

TOTP: RIP

It's about 3am and I've been watching Top Of The Pops for roughly 16.5 hours. Having been blasted by pop pap, prog rock, cock rock, bad house and hip hop for the majority of my waking day, my mind has begun to do odd things. I've made a rule that I can't fast-forward or skip any of the acts presented on the 40 tapes I have of the BBC's long running pop countdown, and I've become obsessed with the idea that I might have to endure Cliff Richard again (he's already appeared three times... and on each occasion it made my brain want to crawl out of my nose and hurl itself at the 'stop' button on the VCR) I'm fractious and twitchy in my chair. Approaching the end of this foolish marathon, I consider myself lucky that I'm unlikely to be troubled by the Peter Pan Of Pop another time. And then it hits me. He's here already. He's here in disguise. He's on the 2004 programme I'm watching right now, and I'll tell you how, it's very simple: Cliff Richard has killed Ronan Keating, and is WEARING HIS SKIN.

There's really no other human explanation for why, on a TOTP episode from 2004, Keating – a man some three years younger than me – is singing a song that Val Doonican would find “a bit tame”, of the standard soporific and nondynamic genre we like to call ‘Cliff’; a song designed to provoke as little thought as humanly possible with its “Will This Do?” string section and factory key changes. Earlier in the day I reflect that Cliff's music sounds as though he's started a home keyboard running on the ‘soft rock ballad’ setting and hit the transpose button a couple of times, and now, suddenly, I'm listening to Keating and I'm hearing it again! It's a Cliffastrophe! It's Cliff/Off!

So, why am I doing this? Why make myself a guinea pig in this bizarre forced entertainment? Truth is, I dunno. I've always had a love/hate relationship with pop music, adoring it for the fact that it's an art form that truly allows the listener to impose their own emotional meaning onto any old crap; despising it for pretty much exactly the same reasons. Maybe I'm trying to get to know it better. Maybe, in spending 17 hours solid in the company of Peter Sarstedt, Olivia Newton John, N-Joi, Spandau Ballet and DJ fucking Sammy, I'm attempting a sort of journey, a journey of self-discovery into the cold, dark heart of pop.

Whatever, these are my rules: I choose, at random, an episode of TOTP from each year between 1968 and 2004 (the BBC didn't actually record entire TOTP broadcasts until the late 60s.) I watch them in a single day, a constant stream of cheesy neon and formation dancing. I then document the process, like Aldous Huxley did when taking mescaline, or as a mountaineer might keep a diary of a treacherous ascent. So come with me now, won't you? If, in the end, we've all done permanent damage to our nervous systems, or we have frostbite corroding our extremities, all for the greater glory of... er... whatever! ONWARDS!

1968

Things begin as they intend to continue: Ridiculously. As it's the days before mass-produced promo films, Dionne Warwick's *Do You Know The Way To San Jose?* is accompanied by a crap film of a small donkey wandering about. The donkey hangs around on a nondescript stretch of road, and looks understandably confused as to why it's being asked to represent a Bacharach and David classic concerning the fickle nature of fame. At one point the donkey is framed to make it look as though it's driving a car, presumably in a vague attempt to link the action to the song lyrics. “Quick!” you imagine the producer hissing, “Whilst it's not looking, push the donkey into the car!” They then film the donkey trying to get out of the car.

1969

Already the playlist is giving the lie to the idea that “pop music were better in them days”. Cilla Black, Sandie Shaw, The Hollies and the foul murderer Cliff Richard all appear... but to be honest they might as well be reciting till receipts from Sainsburys for all the excitement they inspire. The only interest is provided

by the studio background projections that look like the oscillating hypno-chamber in The Ipress File. Clearly the TOTP production designers have started taking acid, but the artists haven't.

1970 – 73

What you have to remember is that we're still well within the era when the BBC had to pay for videotape by sending sacks full of gold doubloons to Japan. The stuff was so expensive that in order to cut costs, staff would simply wipe programmes already broadcast from the spools using great big buzzing magnets. As a result, very little remains of late 60s and early 70s TOTP. So here, we have a short clip of Jimmy Saville saying "As it happens, now that we have 45 minutes to fill, we can show you some different stuff, some avant-garde stuff..." Followed immediately by lots of TERRIFYING PROG, and the studio director grabbing hold of the vision mixer controls and going WHHHOOOAAAHHHRG!!! like a fighter pilot avoiding a missile. Crash zooms! Video feedback! The studio is full of men with beards, huge pulsating lights and huge, pulsating Hammond organs.

Jethro Tull! Rare Bird! Blodwyn Pig! "Widdly widdly widdly" goes the show for several hours, and you suspect that for so much progressive rock to have survived from TOTP's wilderness years there must have been some serious mixolydian-mode anoraks working in the BBC tape stores. I notice that the studio audience are standing stock still. "Look," I say to my girlfriend, "They're not dancing." "That," she replies, "Is because they've ALL DIED."

Pish, I think, I'm made of sterner stuff. I've been to a Porcupine Tree gig and everything. But my first moment of uncontrollable terror occurs as Noel Edmonds, with a completely straight face, introduces *Sylvia* by Focus. It's appallingly jaunty Dutch folk / prog, and sounds like the theme from EastEnders being played slightly too fast by hippies who don't know how to stop. Just when you think it's over... rinky dinky dinky weebly wobbly, off it goes again... ten minutes in, I'm reduced to a gibbering wreck on the floor. And it's not even 1974. I'm not even born yet.

1974 – 75

In a working mens' club called the Blue Pig up in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, there's a bloke called Dennis. Dennis is normally to be found asleep beside the fireplace, his jowls crumpled into a boozy snooze, a half pint of Guinness and a half pint of Timothy Taylor's 'Landlord' on the table next to him. What you might not think to look at him is that Dennis is, in fact, The Oracle. Dennis can look deep into your past and tell you something even you probably don't know about yourself. For in his pocket, Dennis has a little red book filled with dense pages of lists, and he can ascertain (after much harrumphing and flicking back and forth) exactly what was Number One in The Charts on the day you were born.

