBC said they would do it, it had enough money, it didn't have to rely on you buying a set of anything, they could go into colour. It didn't matter to them whether or not anyone bought it or didn't buy it as long as they didn't care to do it, like CEFAX. By and large, we had the money and we did it, and then the trade, the hardware came along whenever it wanted to. This was a situation where when we opened the service we had to have in the shops the hardware to buy. Before they bought the hardware, we

couldn't earn any money. And I kept on pointing this out, and they had done this deal, the Part Committee had done

John Taylor: This was a Home Office committee was it

Bill Cotton Jr: No a DTI, and they had done this, in my opinion, with a form of conclusion with the DTI at the time to try and keep the Japanese out, so that all the hardware would have to be made here and then they said in Europe. And you know, we will be the leaders in Europe and all Europe will adopt this. I said you obviously don't read history. Can you tell me one time a French government have ever done anything that is British, ever, never. They will spend all day not doing it. I said you are wasting your time. And the only thing to do is to go with what is, I also believed to be true, as I remember I said very clearly to the Home Office, that the next big technical innovation will be high definition with a different, that will sell itself, people will go and if you can do a different ratio, aspect ratio, and high definition, they will go and buy that, because that's a different experience. I said D MAC is not a different experience, just the same picture, same stuff, and you're asking them to spend what ever it is. None of it, they were all determined they were going this way. Consequently that was another hurdle.

Then there was the fact that we had to buy our satellite from UNISAT which GEC, BT and British Aerospace. So this wonderful government of letting the market decide was forcing us to go to one satellite manufacturer to buy our satellite. He could make up any price he liked. So we wouldn't sign the contract with them, we never did sign the contract with them although I understand we paid them some money. I don't know why we did but we did. I wasn't there thank heavens, but we did.

So one way and the other they had really screwed it, the government, in spades. They were dealing with something they didn't know anything about. They wanted to turn it into a political weapon. They listened to all their own supporters, they didn't listen to anyone else. And their supporters were basically in the business of trying to get a share of the cake. They didn't have the best interests of broadcasting or the country at heart. They just wanted to see if they could get in there and grab a bit for themselves.

So we ended up, there came a moment when having gone through it backwards and forwards, I knew, and I said there is no business here for the BBC. And the only thing the BBC had you see in terms of collateral was its buildings and its licence fee. When I look now and see how much BSB owe and how much Murdoch owes, I realise how right I was. Can you imagine the BBC being in a situation where it owed something like £500 million or a billion and a half, whatever it is BSB, we would have been destroyed. So it was trying to get the BBC out of it without being ridiculed.

And at one period during this I had gone to the Home Office and said what I wanted to do was go and talk to ITV and in truth I had talked to Paul Fox who then was at Yorkshire and said would ITV like to come in with us. And we would try and get one other channel and we would have one channel each and the film channel, and we would share the profits for 5 years. And then say to the government then you do what you like but we'll have got it off the ground for you and because we're very good broadcasters, we can use all the stuff, we both have our own archives and what have you. Oh you don't understand the nature of the thing, this is not what we want, we don't want you two doing it again, we're trying to get fresh faces, new talent. I said I'll have to tell you I don't know anyone personally who can do this on their own without taking enormous.

Anyway to cut a long story sideways, the thing finished up with 22 people being involved to do it, the gang of 22. They put a committee together which I connived at because within that committee the BBC managed to get lost, so at the end of it when the committee said they couldn't do it, it wasn't the BBC saying we wouldn't do it, it was this committee saying we wouldn't do it.

So by and large I ran uniquely a managing directorship of the BBC which started with 3 people plus 2 secretaries, and finished with 3 people and 2 secretaries which has to be a record in an organisation like the BBC where if you're a managing director you've got to have at least 3 controllers and 22 of this and 18 of that. And that really in a potted way was how it worked.

We did quite a lot, I was enjoying it, because there were lots of ways you could see in which Britain could have been the leader in this and was actually kicked to death by a government who just could not see past the end of their

political nose. They were so involved with everything being subject to their philosophy that they could not see the opening that we had, we had because Europe would have followed the BBC and would have taken our programme. English is the language that most people have got to learn in Europe one way or the other, it's the most important. So they were going to take a good BBC service. If you did a film channel and then you did a fairly up market BBC service they would have taken that in my opinion because it would have been like having a library.

