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Q: Can you give us some background about yourself?

BW: I was born in Sunderland in the northeast, came to Birmingham with my mother and father in 1963. Like many people, they moved from communities where work was not necessarily plentiful to areas where there was. Birmingham in the 1960s was a place where you could get a job. The local paper used to be about half an inch thick, and that was generally about jobs that were advertised in lots of different engineering companies, construction companies. So it was a very productive place and a place where people were attracted to go to, both internally around the country but also from overseas were asked to come to help rebuild, part of the post-war rebuilding of Britain. So I was part of that migratory move really I suppose. Twelve years old, it was the 3rd of May 1963. I'd traveled for about probably nine hours or more from a coach from Durham and arrived in Digbeth coach station to what was a very alien environment compared to what I'd been used to in the northeast. We moved to a place in Sparkbrook, rooms in a big house in Braithwaite Road, Sparkbrook. Interestingly, that house now, 17 Braithwaite Road, is part of the Friendship Housing Association, which was set up specifically to help to house young Afro-Caribbean men who came across to Britain, got invited to Britain, to work. They didn't have anywhere to live so it was set up specifically to try and get them houses to live in and places to live, rather than 20 people crowded in one house, working hard but not really having the houses that facilitated their needs.

Q: What had your environment been like back in Sunderland?

BW The house we lived in in Sunderland, I was born very close to the River Wear at a place called Wearmouth, a very old part of Sunderland. But the family moved to Redhouse, which

was a housing estate very similar to where we live now, built in the early '50s as part of the massive housebuilding program that took place. We lived in what was a modern house with a bath. I'd not known a house that didn't have a bath, by the way, so it had a bath and we were on the edge of the ? of ?, across the road from me literally. It was agricultural fields that went on for about three mile. So I was very lucky, my playground was the countryside on the doorstep. It was a community of people that were very close, and I think that might've been the case everywhere at the time to some extent, but it was a very warm community. The people moved out of Sunderland in those days, you didn't get people moving from outside Sunderland coming into Sunderland; people moved away. So it was very indigenously white area. The only time you'd see someone of a different colour would be very occasionally, if a salesperson came around to the door selling on the doorstep, and that was a very rare occasion. So we didn't have any experience of people from different heritages. Coming to Birmingham, you know what, it's a different world. Birmingham is made up of immigrants, so it was a contrast, it was different, but an exciting one as well. Where we first went to live there was Irish people, there was Pakistani people, there was African people, there was Indian people – it was a very diverse inner-city community. It was a totally different experience altogether.

Q: What prompted your parents' move to Birmingham?

BW: Well basically it was my father, dad who moved. The main driver for him to move, because he'd been a prisoner of war and rehabilitated himself back into normal life, was not easy. He really couldn't settle, to some extent, and he had a wandering instinct. It was that really. In our youth my dad worked away from home for a fair bit of the time. He used to have traits of behavior that seemed normal at the time but it was not. He used to show signs of post-traumatic stress. You'd come into a room and he'd be standing bolt straight just staring into space. A bit like the railway man, a bit like the behavior in the film *The Railway Man*. He was very damaged by that experience. So he moved to Birmingham and worked in Birmingham and we used to see him about three times a year for the first three years until we joined him.

Q: So you moved here to a multi-occupied house?

BW: No, it was an old house and the woman who owned the house and lived in it was Mrs. McAllister. She was born and raised and she was about 70 years old when we moved in. The house was literally almost like going into the past. It was a well-kept house but it was a huge house, it'd been her family house. We were the first tenants that she let in, and I think the reason was I think she worked with my dad at the BSA in Montgomery Street, BSA Tools for a while. I think that's how he got to know her and how we first stayed there.

Q: What got you interested in politics?

BW: I had a very deep sense of class, without realizing it, from a very young age in Sunderland, because of the community I lived in. I didn't have the politics of the academia and the sort of philosophies, but I just understood my class completely. It was there because it was the environment I lived in in Sunderland and the influences at that time. I clearly knew what side I was on. When I came to Birmingham another thing that was a big influence on me in the early days is I also went to an inner-city school in Digbeth where 90 percent of the kids were either first or second generation Irish kids. Basically I got adopted by the Irish community to some extent. I'm not Irish; I've probably got ancestors who would have Irish in them, as many people may. But I have a feeling that it's part of my identity too, as an adopted Irish person, if you know what I mean. So that was interesting, and I've still got an affinity with the Irish community today. I have a lot of Irish friends and they've sort of gotten me into the Irish culture, and did a little bit of music earlier on.

Q: How did the politics come into that?

