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## REVIEW: RADIO

After 26 years of bringing comfort until dawn, the presenter tells all to **Garry Bushell**

**W**HEN I catch up with Rhod Sharp he's on a fishing pier in Florida and seems demob happy. The radio legend has been *Up All Night* for 26 years... which either sounds like the world's worst case of insomnia or the working title for Charlie Sheen's autobiography.

But as the nation's night owls know, Rhod, 66, is the voice of BBC Radio 5 Live's overnight news programme.

Or more accurately he was. Rhod was due to leave this week with a triumphant farewell party. But the show that kept broadcasting through terrorist atrocities and banking collapses has been forced off the air by a deadlier enemy, the coronavirus.

"I've been deprived of a goodbye kiss," says Rhod, relaxing in the sunshine, his voice as warm and rich as a fresh batch of Scotch broth. "I was planning a goodbye show in Salford with a studio audience, but then we thought we'd better not risk people's health. So it was going to be just me."

But now *Up All Night* has been temporarily replaced



by a one-man operation from Radio London, no studio staff required.

The cheery Scot, who has long broadcast from the US, knows the BBC's need to conserve healthy technicians, but regrets that his March 19 show could be his last.

"I still want to do a proper farewell programme, and they want it too, but it might be a long time coming."

It'll be worth the wait for the memories alone. The veteran broadcaster chuckles as he recalls covering the 2008 Democratic Party convention in Denver, Colorado. His producer dragged in a man they assumed was a random delegate.

"He was wearing a checkered shirt and jeans and looked like a Rube," Rhod says with a smile. "He seemed bedazzled by the whole thing."

"Then after about 30 seconds I did a double take and gasped, 'Oh my god, you're Richard Dreyfus!' That was heard all over the world."

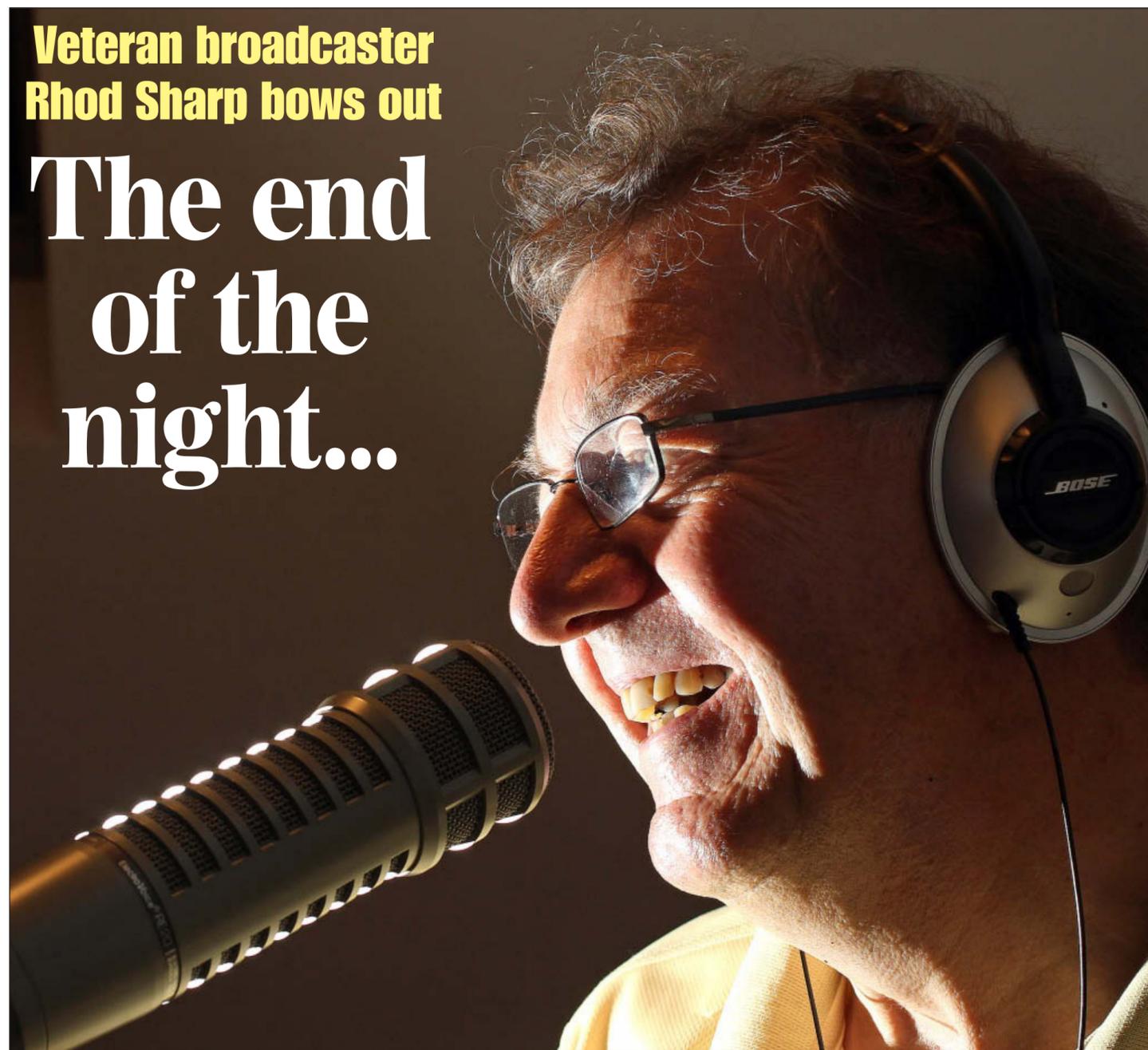
"He was highly amused and stayed all evening."