But now of course if you're going in to Europe, everybody is watching Sky. And they say why are they watching all that xxx stuff, because they want to hear English. They'd be listening to us in my opinion without any doubt at all and it is one of the great lost opportunities, done through complete ignorance and the operation of a political philosophy.

Anyway about that time when this thing was dropping off, they decided to move Aubrey and they decided that, they asked me if I would go back one way or another to the television service and so I said I would. And I became the managing director of television, finally

Alan Lawson: What year was that

Bill Cotton Jr: That was 1984. And I had 4 of the proudest years in my life in one way, but the most wretched years of my life in another way. That I found myself in the full force of that political campaign that was waged against the BBC and against Alasdair Milne and it was the time of the packing of the board of governors with people whom the prime minister believed would be sympathetic. It was a time when threats were made about what was going to happen to the BBC, if you don't behave yourself you'll lose your licence. I mean unbelievable pressures were put on the BBC. And they were obscene, the pressures were.

The background, the thing which stopped in my opinion any final excesses was Whitelaw. I think that she was frightened of Whitelaw and Whitelaw was actually on the side of the angels when it came down to broadcasting and he'd developed Channel 4 and he understood the nature and I remember him saying very sadly to us towards the end of his career, I'm afraid my colleagues and I do not see eye to

eye on this and you knew that he was getting close to retirement at that time, and he had a stroke.

John Taylor: Amazing man, he was so kind

Bill Cotton Jr: And I think he actually saved the BBC in my opinion, not by doing anything but by being there. He was like the fleet in being as they always used to refer in the war to the ships that were in Scarpa Flow. I always remember an admiral saying to me people used to say why don't you go out and fight, what they didn't realise was that strategically a fleet in being was a much bigger danger than a fleet fighting in small packets all over the ocean. And he was there and she I think was frightened of taking him on over broadcasting. And so although we took a beating we emerged in the end remarkably powerful. And there will be a lot of things written about the period that I was there.

And I heard Woodrow Wyatt say of course all this is because in the past you had very weak management, only last week and I only just smiled. Had we had very weak management, of course they wouldn't still be playing all the programmes that they're playing that were made in that time. And the management of the BBC is to do with making programmes; it isn't to do with fighting off idiots like Woodrow Wyatt. I'm certain we weren't very good at that.

I personally couldn't actually bare to talk to most of them. I just found that type of extreme politics to be very un British. And I don't really care whether people tell me it's good for the country or not. I don't believe that this is a country that deals in extremes, it is a country that has done most of things through consensus and will go back to consensus when this nightmare finishes. But it was to me ghastly the awful behaviour of these people, and their accusations about bias and their complete. And it extended I have to say to the board of governors. I remember one member of the board of governors, I refused to do a play written by a man called Curtis who is a right wing playwright, an acknowledged right wing playwright, he says he is. And I was vilified in the right wing press as being indeed

John Taylor: This is the Falklands thing

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, the Falklands thing, and I said the xxx of the thing was unbelievable, apart from anything else, as I explained to the board of governors, who said why won't you do it, why. I said apart from anything else, who do you think I'm going to get to play Margaret Thatcher, tell me. And what happens when we've cast her and we found that she's a labour supporter. What happens when somebody says I tell you who, who is the woman who has just joined the labour party, very famous actress, she would have been number one

Alan Lawson: Glenda Jackson

Bill Cotton Jr: Glenda would have volunteered, and we would all have said wonderful, Glenda, do you want to do it. Yes I want to do it. She would have made her look what she is. And we'd have had the most dreadful time, saying to her well we don't want it played like that. Oh, you are censoring me, are you. Can you imagine. And I was saying this to the board, all they could say is Curtis is writing that. He made a career out of it. And then there was this play written by this boy who had his head blown off in the Falklands.

SIDE 8, TAPE 4

Bill Cotton Jr: In this play, written by this boy who fought in the war, he wrote this play and one of our producers could see in it a tremendous drama which it was. It is an anti war play, no question about it. So was *All Quiet On The Western Front*, nobody is arguing about that. And I kept saying are we're saying that actually we're for war

John Taylor: They were opposing it.