BW: I think the politics was really when I left school really. You become aware that there's a world beyond school and beyond the sort of playing. Going to work, you're reorienting – where the world was was a different world. I quickly understood the need to join a union. I worked initially as an apprentice in an engineering company and I very quickly joined a union. I wasn't lobbied to join a union, a union existed and I was keen to join it because I just knew that it was important to be a member of a trade union. I wasn't pressed to join a trade union, it was naturally the right thing to do really. I was interested in the trade union

bit and as time went on that interest developed and grew. It particular took off when I eventually got a job for Land Rover transmission factory in Tasley. That was the first organized place I'd really worked in. I'd worked in companies where people were members of a trade union, but they weren't really organized factories, they were small factories manufacturing aircraft components and things like that. But Land Rover obviously was an organized factor, so it was a different experience. But before I joined Land Rover I actually joined the Communist Party, the Young Communist League. So when I worked for Land Rover it was like this is an opportunity to organize and to agitate. I was beginning to develop my ideological understanding of different concepts, different ideas. I was introduced into the ideas around Marxism and Marxist concepts, and introduction into issues regarding women and women's rights issues and things like that. I went through a very fast but salted up type of experience in politics basically and discovered a new politics and it just became more and more clarified and gave me a very clear ideological framework that was building very quickly really. Being in an organized factory made a difference.

Q: Did your union involvement escalate?

BW: Yes it did escalate and yes it took up a lot of time. Within six months, I was 21 years old when I joined Land Rover, you had to be 21 years old to work in the car industry at that time. The only other young people were apprentices and they would be in the tool room. So I was a very young person in the motor industry, the youngest that you could be. Within six months of being there, I was elected shop steward, which was interesting. You had to work for the company for 12 months before they would recognize you, but the convener that we had, a guy called Pete Nicholas, who was a very active member of the Communist Party as well as engineering convener, once he realized who I was and I was a member of the YCL his eyes sparked a little and he basically engineered that I got elected as a shop steward, which was interesting. So I began to agitate, educate and organize the section that I was on, and just salted up. As a consequence of that, I got involved in the Ergonet side of the branches, so I attended my branch regularly. Eventually I was also a member of what they call the young engineering section. I was involved in going to the district committee meetings as an observer, as a young engineer. I was beginning to understand the mechanics of organizing at a district level on the district committees. I became involved also in what was called the

broad left. We had a broad left of engineering shop stewards and other people that worked in the motor industry and component industry. We used to meet very regularly in a pub in town, I forget what it was called now, somewhere in Holsfair, so we used to meet there. It opened up a network of trade union political activists and activity that took up a lot of my time. Val would tell you if you asked her that, she used to say put a picture up so the kids know what you look like. So ya it took a lot of my time. When we used to go later on to different sort of folk sessions at times, there'd invariably be the song of the class struggle widow. I got the impression and I think I later learned that it was actually directed at me for being sort of really to adjust my male, I'm important and I campaign, the little wife's at home sort of doing the cooking and looking after the kids. But that also shaped my understanding and importance of recognizing that too. The trade union activists at the time were 99.9 percent male. There was very few women activists that I encountered. There were women trade unionists that were very well organized, like SU Carburetor that employed lots of women because of the small type of work they did that required the kind of dexterity that women could do in small components. So it was a male world, for want of a better word. The shop stewards, it was very macho when I look back, to some extent.

Q: How did your coworkers react to your youth?

BW: Interestingly enough, I think they were a bit sort of like, at the end of the day I used to have to subject myself to election every 12 months. People could vote me in or not vote me in. I very quickly built up and developed a confidence with the 20 or so people that were on the section that I represented, and within weeks of being elected shop steward we had one or two little mini-strikes, for want of a better word. They would support me 100 percent and in doing so I supported them. I worked hard at agitating, educating, communicating every day. I was on piecework at the time so I'd have to do my work, but I used to go on billyo to make a bit of space. Instead of using that space to earn more at my piecework, I used that time to get around and talk to people, constantly having conversations about politics and things that's going on. I very quickly captured the interest of people politically, so it was chipping away. That extended beyond my section into other sections, because I brought an influence on other sections in the particular machine shop. We were quite tightly organized. There used to be the guys on the line, and the foremen and the superintendents were in

their office. If a foreman wanted to speak to a guy in my section he'd come and ask me first – is it alright if I speak to so and so? Well what's it about? So basically we had control of the shop floor to some extent. We all worked, don't get me wrong, but it was not the main where foremen, they would come out and do everything they were going to do and then they'd go back into their office. Even superintendents would not go wandering around the shop floor without saying, giving a bit of courtesy. Like if we went to their office we'd knock on the door and say, do you mind if I have a word with you? We established that kind of etiquette. We worked hard but it was about the negotiating position about what you did, how you did it, and your conditions. It was our space. We had some interesting times, interesting times.

Q: Were you still a member of the Young Communist League throughout this time?

BW: Ya I was, but I was more of a card carrying and I used to go to meetings and sort of events and things like that, but my energy was within the work operating in the factory, being a shop steward and organizing the factory and organizing in the union beyond the factory. That was where my energy went to, I think that's where it had to go. You can't do everything, and it was important to organize in the factory, because that's where the battle was in terms of defending wages and conditions. If they were going to improve, that's where the battle was. So it was important.

Q: When did you first become aware of Banner Theatre?