As we all know – and as astrology has proven beyond doubt – our lives are governed and guidable through what seems like so much banal ephemera. It is, therefore, my solemn duty to inform you that Dennis has told me I was born under the sign of *When Will I See You Again?* by the Three Degrees. What characterises us, as a subset of humanity? Well, think about it: "Three degrees." "See you again." That's right. We have THIRD SIGHT. Third sight is like second sight, just one better.

All the tapes in my Top Of The Pops odyssey have been chosen at random, with the selfish exception of the episode from 1974... because I want to watch the rundown from the week I was born. The question is, was pop music "better when I were a lad, not like all this modern nonsense with its short skirts, baggy jeans and oral sex"? Was it a golden age of song, a paradise of poem, metre and melody? Well, I can now answer once and for all:

No. No it wasn't.

Mud are up first, they of *Tiger Feet* fame. "Our name is Mud." Geddit? An inspired choice of band name right up there with "TBA", "Free Beer" and "Good Question Derek." Lads, no amount of side-splitting nomenclatures will change the fact that you dance as if choreographed by Vic Reeves and your song sounds like it was recorded inside a cardboard box full of dead pigeons.

And then things take a turn for the worse, as 1974 brings with it a cavalcade of names that even chart-farting pop fact bore Paul Gambaccini (the HAL 9000 of popular music) would have to scratch his head at: Ladies and gentlemen, Bobby Goldsborough! Ladeezangenulemen, David Stafford! Laysnjunlmn, Paul Da Vinci! The latter, in particular, is a terrifying proposition. Da Vinci looks like Andrew Lloyd Webber and sings like the eighth circle of Hell. The Americans could have won Vietnam, I find myself thinking... All the Pentagon needed to do was to catapult this spangly-suited, big-haired monster into the heart of the jungle, have him wander the territory singing in his strangulated high pitched whine, then sit back and watch as the Vietcong ran from the trees like rabbits.

Truth be told, mental images like this are in the nursery compared to some of the stuff that's playing out on the screen tonight: a lack of BBC policy concerning the acceptable levels of psychoactive drugs ingested by TOTP directors seems to have resulted in some of the weirdest, most disconcerting pop videos I've ever seen. In particular, a piece filmed for an innocent but dull song by Perry Como stands out. We see a young woman dressed up as a crap fancy-dress tramp. He/she writes a letter from where he/she lives, which is – naturally – inside a very large post office pillar box. The letter is then read by a pretty blonde girl on the Brighton seafront. Suddenly, the tramp is with her, and they play a slow-motion game of 'catch' with a huge blow-up model of the Earth. Unfortunately, whilst tramp and girl are making merry, random people are stealing stuff from the postbox: specifically, they pilfer a six-foot long bright red plastic lobster, a violin, and a stuffed eagle. Presumably grief-stricken by this heartless looting of his collectibles, the tramp attempts to commit suicide by climbing a lamppost. The tramp falls, but the girl catches her/him before he/she jellies up the pavement. The song ends. None of the above has the slightest connection to any of the lyrics.

Even the Rolling Stones get in on the act, performing the lacklustre *It's Only Rock And Roll* wearing matching US Navy sailor suits, inside what seems to be a hot air balloon. Keith Richards looks like the sort of sailor who might sell you a couple of decommissioned anti-aircraft guns – or at the very least, a dirty knife just before a fistfight. Drummer Charlie Watts simply looks bored, as usual. As the song trundles on, the entire balloon begins to fill up with foam, and after a while you just don't see Charlie at all. He's probably wandered off to label his collection of rare bird eggs, or whatever it is that Charlie actually enjoys doing.

No matter, I await the Number One spot content in the knowledge that I was born within sound of the safe, saccharine strings of *When Will I See You Again?* But then, the knife in my heart: DENNIS THE ORACLE WAS WRONG. According to TOTP's historical document, I was actually born to the limpid disco shuffle of *Rock Your Baby* by George McRae.

Look, there he is, jiggling around. The horror, the horror! I fall to my knees and curse Dennis' little red book. I thought I was a Three Degree-er, I thought I had the third sight, but no. No, actually, looking at McRae, what I have is a pronounced paunch, too-tight clothes and the fundamental yet hopeless desire to be Marvin Gaye.

Which, truth be told, I knew all along.

I'm sad now.

Nevermind, here's Johnny Mathis to cheer me up! It's a filmed insert, but the TOTP team have obviously forgot to bring along the sound-synch equipment so, rather than mime, Johnny instead wanders around the grounds of a stately home with no apparent purpose, and looks at some peacocks. The peacocks look back at him, as if to say: "Why aren't you singing, dickwad?"

So I'm still sad, but wait a minute... Did Noel Edmonds just say "Pete Shelley?" Yes he did. My girlfriend and I look at each other. Pete Shelley? Buzzcocks? I glance at the VHS box. Nope, it's definitely

1975. We then cut to a middle-aged man sitting on a gantry with an old English sheepdog. Peter Shelley (for it is he) is performing a country tinged lament called *Love Me, Love My Dog* which is not, despite the evidence, an invitation towards acts condemned by the RSPCA. Apparently, if you don't like dogs, then as far as Mister Shelley is concerned you can go dangle. It's stuff like Shelley - alongside the Goldsbroughs, Staffords, Donald Peers, Pickety Witches and countless other names famous for 1.5 minutes at best - that leaves you asking: Where did these songs go when they died? What stone did each one crawl under in order to quietly expire and be so comprehensively lost for so long afterwards?

It certainly gives the lie to many an argument that states "This music is popular, therefore it is quality music, beyond reproach, designed to last the course." *Love Me, Love My Dog* was on TOTP, for fuck's sake. *My Girl Bill* was in the charts. As if to prove the point, the Bay City Rollers crop up next, one of the most popular bands of the time, and we all know where they went when they died: into a thousand bargain bins in a thousand charity shops, slowly dissipating into the ether as their fans grew up and lost interest, nowadays only to be found in any concentration on Channel 4 nostalgia programmes and in Paul Gambaccini's latest big book of lists.

1976

Oh, look... it's Acker Bilk.