Bill Cotton Jr: Why are you doing this left wing play, which is anti war rather than this right wing play because it shows us how wonderful it was for us to all to charge off and people have their heads blown off. And I said it has nothing actually to do with either of those propositions. What it has to do with is that one is a decent play and the other is not. And the chap said why don't you put both on and let the audience decide. I said because it isn't a fucking competition, you know

John Taylor: I hope you said that

Bill Cotton Jr: Well I did, I just found it unbelievable. But we were in such a state of siege from the press who were having the time of their lives kicking the old auntie around the place at the drop of a hat. They carried to it excess as they carry everything to excess. We were told off if we went to the Commonwealth Broadcasting thing in Hong Kong, when we went there and we'd taken our wives. I didn't take mine but others had gone, which every other broadcaster did, that was the known, it was meant to be a family thing. Oh how much money, they complained about this. There were phone calls, in the middle of the night you were woken up by some idiot from the *Daily Mail* phoning you up wanting to know who you'd got in bed with you, it was really a most extraordinary period

John Taylor: Led by Murdoch

Alan Lawson: It was orchestrated I'm sure

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, by and large, anybody who did anything to damage the BBC was smiled upon by Thatcher. Murdoch could see an opportunity. He's always treated Thatcher like a president and she likes that and by and large his paper,

because his papers, he is a republican, the man is a republican, I believe he bought the *Today* paper so that it would be anti monarchist. And if you read all the anti monarchist stories, it starts in *Today*. And all the other papers can quote it so it doesn't look as if, in *Today* it says so and so. The man is a very clever man who doesn't have the best interests of this country to heart in my opinion. But there we are. Other people may think differently

John Taylor: And he stood to gain commercially.

Bill Cotton Jr: Absolutely. So we went through a rotten time, it really was rotten. And the board of governors and the director general were out of sorts with each other which is not an unknown thing. I remember reading about Reith's time when one of the board of governors wrote in his diary, none of the board are now talking to the director general and few are talking to each other. So the BBC has always had tensions between the director general and, the director general and the chairman and the government and the board. There have always been some, when Lord Hill was appointed Hugh Carlton Greene left for 6 weeks leave and in the end Hill got rid of him. And there have always been these tensions.

But these were much, much more basic and there was a definite wish to destroy the BBC and bring it to its knees in my opinion. Not in my opinion, I'm absolutely positive. And the extraordinary thing is that when they failed to do it, the BBC then emerged even more powerful than it was before it started. My only regret is that I don't think the present board or the present board of management or the board of governors appreciate how powerful they are. They still behave as if they're being beaten to death and I think they're very silly. I think they're being cowardly the way they've stood by and watched ITV being kicked to death. Because she then went on to ITV to try and break that up and take the power out of that. Because what she wants is a lot of little broadcasters and Rupert Murdoch.

John Taylor: A lot of little Rupert Murdochs.

Bill Cotton Jr: The BBC have not actually supported, they've kept their head below the parapet far too much, far too much. But there are no real people there any more.

But I've very little actually to say about my time there, the job is obviously, yes I suppose when I arrived there, there were three things I wanted to do. I wanted to get Michael Grade because I realised that we needed to, because of the pressures we were under, we needed to ensure that the programme makers were heard and we needed to get some moral back into the programme making department.

Moral has always been at an all time low ever since I've been at the BBC. You know you go to a meeting and people say moral is at an all time low. What is the management going to do about it. But they were confused more than anything else, and Michael to me was, remains the most exciting man in the industry of his age. I knew him very well, his father was my father's agent. He has never produced a programme in his life but he knew how to talk to writers and commission shows, he knew how to inspire performers and he knew how to talk to performers. He knew how to talk to the press, he was the darling of the press and he knew how to schedule and he had got confidence. And he was not, he had no BBC baggage at all.

So I brought him in and I got him in and I told him to run the place. And that I'd sit at the end of the corridor and we'd keep in touch. And I remember Alasdair coming in one day saying you know boy, I'm a bit worried about this because there are people saying Michael Grade's running the television service. I said well they're right. Really. He said no you are. I said no, no, no, you asked me to get it run. Are you complaining about the way it's running. He said no. I said Well if I was you I'd shut up. I actually don't need to get my name in the newspapers any more. My name was very well known before I had it, so I don't have a problem with that. I don't have a problem with doing anything other than sitting here and making sure that nothing goes. And Michael ran it very well, the programme side.