BW: One of the things that used to happen in the early '70s is I used to take the lads, Robert and Colin, we used to take them to the Mayday rallies. We always celebrated the Mayday rallies that were organized by the Birmingham Trades Council, which was an organization at the time that was at a big reach in terms of its influence and in terms of its connections. There were thousands upon thousands of shop stewards in factories in Birmingham, so that was a big network of political activists. So the Mayday rallies they used to organized with the Trades Council were huge events, a full day. There'd be a big march in the city, probably about eight or ten thousand people in Birmingham, which you don't get these days. There'd be a big march and a big celebration of trade union identity, and then there'd be a day of

political forum in the civic hall. You'd get people making speeches but you'd get other events for kids, you'd get theatre, you'd get song. There were different things happening in different parts of the civic hall. One of the things that I saw for the first time was Banner Theatre performing one of its shows called The Great Divide. The Great Divide was a show which really was challenging racism and things like that. It just mind-blowing, it was very powerful theatre. Theatre's not something I've been to, I wouldn't go to a theatre because I think of Shakespeare and things like that. But Banner Theatre at the time was a powerful medium that sort of wow, with the songs, the stories. You couldn't get enough of it. I was just bowled over by it. I would have probably seen Banner Theatre at an event like that possibly for a few years really. I didn't know anybody in Banner Theatre but I found them inspiring. It basically reinforced and gave me another texture to my politics, another ingredient that would cement between the bricks and bring it together. It made me aware of the power of culture really, the power of other ways of saying things. The other time I can recall seeing Banner Theatre wasn't in a show. There was a big demonstration, there used to be big TUC and other types of demonstrations in London where they were huge. On one occasion there was a demonstration that was called The Leyland Combine Committee, which was like a committee of the conveners in British Leyland used to come together in order to coordinate the organization from a grassroots level in the workplaces. They decided to charter a train, not a coach, a train, to take thousands of people down on the demonstration. It was a rickety train, I think they pulled the carriages out of mothballs really for the occasion I'm sure. But I remember Banner Theatre or certainly Dave would've been there, possibly Chris Rogers I think was there too, and there may have been others. They were just literally going from carriage to carriage and singing trade union songs and political songs. That was good. They were basically delivering a political message to people who hadn't heard those ideas before. It was quite inspiring. So I was smitten without knowing Banner Theatre. Then some years later, probably a couple of years later or less, I was approached by a more experienced shop steward, and again he was a member of the Communist Party as well, oddly enough. There was a cell of us within Land Rover Tansley. He says, would be interested in being interviewed for a show that's being written around the motor industry; they're coming to interview people, shop steward activists. Oh I don't know, I'm not sure. Eventually I was persuaded, basically as a favour to the guy, because he was a more experienced dude at the time and I says, alright then I will. I met Dave Rogers in

the Saltley Action Centre I think it was at the time. He was there basically asking me about the motor industry, about what happens, what's it like, and just basically getting me to tell stories and talk about the trade union activity and talk about the nature of the work. I think he interviewed me a couple of times I'm guessing. He ensnarled me into sort of go along to their office in Loweselles basically to just sort of be a critical friend as they're developing the show, which eventually became known as On the Brink. It was in its very early stage of writing. I was suddenly then thrown into another world again, another world of people from the arts who were writing a show like the kind of shows I'd seen. Before I knew where I was I found myself sucked into the agenda of the work. It was powerful, I thought it was an important way to tell a message, and to some extent it was an enjoyable sort of process to be involved in. Eventually after a while it was well, would you take a part, would you do a part? Oh, I don't really want to do a part in the show. But eventually again, very persuasive people. Charles Parker, who was one of the original members and as I understand founders of Banner Theatre, and Dave in particularly and a few others basically persuaded me to actually dip my toe in the water. That's where I met other very good friends that are still very good friends – Mogs and Tim, that's where I first met Kevin. He was Kevin Pratt at the time but he took the oath to become a Murphy. But I first met Kevin and Marian Houton, who were far more sophisticated and more knowledgeable than I was, all of them. They had been involved in the work of Banner Theatre much before that. So I found myself sort of getting involved and eventually toured with the show. It was quite a successful tour for trade unions and what have you. It was at a time as well where the Tories in the '80s, because this was in the '80s that this eventually was out, the Tories were attacking trade unions very aggressively at the time. Their agenda was to take on the trade unions. We learn now that part of that agenda was to attack certain sectors, and certainly the motor industry was one of the sectors that they were keen to attack and to undermine. At that time they actually politically assassinated, for want of a better word, what as an iconic convener at Longbridge, a guy called Derrick Robinson. He was sacked for daring to stand up for the survival of the motor industry. British Leyland had been starved of investment for years. Postwar it had no competition, European car industries had all been smashed through war. So the British motor industry postwar didn't really have that much competition. It was an industry that was made up of lots of small car companies: Morris, Austin, Standard Triumph, Jaguar, Land Rover. So it was very fragmented and it was brought together under British