1977 - 79

Here's a few things we haven't seen on our journey so far: Cliff Michelmore, avuncular presenter of Nationwide, performing a novelty single about being stuck in his shed. We also haven't witnessed Joan Bakewell, eminence grise of the cultural documentary since 1965, donning a crow costume and jumping up and down to the repetitive beat of a tune called *Disco Crow* (altogether now, "D - I - S - C - ROW!") And whilst we're on the subject, another thing we haven't seen is David Jacobs, chairman of the panel show Juke Box Jury, crooning a caramel ballad named *I Hit You, And Now I Miss You* in which every mention of the word "Hit" is accompanied by the ding-ing of a bell, and each instance of the word "Miss" immediately suffixed by a gigantic electronic raspberry.

We haven't seen these terrible things, and we never shall. They never happened. They never happened because these presenters of yore were well aware of "appropriate context" and could sense when the viewing public might deem them an overbearing presence. Or, to paraphrase: they knew when people might get sick to the back teeth of the fucking sight of them. However, this is all about to change. Because at the arse end of the 1970s, here comes Noel Ernest Edmonds, here comes Dave Lee Travis, and last (but by no means least annoying) here comes Christopher John Tarrant.

Remember, this is only a few short months before the possibilities of blanket celebrity began to present themselves to these gurgling numpties - before Kenny Everett began to shine like a nativity star in their collective night sky, opening up a new era for DJs doing stupid stuff and getting paid cash money for it. It's odd to look upon the youthful Edmonds and see him for what he was: essentially, a goatee hovering three inches above a sweater. And then to ruminate upon what he has now become, with his business empire, his vacuous political posturing and his Adolf Hitler Angry Funtime TV Show (or whatever it is that Noel likes to call it.) You can see him on YouTube and contrast the man over the ages: back in 1976, segueing between Can and Acker Bilk by means of a joke best compared to some kind of noxious gas. And now, in 2008, rallying a baying studio audience, shouting "I MADE THIS SHOW. I MADE THIS SHOW, I DON'T TAKE A PENNY FROM IT. I MADE IT BECAUSE SOMETHING'S FUNDAMENTALLY WRONG WITH THIS COUNTRY" like a suburban Goebbels after a bad lunch. This, my friends, is how it eats you up and spits you out. This is how one moment you're playing records by The Rubettes and Manfred Mann, and the next thing you know you're leading an army inside your own head.

Cliff Richard shows his smug, smirking face again. He's singing falsetto this time, which is probably a random variant injected into this forgettable song in an attempt to make him appear talented. I wonder about the marketing meetings, the arguments that must have taken place. Cliff versus the record label! "I wanna sing falsetto, man," riffs Cliff, clicking his fingers like a jazz poet. "We're worried Cliff," say the suits, "If you sing in a high voice, your fans might think you're a woman now, or that you've gone really small." "Nah man, no-one takes risks any more, I wanna sing up the octave, live a little, touch the stars," says Cliff, to the repetitive chink of a swing cymbal, "I wanna be like Kerouac, I'll be like a squeaky Ginsberg." "Damn it Cliff," snaps one particularly irate suit, "The chicks are gonna think you've lost ya balls!" "But hey fellas," retorts Cliff as he unzips his trousers, "I haven't got any balls. Look-see!" And he drops the y-fronts, and there, for all to see: a smooth crotch, like an Action Man. "Never had the need for them!" toots our hero.

(Decades later: as a trapped and frantic Ronan Keating grapples in the dark against the surprising strength of his attacker, he will repeatedly kick his assailant in the gonads, and as the life drains from Ronan's big old heart, he will wonder why his blows seem to have no effect at all.)

Our first glimpse of punk is, of course, cartoon punk, as distinct from the authentic gob-in-your-eye variety. The Rezillos offer us not bodily fluids but *Destination Venus*. This involves a frontwoman dressed as Wilma Flintstone walking around in manic circles, and a vibrating buffoon of a frontman in an oversized Elvis get-up. They don't look like punks. They look like they should be handing out leaflets for a burger restaurant.

1980

DJ Dave Lee Travis is wearing a sunflower costume. He resembles a forgotten character from *The Wicker Man*.

Dave introduces Roxy Music in their famous "we're not interesting any more" phase. It becomes apparent fairly quickly that the sunflower routine was merely the first in a long line of tactics intended to ensure that you remember DAVE more than any of the songs on tonight's show. Talking in silly voices, plugging his own radio programme; these are all invitations to join the cult of DAVE where the tunes are mere incidental fripperies, and DAVE, with his huge, flat, bearded face, remains the centre of attention. Interestingly most of the songs are only too keen to aid his cause, being as they are (Jimmy Ruffin, Whitesnake, The Nolans, Hot Chocolate) about as memorable as a stubbed toe. But DAVE tries to make his wacky presence felt even when introducing Peter Gabriel in his "I'm still interesting" phase.

No Self Control is a pivotal record from my youth, and I resent DLT announcing it with all the hammy pomp of a washed-up comedian on a cruise liner clearing the stage for a juggling act.

Because Peter Gabriel is not a juggling act. No, tonight, Peter Gabriel is a MIME. His body is his tool, god help us. Peter does that 'not walking' thing where one makes like one is walking forward, but one does not actually walk forward and therefore, crucially, one avoids falling off the front of the stage. As the song warms up Gabriel does spasmodic moves cribbed from stick insects and scary spiders. And then, dammit, despite Gabriel employing the dance of "man trying to get shampoo out of his eyes", the end of this weird little song does what it always does to me, and I get the shivers. NO SELF CONTROL >>> NO SELF CONTROL as the cadences rise and the bass gets angrier and angrier >>> NO SELF CONTROL >>> NO >>> NO >>>