And obviously I had a reputation with certain members of staff as being somebody you could pick the phone up and talk to. I certainly had a reputation for that outside of the BBC. And since I've left people have said the problem is that once you went and indeed once Michael went, we don't know who to phone. We don't even know what their names are. So I had that advantage as far as the BBC was concerned. But by and large I left programme matters very much to Michael. I made him director of programmes,

controller of BBC1, he had with him Graham MacDonald, *Tumbledown* was the name of the play. Sorry. He had Graham MacDonald as the controller of BBC2 with him and Graham thought he was wonderful. All the output heads liked dealing with Michael, because he was no push over Michael, but he took people on and he was there all day and all night and he was there when the shows, phoned people up, had conversations

The thing I did when I arrived was I cleared up the early evening. I got a 6 o'clock news. I insisted that they did a 6 o'clock news and we had one or two quite difficult words about that because they were very entrenched, the news and current affairs people. They liked the 20 to 6 news and then Lime Grove running it from 6 until 7. And I took that away and said I wanted a 6 o'clock news. And I remember them telling me they couldn't do it within 3 months. I said well I quite understand that, I'll have to find somebody who can. But I do not intend to call myself a member of a major broadcasting organisation if you can't move a news item from 20 to 6 to 6 o'clock and add 10 minutes to it. I really would find it very difficult to claim I was the managing director of anything if you tell me you can't do that. So I'll have to try and get some new people in to do it. So they decided they could do it.

I also booked Wogan and said that I wanted Wogan on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays and the soap, *East Enders*, I wanted a soap on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7 o'clock. They moved the soap, we decided to move the soap eventually to half past 7 because it got quite tough for 7 o'clock. But I cleaned the early evening up and I said to Michael I give you that as a present. Now the rest of it you'll have to sort out for yourself.

Because what had happened over a period of time the early evening had become not completely non descript, nobody knew what was on ever. And it's all very well people saying now that Wogan starred, I don't think he is particularly. There is a lack of love for it which worries me and I don't think there is much protection for it. But by and large in those days it was a very clever move. And people did know what was on and they all dipped in and so people could say what's on in the early evening and you had a chance. So I did that and that was Michael, I cleared up the early evening.

I got £8 million out of the board of governors. By now Stewart Young who was a great mate of mine, I was very fond of Stewart, had become the chairman. And by slight of hand, I got £8 million out of the board of governors to run daytime television. And I remember very clearly because there was a sort of unspoken rule that radio looked after people during the day and television looked after them from the early evenings onwards with a bit of children's television and some sport. But there was nothing, and I said to the board that I wanted £8million, they said they had no money. I said I really do have to have to say to you that in 1984 or 5 whenever I did this, if what you're saying is that the BBC can take a some thing in the region of £800 million from the British public and out of that they cannot afford to run a service on television for the people who least can afford the pay the licence, those are the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, people who are, that they cannot afford to do that, then I really ought to believe we ought to put our hand up and say we're not really capable of fulfilling our commitments.

There was a dead silence and they all looked at me and I always remember that Stewart at last smiled as he knew it was a sort of rather corny way in which I used to do business. He said this £8 million, we would want it accounted for separately. So I didn't answer. And when we came out Geoff Buck who was in charge of the money said to me this separate accounting. I said I didn't say I would do that. He said well you didn't say you wouldn't. I said well I certainly didn't say I would. So he said what do you want to do about it, I said absolutely nothing. I said it goes into BBC1 and we spend the money on BBC1 as we want to spend the money. I'm not having the board of governors deciding what gets spent between 2 in the afternoon and 6. Out of the question. I said I would provide the service for 8 million and whether I spend 9 of it or 7 is not their business at all.

And it was about 8 months later when he said to me when are we going to see the accounts. Oh, I said, I thought that was a joke, it has to be a joke, chairman. You wouldn't make a suggestion like that, it has to be a joke. And the board all looked down, because we had terrible problems. They thought we lied to them which we arguably did every now and again, I mean white lies.