Leyland to try and help its survival, but it really wasn't working. All they did with any profits, they sucked it out and they weren't investing. I worked on machines when I was building the new gearbox for the Range Rover at the time, it was the Range Rover gearbox components I was working on. I was working on machines that came from prewar, making components for a really modern car that was to be built. It was bizarre. What had happened, because the motor industry was really under threat in terms of its survival, there was a commission set up by the previous Labour government under a guy called Lord Rider. Basically out of that came a plan to try and sort of politically support the motor industry, British Leyland, in order to equip it to be fit for purpose for the 21st Century or the 20th Century. It had an ability to be able to continue to manufacture and offer jobs, but it had to be reorganized in order to give it the ability to do that. For example, instead of building engines and all those different parts of the motor industry – Morris did its own engines or Land Rover did its own engines, Jaguar did its own engines, and transmission was all the same – the idea was to try and create a centre of transmission manufacture, and that was going to be in Coventry. That's where it was going to be consolidated. So you would get a facility that could produce the engines and transmissions to scale, a bit like what happens now today with the big companies. Ford will produce its engines that will go European-wide, so it makes the unit costs less. That was the rider plan. The trade unions, rightly or wrongly at the time, the trade unions on the ground in the factories, agreed to a period of time where the company, part of the rider agreement that they eventually accepted in order to save the industry was to agree to, they were given an opportunity to have some influence over, not what was produced, but certainly the where, when and how. The company would not say, well what can we produce, but the where, when and how was open for debate and negotiation. In fact, it was out of that process that you got a new model that was built at Austin, the Mini Metro; it was a new model, new technology, robotics and all the rest of it. So it was an attempt to try and save the motor industry. Then when the Tories got elected in 1979 a couple of years after that they dumped that plan. The guy called Michael Edwards was taken on as the chief executive of British Leyland, and suddenly the agenda became one of we're not going to support the rider plan, we're not going to support this process of committing ourselves politically to this industry. What they did then is decided to cherry pick, we'll close places down and basically we'll just concentrate on making those little bits around that could be profitable to be profitable. So they pushed for this idea that certain plants were

just going to be closed. The company at the time put out a support the survival plan. The survival plan was this plant's going to close, that plant's going to close, oh but your plant's okay. It was a loaded question where 25 percent, I think the idea was that 20,000 jobs would probably go, 20,000 jobs. Well if you've got 50,000 people or 60,000 people or more who they were saying, your job's okay, what they gonna do? Well alright, we'll fall for the survival plan. But Derrick Robinson at the time challenged that whole concept and they put out a document which basically was setting the scene for what would've been a battle to recover the commitment to the industry completely. Faced with that, it was a bit like what happened to the miners later on about which pits are going to close and cherry picking them off. What happened was, because Derrick Robinson and the combine had a big influence and could call people out on strike, basically the company called him in the office. Because he'd written this pamphlet championing the plan to save the motor industry, they basically sacked him; they used it as a pretext to sack him. That caused a wave of unofficial strikes. The Austin plant went on strike straight away and other plants basically followed suit, including where I worked. We went out on strike, and that was to the annoyance of the officials in the trade union at the time, the officials in the engineering in particular, who really also wanted rid of certain what they considered people who would challenge their so-called power. They didn't like the power of the shop stewards, they didn't like the idea that shop stewards were there. They thought that they should just be in control of what we do, whereas we saw the officials of the union as there to serve us and support us. Their view again was that they were politically aligned to destroy the shop steward movement for political reasons. So that was a big strike. In fact, to the same of the engineering unit, it wouldn't endorse a strike. Transport General Workers Union, that was a different union that Derrick Robinson was in, actually made the strike official. The engineering unit just sat on the fence and whatever. Eventually they came up with a deal with the company to say, we'll have an inquiry. So what they did, that inquiry says Derrick Robinson, we'll pay his wages, he won't lose any of his money, and we'll have an inquiry. This inquiry went on for about three months. In that three months people were sort of bullied back to work to some extent. In that three months the company spent thousands and thousands of pounds basically assassinating the character of Derrick Robinson, demonizing him to the point where the national newspapers would be full of demonized stories of Red Robo and what a dangerous person he is, to the point where in the Austin factory he was a popular figure and was well

liked, but after three months he'd been demonized that much that the guys even at Austin were buying in to the company's very extensive day in day out propaganda. They used to publish leaflets and what have you and sort of briefings that they distributed on the shop floor day after day after day. Basically they created that Derrick Robinson was some kind of demon. Derrick Robinson, do you know what, he was a strong leader but he wasn't a disruptive person. He probably stopped more strikes than were started, because he would get involved and resolve the issues. But he represented a danger. That was an interesting period.

Q: In On the Brink, were these issues brought into that?