I take a moment to consider all the good stuff we've seen so far. For instance we've just seen Kate Bush doing *Breathing* (the song, not the biological function) and Kate has rolled around in a giant plastic bubble, as is Kate's wont of a Thursday. Also in this episode we've seen Squeeze, *Pulling Mussels From A Shell* (the song, not the – oh, you get it...) probably one of the earliest TV appearances of Jools Holland, who will in future decades become a sort of anti-DLT, presenting TV shows with the seedy glee of a minor character in a Pinter play. On earlier tapes we've also seen German pop-proggers Can with *I Want More*, its TV-theme weirdness confusing the audience and making them bob around as if trying to keep warm at a bus stop. Earlier still: The Kinks with *Lola*, a song so good that all they have to do is play it – no split-screen

effects, smash pans or soft shoe dancing. The Kinks don't even mime convincingly, and it's still the best thing I've seen this century. In other welcome cameos, Barry White and Stevie Wonder are featured over the long-lost TOTP tradition of the 'playout dance': the artist doesn't appear in-studio, but the audience are left in the spotlight as the credits roll, fully able to show off their fundamental lack of terpsichorean chops whilst the camera circles them like a pervy uncle. I'm grateful for the playback of quality tunes, even as an accompaniment to substandard frugging... but with the notable exceptions of a proto-video from Blondie and *Promises* by Buzzcocks, pretty much everything else has been profoundly rubbish. At a rough guess, about 1 song in 12 is bearable.

Against those odds, so far, 1980 has proven a pretty good year. But with Newtonian inevitability a wave of utter shite is about to ricochet back at us across the TOTP studio. The slide into mediocrity is sudden, and total. Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel are followed by Johnny Logan, who sings *What's Another Year?* He's got the emotive range of a barnacle. He's like a pot plant with eyes. He's a home keyboard demo function. If you stood him next to a cardboard cut-out of himself, and set fire to both, they'd burn at the same speed. The song itself? The suggestion of a faintly unpleasant smell in the next room.

To thoroughly rub salt into the wounds, who better than Chris Tarrant? He appears as one of the Four Bucketees, a spinoff from knockabout kids' magazine programme TISWAS. The Bucketees also count Bob Carolgees and Spit The Dog among their number (apparently as a single entity) whilst the other two are (hang on, let me check Wikipedia to be certain... oh, yes, here we go –) Pestilence, and Death. Their hit record is nothing so much as an immensely long peal of horribly forced laughter, with everyone having a smashingly good time in public, HA HA HA HA HAAAA! they go. Seeing Chris Tarrant bobbing about, immensely pleased with himself, has a disconcerting, anachronistic effect in the middle of this TOTP episode. Imagine dropping LSD and then being unexpectedly locked in a room with your primary school PE teacher.

Appropriately enough, 1980 plays out to *Suicide Is Painless*.

1981 – 86

Cliff Richard, YET AGAIN. I wouldn't mind so much, if only the vaguely ageing Mr Richard did something even remotely interesting. A few suggestions would be for Cliff to:

1) smear himself in pig's blood and ride a whale into the studio

2) sit there, waiting for a kettle to boil, frowning at a DIY book and occasionally attempting to re-wire the plug on a massive mains-powered dildo

3) construct a gothic throne made entirely out of the bones of his enemies (including Russ Conway, Adam Faith, and arch-nemesis Herbie Hancock)

4) appear in order to plug his autobiography, which he has written using only the letter 'e'

5) sing Congratulations whilst playing Russian roulette

But no, here he is, just... not doing... what Cliff... always... doesn't do.

Blondie's video for the lovely *Rapture* is upon us. and suddenly it's proper 80s now, snood and tennis whites 80s. A decade so irredeemably bling, it has its own coat of arms – crossed saxophones and the Ford Capri rampant, above the motto THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY.

As such, the Top Of The Pops studio goes all geometric neon, whilst bands and audiences alike start to do unspeakable things with patterned fabrics. If the 70s was the decade that style forgot, then the 80s was the decade when style woke up, panicked, and over-compensated. Maria Vidal appears in a

bulbous yellow coat with a purple glove garnish. Alexander O'Neal wears a greyish concoction with complicated folds that brings to mind an enormous Womble. When Dr Robert of The Blow Monkeys appears, his hair is teased into a size and shape that should, by all rights, qualify for its own constitution, legislature, and anthem. David Bowie's trenchcoat (in the video for charity clunker *Dancing In The Street*) has the wingspan of an albatross, and I reflect that the 1980s must look, in its entirety, like Grace Jones' wardrobe – grandiose, flamboyant, colourful, outré. The one major snag being: the only person who can carry it off... is Grace Jones.

Stampeding through the years, VHS after VHS, becomes odder and odder. The experience presents every passing fad with incredible speed, and largely devoid of context. Fashions pop up, greet the dawn with an animal yell, then keel over after a single breath. You feel like an omniscient but forgotten God of Pop, shaking your sad head at the ephemera on display, completely powerless to stop the foolish record-buying public and their unpredictable heresies. THUS spake the LORD: why do not people realise that Jennifer Rush singeth as tho' her nasal passages hath been sutured together? Why hath the human race taken Whitesnake to their hearts, for lo, they are before my sight now for the second time? Also: The Style Council croppeth up constantly with songs I've never heard of, even after I've just heard them. What giveth? Can men and women not PERCEIVE that pre-teen boyband New Edition sing with voices high-pitched, and bollock undropped, and yet appear old enough to have begun shaving? The LORD suspecteth a plot.

The deity of semi-permanent pop looks down upon *Manic Monday* by the Bangles, and is pleased. However, the lilting sweep of their final chorus is followed swiftly by, of all people, Su Pollard. How did this gurning sitcom loon ascend to NUMBER THREE in the charts? And if the trend continues, who the hell is at number one? Terry Nutkins? Eddie 'The Eagle' Edwards? Dr Raj Persaud?

Heavy of heart, the Lord inserteth another cassette.

1987

Now, I don't know if you recall the point at which the TOTP entered the world of computer graphics. But according to our fly-by-night tour, it all kicked off in 1987. It's not exactly anyone's idea of state of the art – the TOTP opening sequence looks as though someone has seen *Tron*, and has, like, REALLY enjoyed it, and then spent half an afternoon trying to replicate the graphics on a ZX Spectrum. You can almost see the computer thinking. The music is by Paul Hardcastle and is basically an annoying ringtone fifteen years ahead of its time.