Because it's, being a member of the board of governors is very difficult in one way, because if you think about it. I remember and I suppose we ought to just touch upon this while we're doing this *Real Lives*, when, which was a major, major problem that we went through, this programme that was one of a series of these very small half hour programmes made, I forget who made them, and they were just real, how people lived, and they chose to go and talk to two Irish people, both extremists, one a Catholic and the other a Protestant extremist. And these people had been on radio in Northern Ireland regularly and they appeared on television, and there were no real flags about it. But we knew that there was a programme about Ireland which was always difficult and the bright people had seen it and said fine.

And all of a sudden the *Sunday Times* flew a kite about prime minister what would you do if you knew terrorists were being allowed on the BBC now. And she said I would be very angry. And then they mentioned the name of this programme and we said no, they're not terrorists. Then we all saw the programme. I had not seen it. I saw it. There is nothing wrong with this, but the pressure kept up and eventually the board said they wanted to see the programme. Alasdair Milne was away and he agreed that they should see it. The programme was shown and the board believed it should be taken off, it should not be shown. And this was one of the few times publicly the board of governors had ever seen a programme prior to its transmission. They always used to see them afterwards.

Although I have to say I cannot believe that at sometime or the other the chairman hasn't seen programmes, I know they have, that the director general has said I know we don't normally do this, why don't you have a little peak at this and tell me what you think the board would say if we did this. And I am sure that there has been a lot of more of it than people think. And I'm not against it either in fact.

And so we had this terrible dust up. The leader of the pack as far as the board were concerned was William Rees Mogg who runs his own business, as far as I'm concerned. I find it quite extraordinary that he was on the board of GEC and used to sit in on all the meetings that we had about UNISAT and didn't put his hand up and say I have a conflict of interest, but there we are. It was all part if you like of the destabilisation of our particular management at the time. It was a disastrous period.

What I was going to say about the board of governors was that it is very difficult. I went back to Television Centre and of course the place was kind of ablaze with all the producers saying that the end had come. And I called weekly review, which is the main programme meeting which was held at Television Centre on a Wednesday morning, I called them all together.

And I said before you all get your knickers into a twist about this, let me just put to you this. You are a successful man in your own line of business, and one day you're invited by the government to be a governor of the BBC and you think oh I like the BBC that's a nice job. I'd quite enjoy that, I'd enjoy that. So you write and say yes. You only get a couple of thousand £2,500 a year for doing it. And you're told that you have to turn up every fortnight on Thursdays and that you will get a few perks with it but you will be expected to pay attention and you will be one of 12 who control this.

And you come and you find it very pleasant and you get seats to Wimbledon and people speak to you nicely and you get shown round Television Centre. And then all of a sudden a main national newspaper splashes over its headline that your management are going to put out a programme that is outrageous because it is to do with terrorism in Northern Ireland. This programme has been seen by unquestionably the cameramen, the daughter, his wife, and everybody else, because of video sets you can just go and say have a look at that. And you can take it. The press have all seen it, anybody can see it except you, because you're just a governor. You're just responsible and apparently your management do not believe that you are capable of making a valid decision about that programme. Now I have to tell you gentlemen and ladies, I do not believe that would be a job I would take. I don't think it is a way of working we would expect anybody to do when the idea that the board of governors should not see programmes before by and large it was because to get them altogether to see a programme was virtually impossible, so you would never give them all the opportunity to see it except once a fortnight. And it was too quick, so they said that we will hand that decision to our chief executive. I said that does not count now, as I say probably the girlfriends and whatever of this programme, they have read about it, were you on that, can we have a look at it. I said everybody's seen it. And it calmed them down.

But it was difficult for me because the decision the board had come to was madness, I mean madness. And people who since have since come to me and said Bill, I can't believe I did what I did. But they were led like a pack and it was quite, quite, quite appalling. When I said to you the whole thing was a fairly obscene time in my life, this was really and I walked out and I thought what are you doing, do you resign. I've never been a resigned, I don't believe in resignations within big organisations like the BBC, because you don't get anywhere. They just appoint somebody else. And on they go and probably worse. You're probably better because they're a bit ashamed if you sit there and certainly the fact that we all stayed there, because people were talking about resigning on mass, I said you've got to be careful, they might accept them, and then where do you go from there. Then there will be the eras of appointing a whole lot of other ambitious people. Whereas if they've got to live with us, they know that we know that they know that we know what they've done. And I think to a degree, there was a certain element of truth in that.