BW: Yes. I think the On the Brink show really was instigated or prompted by what was happening in the motor industry. The car workers were at the front line of being under attack by the government. They happened to be the ones at that time that were on the front line, it happened to be them, car workers. It's all about all the papers, the Evening Mail, demonizing car workers who don't do any work. They had no idea. People worked very hard. They painted this picture of people that stood in the way of productivity, they wanted tea breaks. There was a strike in the county once because they removed their tea breaks, they decided that they couldn't have a tea break, a 10 minute tea break in the morning where they stopped the track, because they wanted the track to continue working and they wanted to stop the tea breaks. Arguably, part of the reason they wanted to remove periods of time where people could sit down and have a cup of tea and chat was that people might talk about things and people might share ideas. So it was partly to do with the productivity thing but it was also a political attempt to marginalize the time that people would be together. If people are sitting down together, you know what, you chat, you swap ideas. You take that away from them, you don't have time, because you're working on the job and you don't have time to talk to each other. Very clever really. But that's what gave the impetus to the show, I believe that was the case. Of course there's been other sectors that had been under attack either just before or just after, the steel workers and so on and so forth, there'd been other sectors under attack. But the motor industry was one of the targets, in fact it later turned out following the attack on the miners in the '80s that it was part of the

plan of Nicholas Witterly, the Conservative MP, to actually engineer a weakening of the trade unions before they went for the vanguard, which was the miners themselves.

Q: You mentioned On the Brink. How did the first rehearsal go or your first experience with it?

BW: Well put it this way, I went into a strange world of people who were either professionally or economically what we call middle class. They were educated, they had degrees, so there was a different circle of people altogether. That didn't worry me at all because they were very warm and very good people, very welcoming and things like that. I think the first thing I remember being in the office in Loselles and this was all new to me, and all of a sudden Fran Rifkin, who was a member of the core group at the time, came into the office. It was before they went into another room where they would be talking about the show a bit. Suddenly it was to do a relaxation sort of exercise. It was sort of like everybody lie on the floor and sort of take deep breaths and all that kind of stuff. Breath in, hold it, and all that kind of stuff. That felt really sort of, I thought, what the hell is going on here? It was just really strange, but it was part of their environment and part of what they did, but it was completely alien to me. The idea of deliberately concentrating on relaxation just didn't happen, you just got on with life. So I felt a little sort of out of my bubble doing that and I felt it was a bit strange, to say the least. I thought, Val would never see me doing this, she'll think I've gone around the bend completely. But after a while I started sort of just seeing it for what it was, and it wasn't a problem. But it was a little embarrassing to begin with really, because it was just something I'd never done. I'd not been involved in the arts or anything like that. But the first rehearsals, I was there when they were still writing the show. Dave or Charles Parker or one of the others used to come with a draft of a script and the different characters, and they'd discuss the different things that would be in the show. It was very much centered around the sacking of Derrick Robinson. They'd interviewed lots of other people in Austin and other places and they brought lots of their transcribed stories in a printed out form. They used to have an old Ronio printer where you'd put ink in the drum and sort of type on a skin of types, then you'd put the skin around the drum and sort of roll it around, which was a very crude way of producing script packs for people to look at. A lot of it was discussing, and I think at the time I was able to inject a bit of reality because I

worked in the industry, I worked on the floor, I worked in the environment. So I was able to sort of bring that experience into the conversation I guess. Then as the characters were beginning to shape, one of the characters that came out of it was a character in the show called Kinky King Konrod. Kinky King Konrod was almost like a zany sort of character that used to come into the show, and what he was doing was trying to unseat the power from the seat of power, which was represented by a toilet. Dave had got into an old house that was demolished and ripped out the toilet, and I think he cleaned it out and mounted it on a box on wheels. The seat of power, which was a character played by the master of ceremonies as well, Bob Etheridge, he would sit on the podium. So this toilet was one of the props and Bob Etheridge, as well as being the master of ceremonies dressed in a white boiler suit and what have you, and a bit of a character, used to come in as a bit of a link between the different scenes. He would at certain points sit on the toilet, being the seat of power. ? was to come up with the magic formula to try to get him off the seat of power. Basically they conjured up the spirit if '72, then we knew just what to do. Send the bosses to their fate, give them a dose of Saltley Gate. It never worked towards the end for a lot of reasons. It was about the message of together we can change things, individually we can't; it was about that. But this toilet in the show also doubled up for the Evening Mail where Kevin Murphy played the part of the Evening Mail guy with his scruffy mac he wore. He would sort of like come in, get your Evening Mail, and all the rest of it; there were songs about that. He used to lift up the toilet and take the Evening Mail out of the toilet. It was all dramatically underpinning the message really.

Q: What was the significance of the Evening Mail?

BW: Well because the Evening Mail was the local paper, it was the local broadsheet, and it was the paper that peddled the lies and attacks and demonizing constantly day after day. It was always a negative story about car workers, always a negative story about shop stewards. They were always attacking – they're on strike for nothing, and all the rest of it, sort of comparing lazy British Leyland workers to efficient Japanese workers and all that stuff. It was a drip feed of constant undermining, demonizing people who were activists within the motor industry but demonizing the industry itself in order to nurture a public perception so that when it came to the attack I guess the public were already, well it's their

own fault, they deserved it. That's the way they attack communities, that's the way they attack individuals, it's what they do. It is a process. But at the time you don't realize, you're just constantly defending yourself and constantly looking to defend. There was a constant pressure to try and erode your wages and conditions and all the rest of it, that was a constant thing. You had to fight every day to retain control of the job to stop them squeezing the last bit of blood out of you. So it was a never-ending process. People bargained every day over their work process and how many pieces they had to do an hour and what have you. It was a constant battle. You didn't realize it at the time, but these battles you had were happening all the time. You had hundreds upon hundreds of shop stewards in sections that were battling every day with their foremen over the foremen trying to squeeze a bit more out of you because they'd been told they've got to squeeze a bit more out of you. So you were negotiating your job with the conditions and the pace every day. The deal was you were looking to get the deal, but what the deal was in terms of what effort you had to put in. If they could they'd work you to death, they literally would.