Having said that, presenter-wise things have improved immeasurably, as John Peel has been handed the microphone. "JOHN PEEL!" I shout several times, as if he's ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Hailing Peel as some sort of anointed one is a good measure of my fragile state of mind as we slither through the 80s. But I'm not the first to seriously break and have to be physically held back from the FFWD button. That honour is reserved for my girlfriend, who finally cracks when subjected to *Music Of The Night* by Michael Crawford and Sarah Brightman. Dry ice floats across the TOTP studio like sulphurous guff-waft radiating from this immense Satanic turd of a tune, freshly extruded from Lucifer's mile-wide puckered poopflap. Crawford does his low-rent Elephant Man routine whilst Brightman hides behind a big candlestick and simpers, watery-eyed and weedy, in a manner normally reserved for disappointing costume dramas. The orchestral arrangement journeys from plain old hackneyed to overwrought, over-ripe and fatuous, and... "I CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE!" screams my companion. I make a triumphant note of it.

I also begin to consider the fact that I need to go for a dump (probably a natural mental association when confronted with anything produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber) and ask myself: as I'm not allowed to stop the continuous playback of tapes, what criteria should I apply in order to decide when, precisely, I can empty my bowels? Will a certain song, or band, immediately prompt a decision? Or should I lay down conditions in advance, e.g. I may only leave the room to 'offload' upon an appearance by Hot Chocolate, or

Limp Bizkit, or Janice Long? Or Prince? I resolve to act upon instinct, and in the meantime ignore the issue for as long as is biologically feasible.

John Peel introduces the top 40 countdown with a lugubrious "... and now the charts, huddled masses." After the number one song, *I Knew You Were Waiting For Me* by George Michael and Aretha Franklin, he comments: "They say Aretha sings so well she can make any old rubbish sound good, and I believe she just has." Sorely, sorely missed, that man.

1988 - 89

1988 brings with it The Pasadenas, Bobby McFerrin, Erasure, Wee Papa Girl Rappers, and U2 doing the boring song they did from that boring film they did. You know, the boring one? The one that sounds like *Not Fade Away* played by Runrig.

Bono and company even manage to make Rick Astley look interesting in comparison. But then let's be fair – Rick is genuinely interesting, in that he's got that whole Social Realist thing going on: the slightly-chiselled-but-essentially-homely look; the helmet of wavy hair; that broad-shouldered-man-of-the-fields thing. Put him in overalls and he could be a poster boy for 1930s Russian Collectivism. He ought to be heroically manoeuvring a combine harvester, or at least standing astride the principal tractor in, like, an enormous parade of tractors. Instead, he's swinging his pants to *She Wants To Dance With Me*, which even by Stock Aitken and Waterman's standards has lyrics so unremittingly bad, that, well, I mean –

*There's a girl I've been waiting to see
And I really get the feeling that she likes me
'Cos she said so, but not in so many words
I've got to tell you what I've heard*

Jesus. By the sounds of things, Rick, what you've "heard" is a globally audible muffled thump as rhyming dictionary salesmen across the earth throw themselves out of the window in unison.

And let me get this straight, you're "waiting" to see this girl? Are you currently in some sort of holding pattern? A queue? What, you're standing patiently in line, reading a magazine until it's your 'go'? Is there a ticketing system? What sort of twisted shit is going on here?

Anyway. I'm thoroughly disappointed that Rick Astley is not being held up as the shining example of the proletariat that he blatantly is, but merely as a pop puppet fit only for bourgeois dinner party conversations of the "Yah, isn't it amazing he's not black?" variety. I'm so disappointed, in fact, I decide to adapt the lyrics of *She Wants To Dance With Me* as a vessel for the appropriate Socialist messages:

*She wants to daaaaaance with me (ding ding ding dong)
Glorious leader, our hearts sing to you!
She wants to daaaaaance with me (dee dee dee dee dong)
And eliminate the landed peasant-ry.*

*There's a girl I've been waiting to see
And I really get the feeling that she likes me
'Cos she said so, but not in so many words
Stalin, the people salute your sobriety of vision!*

*SHE WANTS TO DAAAAAANCE WITH ME (doo doo doo doo dong)
Workers, fulfil your quotas! Workers, fulfil your quotas!
SHE WANTS TO DAAAAAANCE WITH ME (ring ding ding ding doo)
So I reported her to the People's Commissariat for State Security*

(Instrumental break and 6-hour procession of patriots.)

There. Much better.

1990

The cassette gets stuck in the VCR and refuses to play. I have to extract it with a screwdriver and scissors.

1991 - 93

Inspiral Carpets. "Unspiral carpets," says my girlfriend, precipitating a bout of shrill, mentally unhinged laughter from both of us that continues all the way through N-Joi and The Waterboys.

The question remains: when am I going to go for a poo? Neither the Mock Turtles nor Black Box seem to suggest an appropriate opening.

Also, my girlfriend has booted up her own laptop and is frantically googling every single act that appears – presumably in an attempt to add frisson to this foolish enterprise by means of solid gold pop factoids, some of which prove mildly non-suicide inducing. Hey, everyone: Martin Coogan (lead singer of the Mock Turtles) is brother to comedian and actor Steve Coogan, exclamation mark! I'm tempted to surf alongside her, but remind myself that I'm meant to complete this marathon without respite; that in order to emerge with any semblance of honour, I have to pay the closest possible attention to every onscreen detail, every last single-fingered stab at the synth, every last shake of the booty.

Then Deacon Blue turn up, and I go for a dump. Case closed.

Jimmy Somerville and Voice Of The Beehive open up the next episode with a naff take on *Gimme Shelter*. As usual, Jimmy reminds you of one of those toy plastic flowers that dances and sings a tune whenever you move. However...