But it was the end thing, the last thing for Alasdair. Alasdair had been a fairly marked man. He had made mistakes with the board, and I told him so and he did find, the sodding governors as we used to call them, well actually as Huw Wheldon always used to call them that, the sodding governors, but he had not been able to build any real, substantial bridge and it was fairly disastrous. And Stewart Young then had cancer so nothing much happened, but Alasdair was marked. And then Stewart died and Hussey was appointed. And there was no doubt about it, one of the first things he had on his agenda when he talked to everybody was that Alasdair had to go. But they did it in a pretty ham fisted way

John Taylor: It was a disgraceful business, wasn't it.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes. They were really pretty awful. What is the time.

John Taylor: Were you there when they seized the 6 programmes in Glasgow.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes

Bill Cotton Jr: What about that business. Was it called *The Media Show*

John Taylor: There were 6 programmes on security

Bill Cotton Jr: They were made by this fellow who is known to be very left wing

Alan Lawson: Duncan Campbell

Bill Cotton Jr: Duncan Campbell, that's right. To be very honest, this is where you get into this grey area. There is no doubt that it was very unwise for Duncan Campbell to be have been let loose in the way that they let him loose. You can't have responsibility, or you can't have power without responsibility and it was to a degree I think we shot ourselves in the foot, that we allowed somebody to get in if you like to the BBC in a very sensitive area through the back door of the region with insufficient control and, by control I mean editorial control, and it is all part of this problem of the BBC and regions, that the BBC is obsessed with having this regional what have you and you often end up with second division people being put into first division positions. And I'm afraid I have to say I think this was the case.

I think there was absolutely nothing wrong with employing Duncan Campbell but I think if you're going to employ somebody like that you've got to have somebody riding herd over them who understands the nature of his own commitment and you have to have somebody who is able to say this thing is over the top. And there were about 2 or 3 things in it which were missed but should not have been missed.

John Taylor: I thought, they always said the programmes were fairly innocuous, I thought

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, there were just things in it that we would claim as broadcasters would be inept and wrong to do on a serious subject of this nature. And I actually think we did shoot ourselves in the foot over that. And the trouble was, and I think we actually admitted it, the trouble was we should have been, and the people in Scotland, instead of being as they were, as I remember it, fairly secretive about this because they were wanting to stir the waters, and they were wanting to be important and they were wanting to have, why not. I don't think they had taken on board the seriousness of the situation the BBC was in at the time. And they should have been much more open about what they were doing. They should have accepted the fact that of course by the time it got to us and Alasdair sent up the man who was in charge of news and current affairs and he sat through these programmes and he was put in a very difficult position

John Taylor: Birt was it.

Bill Cotton Jr: No, this was, he is now running the forces broadcasting, and he is a great mate of mine, and I don't know why I can't remember, but he went up, by then the programmes had been made and it was all public and if he changed he was going to be blown out of the water. So he not being able to say don't let's go down this road and don't let's do that and don't let's do that, because what he is saying there or here or there, bla, bla, that is hearsay and you will be picked off as not telling the truth and you won't be telling the truth. And he was not in a position to say that because it had been made, money had been spent on it. And he had to make a judgement as to whether it would be best to let it go through and hope nobody noticed it or whether he was going to take it out where everybody would notice it. Because this other chap Duncan Campbell was wanting to make as much capital for himself as he could, so it was difficult.

John Taylor: The reaction by whoever it was that seized the film seemed absolutely ludicrous.

Bill Cotton Jr: Yes, but these were the times that we lived in. People were doing things because, now when you get governments like we have at the moment, people will do things because they wish to be noticed and they know the sort of thing that will go down well with the government. And the way Thatcher handles, the way she handles the patronage of awards and knighthoods and all this and all that, you do things like that to make sure that she doesn't pass you over.

John Taylor: You have had personal run ins with her

Bill Cotton Jr: No, she wouldn't consider them to be run ins.

John Taylor: But you've met her personally.