Q: What was your character in On the Brink? Was it a hero?

BW: I wouldn't say so. I think the heroes were, all of us became the workers on the line at some point because there was a scene where they had the front part of a mini literally that was converted to represent the track. The central characters of it really were the workers that were working in the motor industry. These characters were just sort of like flying in as a bit of entertainment but also as a bit of provoking the issues, being devil's advocate to some extent. There was parallels, there was a scene to the serious messages of working on the line and what that involved and the songs around that, but then another layer on top of that was the politics of workers organizing themselves and what have you. It had a very international flavour to it in the sense that it was saying, we have to link up and join up with workers in the same industries across Europe and things like that. It was promoting purposely for trade union organizations the importance that we have to link up with people in other countries in our organization. That was perfectly right and I think we realize that more now than we've ever realized. But at the time it was very politically forward looking and very clearly informed by a Marxist analysis of class and what have you. It transcended national class interest and was very much about the importance of we've got to join up with

people other industries, otherwise at some point we'll be used to undermine each other. That's what used to happen, in essence.

Q: So you had more than one part.

BW: Yes.

Q: How did that work for you?

BW: It was alright really, it was fine. We all had a particular part, like Kevin was the Evening Mail guy and Bob Etheridge was the master of ceremonies. I was Kinky King Konrod. At one point Vic, who was a tool maker, Vic became part of it, Val's cousin Vic. He played a parrot, representing Terry Duffy and the right-wing trade union that stabbed Derrick Robinson in the back. I think I played Mack the Knife as well, I think I was a character Mack the Knife, which was like a shady character in a pinstripe suit, a pinstripe jacket it probably was at the time, and glasses and very shady, Jack the Knife sort of character that was a bit of a spoof. So we played particular characters at different parts but then we would all sort of come together in the collective part and we were workers on the track and we were all workers. So you wore several hats I suppose, several hats. Eventually I got to the point where I thoroughly enjoyed it. I used to enjoy the performance and I enjoyed the message it was sending out, because I believed it. It mainly toured, when it did tour, to trade union audiences and ordinarily people, and it went down really well. It touched what they understood, so it was good. I think we did about 10 or 15 show, I'm not sure.

Q: Whereabouts in the country?

BW: Basically it was mainly Birmingham area, and it was to the transport and general workers union. We got the show in a couple other factories as well in social clubs – Acocks Green, Land Rover Acocks Green factory. I think we got it in Tarsely social club the one time as well. We also got it for the TNG offices and different trade unions. It was a mixture of internal shop stewards, factories and external, and there was occasions when we did it for

community groups in that arty area that would go see community theatre because it was something that they did.

Q: Was there a lot of comedy in the show?

BW: Oh ya, it was satirical fun, it was serious messages, it was a mixture of all those. It was things that people would laugh at, people would see the irony of some of the things. It would be exaggerating certain things just to make the point. It was a mix of all those things. It was quite an enjoyable process but also an educational process I have to say, educational in the sense that it exposed me to and increasingly got me interested in the power of culture, the power of song, the power of theatre to carry a message, which has a tradition, as I later learned. But also the different people that I met were very interesting intellectual people and I felt comfortable. It's like getting to know people who'd got deep intellect as well about them. Not saying that people don't have deep intellect, but these were politically savvy intellectual people, so that was interesting. A lot of the people that were in Banner, as I say, were perhaps middle class, so I was in a different bubble. But I fairly quickly assimilated into what was a network of good friends.

Q: Can you remember any of the songs from the show?

BW: I don't think I could sing them now but ya. There was Evening Mail song, which basically was about the Evening Mail peddling its lies. There were songs about unity linking up, there were songs about standing up together. There were quite a few songs in there.

Q: Were you singing?

BW: Ya, ya. I didn't sing solo. Some people would sing solo, like Marian, there were very skilled singers. One of the characters she played was Thatcher, and she would sing. Joy Ashworth, I seem to recall, would sing a song too. So there were a few individuals who were particularly experienced and confident and able to sing, then there were the songs I would sing with the collective songs where we would sing.

Q: Did that influence you to get involved in music?