Jimmy is wearing a t-shirt that says **SHABBA RANKS IS A BIGOT**. It's a laudable slogan, and palpably true, referring as it does to Rank's TV interview where he calmly advocated the crucifixion of homosexuals. But consider: in being so precisely topical Jimmy's t-shirt also performs an immensely useful function for future historians. Centuries from now, multi-media archivists will dig up some ancient hard drive full of manky MPEGs, including this one of Jimmy bouncing around, and they'll be able to identify the year simply by cross-referencing the slogan emblazoned across his chest. Wow! The only way Jimmy could help them more is by wearing something that reads, for instance, **CONGRATULATIONS TO MAURITIUS UPON BECOMING A REPUBLIC** or alternatively **OSCAR-WISE, I THINK JFK WAS A BETTER FILM THAN SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**. Or even one that simply says **1992, IN CASE YOU'RE WONDERING**. God bless the permanently vibrating little chap.

My own teenage years are now synching with the TOTP playback. In fits and bursts, I can remember these performances from the first time around – and apply the benefit of hindsight to songs and faces that would otherwise seem increasingly obscure. My mind begins to resemble those books containing intricate family trees of various rock acts that became inexplicably popular back in the 80s, allowing muso geeks worldwide to pore over spidery diagrams that explained, for instance, how Beef Cottesloe (ex of the Angry Swans) once played bass for Market Bosworth And The French Toast, before joining Pink Floyd for a week and dying when he tried to drink a hot lava lamp. My inner muso nerd is now making spoddy connections just like these, entirely of its own sad accord. So I see the fun and bouncy *Ain't No Love* by Sub Sub, and think of the epic pomp the same 3 guys will later produce when they morph into indie rock band Doves. When promos for Tricky's *Hell Is Round The Corner* and Smashing Pumpkins' *1979* get played out, I know the names of the fucking VIDEO directors. Luckily, I don't say any of this out loud.

My nerd gland has also spent most of the last 20 years palpitating in happiness as it notes the remarkable similarities between TOTP studio décor and any given Doctor Who set of the same era. What, don't believe me? Honest to goodness! Look at the lair of villainous Sil, intergalactic arms-dealing slug from 1988's *Mindwarp*, and the concentric neon circles are exactly the same as the ones behind the Wee Papa Girl Rappers! You think the Cybermen's tomb is just multiple sheets of bacofoil sellotaped together? So is that vibrating curtain behind Cilla Black! Luckily, I don't say any of this out loud.

It doesn't mean I recall, or even recognise, every single tune. 1993 brings with it *Dance 2 Trance* and *Power Of American Natives*. "I belieeeeeve in the power of American Natives!" bawls the frontwoman, repeatedly. Maybe I've blocked it from my memory because it represents precisely the sort of faux-spiritual, cynically opportunistic raver-bait that I hated as a teenager, its back-to-the-earth platitudes flagging up instantly as shallow and insincere. Don't get me wrong; I also believe in the power of American Natives, but that's because a lot of them carry handguns and the ones in Washington DC have access to roughly 1,650 nuclear warheads (luckily, I don't say any of this out loud.)

1994 - 96

Come 1994, it's strange to see the 'old' Mariah Carey, the original version, the one that didn't feel the need to slap her tits in your face all the time (I don't say this out loud – my girlfriend does.) Sinéad O'Connor once more proves herself to be the Anti-Mariah: she sings *You Made A Thief Of My Heart* with a demeanour best described as defensive, all sidelong glances as if sizing up the audience, judging whether they're set to climb up on stage and make a swing for her. She then bounces around whilst making some excellent seal-cub noises, and SINEAD SAVES 1994!

Between TLC, Take That, Blur, Pet Shop Boys and Tricky, 1995 needs considerably less resuscitation. Note for note, it's the best year yet. Shaun Ryder forgets to mime during Black Grape's *In The Name Of The Father*. Every now and then Shaun leans somewhere beyond the cameras and I imagine he's shouting things at the floor manager along the lines of: "OI! YOU! GOT ANY WHIZZ?" Add to this the sudden unexpected presence of Julian Cope as guest presenter of 1996's instalment, and the 90s is looking a lot groggier, druggier and weirder than one might expect.

That's right: Julian Cope. He's wearing bypass-protester chic and introduces every act with wonderful, deliberately spurious metaphors, linking song titles to the counter-culture cause of his choice. Hence, The Lighthouse Family's *Lifted* leads to Cope extolling the virtues of "lifting ourselves up into the trees" in order to prevent them from being bulldozed to make way for motorways. This is a particularly hilarious association given that The Lighthouse Family would no doubt rather shoot themselves in the face than sing about anything of import.

The closing credits of 1996 are accompanied by a trail for TOTP2, the archive-based sister show that will eventually outlive its sibling.

1997

I am Victoria Adams and I am presenting Top Of The Pops. Nothing else is important.

The studio crowd screams and squeals around me. I don't mind – I know they're calling out for Victoria, I'm dead certain of it, but what matters right now is that very soon, I'm going to speak. It's going to require concentration and no small amount of skill. I look into the camera with aplomb. I wait for the most important moment: my moment. Every ounce of my body (and believe me, that's at least 7, maybe 8 ounces) is taut, composed, and ready to perform. I'm also vaguely aware (and I mean vaguely) that to my right and to my left, the other girls (Mel, Mel, Emma and Fatface McStroppy) are saying their assigned phrases and also

looking at the camera. That doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm about to speak, and that either side of my speaking it's important to look as much as though I'm not speaking as possible.

At Laine Theatre Arts College I was top of my class in looking at things whilst not speaking, and I'm not about to lose that hard-acquired crown any time soon! But there can be no time for memory lane now! I'm about to speak!

Hmmm. I wonder if there's been a delay. I continue to look into the camera in the accepted fashion.

Now, what IS going on? My eyes show nothing, but my brain is concentrating hard on my face.

Apparently tonight there's going to be some Monaco (whoever they are - when they were mentioned in the green room I thought someone was offering me a coffee), Sarah Brightman (old) with Andre Bocelli (doesn't really speak English), George Michael (of no concern to me) and Eternal (like, it's soooo been done.) My role is to introduce the second act of the show. It's not the first act, but then nobody introduced the first act! So that's fine in the hierarchy of things – and as the producer personally assured me, the act I'm introducing will be the first act that I, Victoria, am introducing, so I'm doing them an enormous favour! They're called Faith No More, and whilst we were in the green room their lead singer spent lots of time offering to do something called the wheelbarrow with me. Melanie B kindly explained to me that this 'wheelbarrow' was a new exercise move: very popular in the USA. Maybe it will sort out all the worrying deposits of fat that have been building up on my face whilst I've been standing still and waiting for GERI TO FUCKING FINISH TALKING.