Bill Cotton Jr: Over the Falklands, she came to dinner once at the BBC, over the Falklands and she went banging on about our behaviour over the Falklands until I couldn't take it any more. And I said tell me prime minister, are you saying that you believe that members of the BBC have been either disloyal or mischievous or treasonable during the operation of the Falkland campaign. And she said I have said what I had to say. And the director general very kindly said I think what the prime minister is saying ... I

unfortunately said that is not good enough for me, I want to hear you say it prime minister. Are you saying we're traitors or aren't you, because if you are you're wrong. And she just looked at me and said I've said what I've had to say. And I said I've now said what I've had to say. Can we change the subject. And half of the people said your feet won't touch, she's got your number now. And the other half I have to say said to me she won't mind that, she won't mind that. And you know she certainly won't promote you, but on the other hand she's used to people, she quite likes people who have the courage of their convictions.

I then went to lunch with her at Downing St and she sat me next to her. And she had cut me completely all the way through the drinks before, and she did it very cleverly, she just never looked at me, talked to everybody else and never looked at me at all, and I was in the middle of the thing but our eyes never met. And then when we sat down she said turned and said how is television. I said very good, very good. So she said if it's so good why won't you take a little advertising. So I said did you have the Olympics, this was the Los Angeles Olympics. I said did you see the Olympics. She said yes, weren't they marvellous. So I said yes, do you remember that wonderful bit where they took the disc from off their seats and they held it up and it made the flag of all nations. She said yes, wasn't that wonderful. I said it was prime minister, unfortunately the Americans missed it, they were on a beer commercial at the time. And she said, oh she said but surely that can be organised. I said oh that would be regulation, we don't want much of that, do we. So those have been the two things. I've seen her once or twice. She doesn't, she gave me the CBE so I presume that she was not intent on making me look completely stupid. I say she gave it to me, it comes up with the rations if you do that job. But she didn't stop it, so I presume she either forgot me or didn't hold it against me, probably the former. But there we are.

I think that is about it actually.

John Taylor: You don't want to go on how you left

Bill Cotton Jr: I just saw my time out. Oh yes I suppose so. The going of Michael Grade you mean. During part of it I said to Alasdair, just before he went, I said we ought to really make some plans about where the Corporation was going, that we'd got ourselves bogged down into not really

knowing what was going to happen next Thursday, that we ought to actually try and release ourselves a bit to talk about the future of the place.

And so we formed this small group of managing directors and we were going to talk about it regularly. And during the first one I said that I thought that someone should be brought in to rationalise the journalism, and by that I meant cut it a considerable amount because it was very expensive. And it was put on the minutes that we would talk about it.

Alasdair was then removed and we went through all the business of having a selection for another director general. I was for appointing and I said so to the chairman, I thought that they should bring Paul Fox in and make him DG with Checkland remaining as the deputy director. And I believe that would have settled the place down.

They however had got themselves into a situation where Paul had not applied for the job, people like David Dimbleby and Jeremy Isaacs had applied for the job and I think they found it impossible, that they would consider somebody who would not apply, which I think they were wrong about it but there you are. And as we know what happened was that Checkland was chosen.

Very difficult to make a judgement about him at this stage although I have to say I don't believe the BBC should be run by somebody whose main experience is to do with resources rather than programmes. I think that is a mistake. I think that you have to have a programme orientated man to run the BBC because if you don't you have what you now have got, because he brought in Birt to do the job that I was talking about but Birt took it rather the wrong way and he expanded the journalism rather than rationalised it. And you now have a situation when it comes down to programmes everyone is talking to Birt rather than the director general, and I think the director general should be the editorial brain of the BBC, the chief of the BBC.

So he brought in Birt, there was definitely tensions between the front office and ourselves, by ourselves I mean Michael Grade and I, and Birt certainly had got some agreements with Checkland which I don't think Checkland had

told the rest of us about. And we once or twice ran into problems in which I found it very difficult, it didn't in the end, I was going anyway in the April the following year, and this was towards the end of the year, and therefore when you get that close you're a bit one wing low, nobody's taking too much notice of what you say, they know you're not there. But Michael Grade was very worried about it and in the end he made the decision, as we now know, that he could not work with being second guessed by people in Broadcasting House about what he was going to be doing down in Television Centre. So the offer of Channel 4 came up and he left.