BW: Ya it did, because it was a conduit that ultimately got me interested in eventually being persuaded to go along to a folk club in Birmingham called the Grey Cock Folk Club, which I learned was the foundation, the origin of where the Banner Theatre project came from. I eventually was persuaded to go the Grey Cock Folk Club. It used to be once a month on a Sunday. Val used to come with me as well. It was one of the few occasions that we were able to get out. We used to get one of the cousins, Peter, he used to come and babysit because he was a bit older. We used to get on the bus and we used to go to the Grey Cock Folk Club and we used to thoroughly soak it up, because Val loved the folk singing as well and she loved the entertainment of it. So I got into basically beyond the Bob Dylans and the Donovans if you like, and realized there's a history of song about what people do. I found it poetic, interesting, historically interesting. I loved the different types of folk music and what have you. Every month one of the regular people that were part of the core of the Grey Cock Folk Club – Dave, Chris, Pam Bishop, Mogs, Joy, Marian Houghton, the Harpers, and others I may have forgot – would get up and rehearse a song and bring it along to the next evening. The evening would be a little bit of people, there was entertainment, but in turn they would bring new songs into the club. Also they would have people occasionally that would be the guest, so there'd be a touring guest, a person who was a folk singer; so there was that. It really opened up a new library for me really, a library of song and culture rather than a library of books.

Q: Following On the Brink, did you get involved in any other shows?

BW: After that I was very, I'd obviously become very friendly with most of the people if not all of the people in Banner Theatre, including sadly a really nice guy called Pete Yates, who sadly died some years after I got involved. So we'd become real friends, we'd do things together, we'd go and share meals. Dave and Chris and me and Val would go over to Dave's and they'd cook a meal, and occasionally they'd come across to us and we would cook a meal. We started to share social occasions – holiday times, camping, things like that. So ya, what was the question again?

Q: It was what happened next in terms of your involvement.

BW: So that took on a new group of friends doing different things and sharing time. I supported Banner, I would go and see them in other shows that they did, but I think the next show that I got involved in, and this was probably in the early '90s, they did a show at the time when the water was being privatized they did a show called The Battle of Ladywell, which was a show about the privatization of water. It happened to be a story, there was a song written about a story at a time when there was an attempt to privatize water in Birmingham at a place called Ladywell, so it just happened to fit the fact of here we go again. It was about people stealing our water and charging us a lot more to get it back. That was quite enjoyable and it involved the same suspects: Mogs, Tim, myself, Lorraine the special school teacher, lovely person. Who else was it in? I can't remember; there was a few of them in it as well. That was quite an interesting show. Didn't tour a lot, to be quite honest. It toured a little bit but not extensively really. But that was interesting.

Q: What prompted you to get involved in that?

BW: By invitation really I think. It was a new project that they'd got – are you interested, we'd like you to get involved; it was that really. I think it was sponsored by the Birmingham Trade Unions College, a guy called Paul MacNee, who was the head of the trade union study centre inside Birmingham College, who created an opportunity to be able to get some funding to create a new show really, and it was that. We used to rehearse in the school I went to, oddly enough, but it's not a school anymore, it's a college. We rehearsed and eventually the show went out. It was good.

Q: What were the audiences like for that?

BW: Mainly industrial. We went and played for a big audience at Pinkerton Glass Company in the Kings Norton area, labour party sort of gatherings and things like that. From my recollection, it went to working class audiences that would've been their first encounter to hear a message through a different medium. It would've been their first time.

Q: Who wrote the songs?

BW: Well the main song, The Battle of Ladywell, I think was a traditional song, and it basically told the story. The show was built around the song telling the story, then there would be other songs too. You'd sing a bit of a verse that moved to the next scene, so we'd sort of set the scene. I can't remember all the songs that were in it. It's a fair time ago now.

Q: Some people know you as Bob, some as Robert. Could you expand on the name, The Little Red Mole?

BW: First of all, the only person that calls me Robert, and the only person before that that called me Robert was mom and occasionally and increasingly so Val calls me Robert. But really it means I'm in trouble. I was always a Robert and then at one place I worked at suddenly for whatever reason they started calling me Bob, so I became a Bob and Bob was what I became. So several names: Rob, Bob, Robert, it varies. But Robert's not the common one, only by certain people and it makes the hair go up on my backside because I'm in trouble.

Q: What about The Little Red Mole?

BW: The Little Red Mole, basically what happened is for my endeavors and for my activities, I didn't quite appreciate how much of a thorn in the side I must've been for Land Rover. Probably cost them a lot of money, to be quite honest. The place I worked at Tarsley, there was a reorganization or rationalization of what was happening, and they were closing all the satellite transmission factories down and they were going to bring them all onto the main site of a big production line of a car called the SD1 down to Oxford. That cleared the way to bring all the transmission factories into this one huge really big sort of workshop. What happened then, because I was going on to new work and you don't sort of like, well I'm a shop steward, I'll take the shop steward card with me, I'm like all the guys that would entirely find ourselves on new work at the expense of the factory. So I was not a shop steward and then eventually I got elected shop steward pretty quickly again, only to find that the company refused to extend recognition for me to be a shop steward. They said,

