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LIVING

Midnight rambler

FEW OF RHOD SHARP'S LEGION
OF LATE-NIGHT BBC RADIO
FANS KNOW THAT HE'S
COMING TO THEM LIVE —
FROM MARBLEHEAD

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BBC, live from Marblehead

Rhod Sharp hosts 'Up All Night,' the news show for UK audiences, from across the pond

By Joseph P. Kahn
GLOBE STAFF

MARBLEHEAD — "I'm Rhod Sharp, and we're 'Up All Night.'"

As twilight fell outside his third-floor study, Rhod Sharp opened his weeknight BBC radio show with that brief sign-on — live from the North Shore.

By midnight, four hours later, Sharp had chatted with BBC correspondents around the globe, reaching nearly 1 million listeners in the United Kingdom on BBC Radio 5 live, one of the BBC's domestic stations, with an engaging mix of hard news and feature stories. Few, if any, knew of his actual broadcast location. Or that for the past eight years, Sharp, 59, has been anchoring his late-night show for the British Broadcasting Corp. from across the pond, in Massachusetts.

"I don't keep it secret. I do mention the town now and then, though not by name," Sharp said the following day on his backyard patio. Not being a "personality-driven broadcaster," he added, "I don't make a cult of who I am. So why should I make a cult of where I am?"

Only a couple of hundred Americans listen to his show online (at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes), which airs in the UK from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. Sharp hosts the broadcast Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Even accounting for neighbors who hear him — unfiltered — through their open windows, his US audience remains tiny. Rush Limbaugh he's not.

And yet, Sharp commands a large and loyal following overseas — and the respect of American pundits and media figures who appear on his show. Broadcasting from the United States makes Sharp "pretty unique" among BBC radio hosts, according to BBC deputy news director Stephen Mitchell.

With the program already an established hit in the UK, "it was a natural move to see if we could make it work with him in the US," Mitchell said via e-mail. "We like to feel he gives our listeners a more intimate insight into your country each night."

This summer, Sharp has plenty to talk about, too: a London Olympics the whole world has been watching; banking scandals here and abroad; and a hotly contested US presidential election being closely followed in Great Britain.

On one broadcast this week, Sharp led with an update on the fighting in Syria between government troops and rebel forces; an appreciation of the late Gore Vidal as public intellectual and protean man of letters; and a feature story on oil theft and violence in the Niger Delta.

A handful of interviews were prerecorded in the hour or two before Sharp went on air. The rest were conducted live.

"We haven't done much on the Olympics, given its wall-to-wall coverage elsewhere, and may not," said Sharp, whose Sean Connery-esque accent reflects his working-class upbringing in Perth, Scotland. (One possible exception: Marblehead runner Shalane Flanagan, who'll compete in the Olympic women's marathon.)

While some listeners find him "too pro-American," Sharp observed, he strives to balance what interests him personally with what his listeners, and producers, are attuned to. Stories largely focused on America comprise about 30 percent of the broadcast. Still, one listener recently tweeted, "Rhod and Obama: Get a room!"

Does that make Sharp a Yankee propagandist? Part of some left-leaning media cabal?

"I don't buy that at all," he replies, blue eyes sparkling beneath a mane of reddish-brown hair. "I particularly object that radio, the medium I truly love, has been hijacked by people with an agenda."

Since its launch in 1994, "Up All Night" has won plaudits for its wide-ranging coverage of news and cultural affairs, reflecting the host's blend

of journalistic curiosity, cultural omnivorousness, and bone-dry wit.

Sharp is a one-man production crew, linked by digital network line to BBC studios outside Manchester, England. One boom mike, a couple of desktop computer monitors: He's all set to go.

No matter what advanced technology allows him to do, though, he would not be broadcasting from here, were his love for nearly all things American not so deep. In 2001, immediately after 9/11, he flew from London to New York. The dispatches

he filed deepened Brits' understanding of the tragedy considerably. Those reports "changed everything," he now says, about what his show was and could become.

"If I have any criticism of the show, it's that we're almost too serious," said Sharp, nursing a mug of tea. Likening himself to a night watchman, he said his most important role is mediating between the day's news — often unsettling — and the sensibilities of listeners awake in the wee hours.

"I try to tell them the end of the world is not nigh," said Sharp with a smile.

Stephen Hess, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., and longtime "Up All Night" contributor, says Sharp is neither passive nor bombastic in his role as show host. His sophisticated knowledge of subjects like the Obama-Romney race make him particularly valued to a non-American audience.

"Rhod doesn't talk down to people — 'Let me explain what the Electoral College is' — but exactly as he would if he were an American talk-show host," Hess said.

Earlier in his career, Sharp might have chosen a different path: academe, perhaps, or theater. Raised in Perth, Sharp came to the United States in 1976 to study in a Princeton

University master's degree program combining literature, theater, and politics. At the same time, he was accepted into a BBC news training program, which he joined following his Princeton year.

Working as a BBC scriptwriter and California-based stringer honed Sharp's nascent broadcasting talents. In the early '80s, he bounced back and forth between America and the UK, and between print and broadcast journalism. While in San Francisco, he reported extensively on the burgeoning AIDS crisis. He also met his future wife, Vicki Staveacre, there.

The couple moved to London in the mid-'80s and remained there for seven years, a time of rapid change in broadcast journalism. When the BBC moved to create its first 24-hour news network, Sharp proposed, and named, the overnight radio show. He anchored the broadcast four nights a week, which by 1998 had expanded from three hours to four.

Following 9/11, Sharp and his wife took a two-month sabbatical in Harvard, Mass. On frequent forays to the North Shore, they became enamored with Marblehead. In 2004, they'd bought a small apartment in the seaside town. Three years later, they moved to a 18th-century house in Marblehead's Old Town section.

"We liked it so much, I asked one day if I could broadcast the show from here," Sharp recalled. "And they gave me the OK."

This past June, Sharp returned to the UK to visit family, friends, and BBC colleagues. He has no plans to move back — in fact, he plans to apply for US citizenship next year — but he did make one concession to being back on British soil. One night, while technically on vacation, he broadcast "Up All Night" from BBC studios, live on UK time.

By 4 o'clock in the morning, Sharp began to "feel a little woozy." If listeners noticed any difference, they didn't say.

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Rhod Sharp reaches nearly 1 million listeners in the United Kingdom with his BBC program, "Up All Night," which covers news and cultural affairs.

PHOTOS BY ESSDRAS M SUAREZ / GLOBE STAFF