And I was then left having made arrangements at Television Centre based on the fact that Michael Grade was managing director designate, that had been said that he was, he had got that job, so he was going to take over from me, we knew that. So I had made arrangements in terms of appointments and all sorts on things based on the fact that they would be run by Michael. When he went I really hadn't got the time, it was very difficult for me to readjust these arrangements that we'd made.

There were a couple of confrontations that I had with Checkland and Birt and in the end I was shafted, there was no doubt about it. One was the placing of *Newsnight* at 10.30 which I think was a very silly thing to do on a minority channel which has to, where you have to have a common junction at 9 o'clock to then say to a minority channel, 90 minutes later you must be on another news programme, given that the public had already had one at 6 o'clock on BB1, one at 7 o'clock on Channel 4, and one at 9 o'clock on BBC1, and one at 10 o'clock on ITV. You know why there is an imperative to have one at 10.30 at a fixed time, I have no idea and I believe that it restricts the running of the minority channel in a very damaging way. And I think the fact that they're enjoying less support on BBC2 than on Channel 4 is directly attributable to that decision. But that is their business and not mine any longer. But in making that decision they announced it, they had told me that we would have a debate about it and it was announced at some meeting by the director general with no reference to me. And it left me a) very hurt, b) very angry and c) determined I was not going to resign. As I said to the director general at the time, you ain't big enough to make me resign.

John Taylor: Pity Grade didn't take the same

Bill Cotton Jr: I don't think so, in fact, I don't know if I, don't forget I didn't resign, but then nobody had offered me to run Channel 4. Different thing altogether. Resigning to go into the wilderness is very different from saying I'm going to leave here because I don't like the look of them, and I'm going to go to something as good or better

John Taylor: Channel 4 not a step up from the BBC

Bill Cotton Jr: It's not a bad job, and you're your own master. And I can quite understand, Michael is young enough that he can always go back, and he knew that he had got 5 years and Birt had worked for him before, so he knew Master Birt alright. And he decided, I think it is a terrible waste because I think that Michael is world class at popular contemporary entertainment. And by and large Channel 4 are not there to do popular contemporary entertainment, by and large. They do a bit of it. But that is his forte and the BBC could do with that more than Channel 4 can. Nonetheless I would find it very hard to say that I would not have done what he did. I think I probably would, at his age, and don't forget he had no real background at the BBC, he had only been there two years, to all of a sudden to look forward to 5 years of being rubbish.

And he said to me when I had this, I tried to rationalise it, I tried to talk him out of it in some ways, but I said to him when we started, he asked me to go and have a meal with him and we went to the Chinese restaurant because I always go for Chinese meals, and I started, I said before we start Michael, do you want to go, do you want to go. He said yes. I said well then there's not really much to talk about then. I said if you really, really want to go and you've had the weekend to think about it, you're grown up, then I really can not put myself in to the position of trying to talk you into something for the sake of yourself and your own future and that of the people who are going to work for you. Because if you don't want to be there, there is no point in being there. But during it you see I said to him I said that he would win the battle, I thought that he would if he took them on. He said to me fine. I said you always have won, he said yes because you were there. He said but when you've gone who do I have to talk to. He said

I don't have anyone to talk to, I just sit there. And he said no I don't fancy that. And I think Dicky Attenborough had done a decent job on him about the relationship he'd have with him and Dicky in running Channel 4, and Checkland had failed to inspire him that he would have the same, and I don't think Hussey had either. And I think that he smelt the fact that Birt was going to be flavour of the month and they were all going to want to go down that road, and he just fancied where he was offered. So, but I wasn't about to resign, I was going to have my party on 22 April.

Bill Cotton Jr: What year

Bill Cotton Jr: 1988. I was born on 23 April, so I actually finished at midnight on my actual 60th birthday. And they saw me off in style. They gave me a very good going away this, that and the other.

But the flavour in my mouth when I left was and is of disappointment, not of, I've no bitterness towards the BBC because the BBC is only what the people who run it make it. The BBC is a great organisation that has a marvellous remit. And you can change it in a minute, get rid of this lot and get another lot in, and it will change in a second. So all is never lost in the BBC and I love the place. I was desperately disappointed though with certain people who I really, really found did not behave in the way that I would have liked them to have behaved.

John Taylor: Many thanks