Another time, a producer booked the then-unknown Gunther von Hagens who would go on to show his perfectly preserved skinless bodies all over the world.

"They brought in this strange-looking fellow with an unpleasant coldness about him. They said, 'This is Gunther, he specialises in dissecting dead bodies'. It was like interviewing

## Veteran broadcaster Rhod Sharp bows out

# The end of the night...



Herman Munster except Herman was funnier. It was a chilling encounter. He was an idea. Right from the get-go my plan was to have very relaxed conversations with BBC correspondents in different time zones, people who were much more awake than the listeners. Not sound-bites, in-depth chats.

"If we'd stuck to British chats, we'd have sleep-deprived reporters talking to an audience of equally grumpy milkmen."

It's mix of light and shade built up a formidable audience – more than a million at home, with a huge global reach. "People in the Far East hear us over breakfast," Rhod says. "A lot of Americans listen. We were supposed to be domestic but we're worldwide."

Rhod has anchored the 1am to 5am graveyard shift since 5 Live launched on March 28, 1994. Dubbed "probably the best night-time radio show in the world" by the Washington Post, *Up All Night* was his idea; his broadcasting baby.

"Radio 4's gulf war service News FM, known as Scud FM, had been such a success that in January 1994 the BBC gave Jenny Abramsky six weeks to put up a rolling news radio channel," recalls Perth-born Rhod. "I wrote to her saying if

you haven't thought about the overnight content, here's an idea. Right from the get-go my plan was to have very relaxed conversations with BBC correspondents in different time zones, people who were much more awake than the listeners. Not sound-bites, in-depth chats.

"I was going to be gone for months," he says. "Then 9/11 happened... and things got very busy."

When flights to the US resumed, Rhod and his producer were on the second plane out. "We arrived and did six live shows from New York and then Washington.

"At the Pentagon a wonderful colonel who'd been there when it was attacked gave me a guided tour calmly saying, 'We couldn't go down that corridor, it was full of smoke and fire...' He was courage personified."

Rhod's shows – originally broadcast from London – have come from Marblehead, Massachusetts, for the past 16 years.

He and Vicki fell in love with the historic fishing town just north of Boston, and Rhod persuaded the BBC to let him work from the studio in their 18th-century home. So when he heard him at 1am, it was 8pm where he was.

He keeps a pair of the late Robin Williams's gloves in his attic studio. "We went to watch the Yankees play the Florida Marlins in the World Series," he

explains. "Out came Billy Crystal and he'd brought his friend Robin..."

"I asked if I could interview him about baseball, and we did it in the middle of the field. It was October and I was shivering so he gave me his blue cotton gloves."

Afterwards, Williams told Rhod that he'd listened to him intently "because he needed to work on his Scottish accent".

And Rhod told him that when he'd lived in San Francisco in the early 1980s, working as a BBC scriptwriter, he'd shared a large home which the owner had then rented to Williams and his first wife. His front room was my old office."

Rhod met English journalist Vicki there too. "I fell in love with his voice long before I fell in love with the man," she tells me, adding that Rhod's worst quality is his pessimism.

"His glass is always half-empty or worse, but I've learned to live with it."

"My glass is never less than half empty," he retorts. "I don't get too excited because disappointment swiftly follows."

It was his decision to leave *Up All Night*. From now on Rhod is as free as the marlins leaping past the jetty but he won't stop working. He's launching a website and is planning a series of "semi-regular" podcasts.

"I'll try and do things for people to take their minds off the coronavirus – the end of the world is not nigh."

Any farewell message? "Be well, be safe."

● *Keep Up With Rhod at [rhodsharp.com](http://rhodsharp.com)*



RELAXED LIFE: Rhod Sharp in Florida

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