But now is not the time for negative emotions such as anger, upsettance, and extreme thought. I'm about to speak. The crowd is waiting. It's anticipatory. Everything hinges on this moment. Yes... I can feel it. I can feel it! Lean forward. Eyes slightly wider – not too wide! Too wide and I'll stretch my irises! Microphone equidistant to mouth – initial words departing from brain on voyage to vocal organs... diaphragm activated! Lips in motion! Face must remain pointed at camera! WHERE'S MY NOSE? It's there! It's in between me and the camera! Panic over! Say the words, look utterly fantastic, and don't smile, don't smile, please god, whatever happens DON'T... LET... ME... SMILE...

1998 – 2003

A strange thing happens in the dying years of TOTP. I've come to accept that this frantic sprint through its history is not going to provide me with anything like a true representation of the quality in pop per annum. 1968 for instance, a year of incredible musical innovation and imagination, is a dog on Top Of The Pops. But even given that the samples are random and my method of ingestion less than scientific, from 1998 onwards there is a notable shift in the show's attitude... and by the year 2000, it seems the shift has become an ethos. The show becomes – amazing to relate – more professional. But with it, TOTP seems more controlled, more controlling. Eventually it's not so much a programme; more a programming policy.

Now. I'm the first to berate the grass-were-greener, kids-played-in-the-street, Kylie-doesn't-make-songs-like-she-used-to moaners. There were no golden years. But there's also no doubt that as the century turns, TOTP's content represents a music industry battling against video games, recordable CDs, MP3s and t'internet. There are various strategies the programme-makers can adopt to save their rusty format; to keep relevant a programme that, by definition, is about charting a mass approval which has become much more difficult to measure. Multi-channel carries enormous chunks of audience away in different directions, like icebergs drifting into the sea and dissipating. TOTP must adapt. And to the producers' credit, not every single decision made in the face of this threat is utterly, comically useless. But my god – most of them are.

There's barely the opportunity to hear any music on the show now. Songs are interrupted constantly by camcorder interviews with the artists in question, who handily inform you a) who they are, b) what you're watching, and normally c) that they really, really hope you like it – because otherwise you're not fashioning a

narrative, see, and the target demographic will flick to the T&A on MTV as if they've been zapped with a cattle prod.

You might think I'm getting tired and emotional, my precarious mental state tilting over the edge as we venture further into this long, dark night of the pop. On the contrary. My attention remains undiminished. My running notes, if anything, are getting more detailed and verbose. Much like a marathon runner, I've broken through the pain barrier (I think it was in 1984, during Paul McCartney's *Pipes Of Peace*. My hands went a little numb, a high-pitched tone filled my ears, and then suddenly I was OK again. So either I'm fine, or McCartney gave me an aneurysm.) I'm coasting on four-to-the-floor beats and clouds of fake smoke. Back in 1994 the programme began its practice of coercing the studio crowd into making immense amounts of over-enthusiastic noise, and now their whoops, screams and whistles are like a tide, receding, returning...

No. I'm intact. I'm fighting fit, if a little dazed. I will live. It's TOTP that's on its last legs.

To add to the woozy air of uncertainty, there's still the odd gem amongst the cavalcade of turgid movie tie-ins and forgotten dancefloor fads: Oxide and Neutrino's Casualty theme-sampling *Bound 4 Da Reload* is a slice of bolshy bedroom-generated bliss amidst the coffee table blandness of 2001. In 2002, Scooter's *The Logical Song* is insane fun, and I return to the theory I held at the time: that Scooter followed, note for note, the strategies recommended by The KLF in their book *The Manual: how to have a Number One the easy way* (sample classic song, put breakbeat under it, shout impenetrable nonsense in between choruses.) The year after that, Junior Senior's *Move Your Feet* is joyous, gurning, body-popping glee. They're most welcome, because otherwise it's a sorry state of affairs.

Current theories regarding the death of the universe suggest an immensely slow, protracted end to the cosmos. Galaxies will dissemble, and ultimately all matter will succumb to the inexorable march of entropy. The stars will all die out, leaving nothing but a scattering of particles: what cosmologists call 'heat death.' And the pervading sense I have right now is that Top Of The Pops is perishing in the same way. No core, no focus, just a deathly diffusion, with pretty much every tune achieving an equivalent non-committal level of dullness. It's hard to even get angry at it, because that would be a bit like getting angry at nitrogen.

... Oasis, *All Around The World*. The one that sounds a bit like *Always Gonna Be There* by Pop Idol winners Hear'say.

... All Saints, *Never Ever*. The one that sounds a bit like *Always Gonna Be There* by Pop Idol winners Hear'say.

... Simply Red, *Ain't That A Lot Of Love*. Mick Hucknall part-owns a chain of hotels called Malmaison, a phrase which could conceivably translate as "Bad House." By the sound of this, it's a mission statement for all his enterprises.

... Will Smith, *Will 2K*. Will manages to rap like someone who remains contractually obliged to play the part of a rapper. I guess old habits die hard.

... Westlife, *Flying Without Wings*. I wish they would.

... MJ Cole, *Crazy Love*. Mr Cole is a multi-instrumentalist. Drums, keyboards, strings or woodwinds: he can pick up any single one, and immediately make it sound like a coffee table.

... System F, *Cry*. Forgettable (and forgotten) commercial house tune that features a 'chorus' of one, sustained, long note. Guess which word that note lands on?

... Papa Roach, *She Loves Me Not*. A tantrum set to power chords. At one point the vocalist actually screams "LIFE'S NOT FAAAAIR" over and over again. Emo cliché personified: wanking and crying at the same time.

... Paul Oakenfold.

... Daniel Beddingfield.

... Ainslie Henderson, *Keep Me A Secret*. Ainslie: you do not need my help.

The number one for 2002 is *A Little Less Conversation* by Elvis Presley feat. Random Remix Bloke #228. It takes the original fourth-rate shuffle of the Las Vegas recording and adds a track that goes wonker wonker wonker wonky wonky wonk wonk, then puts louder drums on it and a couple of unrealistically extended snare rolls. Job done. Some demi-funky dance troupe go halfway towards busting some moves, and Random Remix Bloke is not even present in the studio. But here's the thing: I am. I'm in the audience.

Granted, I'm not visible onscreen. But this insert was shot on the day in 2002 that I attended the TOTP studio recording for the one and only time. There were several mime-throughs by acts such as Liberty X, and a single truly 'live' band: Counting Crows, fully amped up and being filmed for TOTP2. I retreated to the back when I realised there was a peer pressure to dance around. Applied to yours truly, TOTP stands for "Too Old To Pogo" (and the songs didn't exactly suggest hair-whipping abandon) so I backed the fuck off and remained well behind the cameras for the rest of the day. I asked the odd question of the crew, who went about their business with the air of professional ennui that seems baseline standard for most TV operations. I asked, for instance, why Christina Milian was being recorded twice, wearing different outfits and performing slightly different routines for the same song, *When You Look At Me*. I was told it was because the Top 40 was predictable to such a degree that one could say, with some certainty, Ms Milian's song would still be riding high some weeks from when it first entered. Top Of The Pops would have to keep this track in rotation, and so it was custom and practice to have a second version of it.

Heat death.

Whilst Elvis Presley's DAT-tape ghost was chuntering through one of his lesser numbers, I skulked around far from the action and gave the stage set a closer look. On screen, the lights and fast-panning cameras give the impression of big, glass-panneled opulence, a modernist grid like the translucent floors of the trans-dimensional hotel at the end of 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. In real life, they were just black electrical tape laid out across standard stage blocks that had been painted matt white. They looked a little scruffy up close. They creaked, hollow, as I walked on them.

2004

My carefully planned cut-off point for this stupid pointless exercise is the year before TOTP moved to a Sunday slot, put out to pasture. After thirty years on BBC1 it migrated to BBC2, and finally became the stuff of nostalgia (with the odd resurrection at Christmas) in 2006.

By now, I can't say I'll be sorry to call a halt. 2004 opens not with a song, but with the opportunity to win something.

There's a worryingly detailed run-down of Brit Eurovision contenders.

Blazin' Squad mumble through *Here 4 One* and the stage is full of inept b-boys. Blazin' Squad: this is what happens when E17 don't use condoms.

Jamelia sings *Thank You*. In current company it sounds like The Velvet Underground.

We're given an interview with Peter Andre. I'd rather be given tetanus.

But how can I complain? TOTP ran for some 32 years, which my shoddy mental arithmetic calculates as a good 780 hours of television. I've watched 17 of them. We've not done too badly. Will Smith

has cropped up twice, as have Whitesnake, The Rubettes, Manfred Mann, George Michael in ballad mode. But we've also been graced by the presence of Kate Bush, The Smiths, The Kinks, Tricky, Kirsty MacColl, New Order...

I was grateful to encounter Babylon Zoo just the once – but then, so was the world.

Better than anything, as we scrape into the wee hours, I know that there's no chance of me seeing Cliff Richard again. The thought strikes me 10 minutes into our final episode, and for a brief, fleeting moment, it gives me a warm, contented sense of relief. A mental respite.

3 times in one day would be 3 times too many. Even Cliff's parish vicar must get a better deal than that. I'm safe in 2004, a good few years after Cliff fell out with the Beeb for refusing to run some crappy knock-off he self-released, and when he vowed to... to what, exactly? Make Tssking noises whenever the corporation was mentioned? "Those cats won't run my groove!" Cliff says to his long-suffering local reverend, "I get bad thoughts. My next records gonna be choc-a-bloc with angry guitar, man!"

"Cliff, you've got to see this through a young man's eyes."

Cliff looks up. "Yeah." He says. "Yeaaaaah. A young man's eyes. And I know just the man."

A week later, Cliff smuggles himself into Television Centre by disguising himself as an old crone (this isn't difficult – he just pulls the pin out of the back of his neck in order to release his face.) He crabs into the basement below studio 2, and manages to disconnect the power to the backstage area and TOTP bar. Before anyone has time to evacuate the dressing rooms, Cliff has found his way to the door with the star marked "MR KEATING." In the pitch black, he introduces himself. "Ronan," he says, "We've met a coupla times, yeah? Wimbledon. Just need your skin, fella. I just need another spin of the wheel."

"Who...?" whimpers Ronan, petrified. But the saggy, clammy thing with the mannered voice is on top of him, hands around Ronan's neck, pinning him back against the basket of complimentary fruit. Ronan flails out – finds his leg free, kicks at his assailant's crotch. NO DICE!

"Sorry," says the voice, over and over, "No other way, my friend. Sorry. Sorry. Love your work."

It takes Cliff just a few minutes to remove the Boyzone lynchpin's epidermis. A dab hand at this game by now (he did the same thing back in the 80s with Terence Trent D'arby) he shrugs into the flayed mansuit, then he's out and along the corridor in seconds, and socialising with Fearn Cotton by 5pm. He's got himself a nifty Irish accent to boot, and when he approaches the playback boys in the studio control room, slipping them his substitute song, it's with a jovial, nonchalant "Hoi goys. Hurrs the bocking tape fur toonoyt, excloisive track, brand new doirection. Way-aye pet!"

And all this I'm convinced of. After 17 solid hours of pop pap, prog rock, cock rock, bad house and hip hop, I thought I'd seen the last of the man. But here, standing on that faux-glam stage demarcated by electrical tape and Dulux, there can be no doubt: with that relentless, almost totalitarian devotion to mediocrity... with that god-bothering false sincerity... with those dead, humourless eyes, and phoned-in emoting... there's no other explanation. Cliff Richard has killed Ronan Keating, and is wearing his skin.

Goodnight.