we're not prepared to accept a shop steward. But that I later learned and became aware very quickly that that wasn't the decision by the company alone, that was the decision that had been taken by the company with union officials in my union at a very high level. I was I believe one of several stewards within the Leyland company that were picked off, for want of a better word. I was marginalized. So I was elected as a shop steward. Basically every effort and attempt to take on the company, even the guys voted unanimously to go on strike over the issue but obviously they wanted to make sure that it was official, because obviously they knew that people felt vulnerable that the company may pick off a small section of people. There was great efforts made to frustrate that happening. It was also taken up in my union at a branch level and national level, in fact the issue of the union supporting me went to what they call a final appeal court ruling, which is the highest body in union decision making, to appeal against a decision of the executive committee of the union at the time who refused to support me. The final ruling was actually in my favour, but it still got frustrated and still didn't happen. That experience and that victimization led to a show. I didn't realize it was happening, but Dave was interviewing me talking about what was up then, and out of that came the show The Little Red Mole. It was a story around a trade unionist being victimized. At the time I was being interviewed I didn't realize that the show was about me, until I saw the show at Handsworth. Me and Bob were there and blimey the show was about the little red mole. They hadn't told me really. I thought I was part of something but I didn't quite appreciate that it was a show about that. But what it was really about was the betrayal of a trade union working in collaboration with a company at a strategic level in order to marginalize and take out a trade union activist. The reasons for that were partly to do, it was at a time when different workers were under attack, like the coal workers or steel workers. There was also an infiltration into the engineering union in particular to subvert it in the interests of the bosses. A lot of big engineering companies like Lucas, like GKN and various others, they basically bankrolled and facilitated stewards that were from their factories and groomed them to be the bulwark against what they saw as the communists and the left. To their disgrace, and ignorance to some extent, a number of stewards that were in industries that weren't as well paid as the car industry, they allied themselves unwitting I would say to be used against what were front line activists that were very active, and it was always pitched between the moderates and everything else. I was just one of the many that found themselves being under attack, but it was because of the

infiltration of the trade union movement. I remember one time when I was involved being actually unwittingly by a person, a guy called Mike Telly, he was a Lucker shop steward, a right-wing shop steward, and they were agents in essence of the state in some ways, which I think they were, I think they were paid. But he actually tried to recruit me to go onto a training course in Oxford run by Trumede, which true democracy or something in trade unions, which was a Tory Conservative front to nurture a group of right-wing shop stewards to operate and to undermine the engineering union. The engineering union historically had been the most radical union. It took on the Tory government industrial relations court in the '70s and went on national strikes. It was a very powerful, probably the most militant of trade unions definitely, to sort of like be able to call engineers who worked in airports, who worked in factories, who worked wherever, to give a call and they'd all go on strike, which they did on a number of occasions for no other reason than defending principles and defending people. The industry tried to get recognition and they were under attack so there was a big strike called to support them and get them recognition. Secondary action, workers could be called upon. These group of workers, they're trying to organize. The employees federation are supporting the employee to the hilt that's refusing to give them the right to be able to bargain over their wage and conditions. They needed our help and we went on strike on a number of occasions, for no reason for ourselves but to help other people.

Q: How far did The Little Red Mole tour, and what was the audience?

BW: I don't know really. I only saw it once. I felt a little embarrassed what subtly was coming out, and maybe I didn't quite know what it was going to be. I wasn't inclined to go and see it again because after the show everybody was sort of pointing me out and they all came up and wanted to speak to the little red mole. I felt a little bit exposed really, a bit embarrassed. But the show went good, it was a good show in many ways. But we all like to be chameleons at times. I'm a bit of an exhibitionist on occasions probably, but it's when I choose to be an exhibitionist. So I don't know how much it toured really, I think it probably toured a bit.

Q: What influence did Banner have on the rest of your family?

BW: A big influence. Eventually at some point Val became, certainly used to enjoy going to the Grey Cock Folk Club and I think she enjoyed seeing Banner Theatre as much as I did. She enjoyed most of the people that she met within Banner Theatre and suddenly found herself into the fold really of the social side of Banner Theatre certainly. Then there was a guy, a senior steward when we were at Tarsley, of the DMB union, a guy called Pete Townsend. He approached me one day and he says, is there any chance that Banner Theatre could do a show about women at work? I says, well I think so, I'll have a word. So basically I passed it along and the DMB sponsored the show, which was basically celebrating and talking about the contribution that women make, both at work over historically by working and also in organizing. So it was quite an interesting sort of show which reflected what had been hidden and buried, that women did anything instead of staying at home and changing nappies and cooking for the old man or what have you. So it was interesting. Val was persuaded to sort of get involved, and she agreed. She did the technical side of what they did in the show. There's a thing where you change slides that were reflected on a big screen, and the sound. So Val was the techie really, but I think she enjoyed it. They toured that show a fair bit. You'd have to ask Val this for the details, she'd remember it. But they toured a bit and I think she enjoyed it a lot.

Q: What was the date of that?

BW: We're probably talking mid '70s, mid to late '70s.

Q: What slides were being shown?

BW: Banner Theatre has always had a backdrop of a screen that showed still pictures. The pictures would change that reflected the part of the script you were at, so it was a constant changing of pictures that were back projected onto a big screen. It was a multi information process. You had the song, you had the theatre, you had the voices, the actuality, the voices reflected by an actor. Then you had the pictures, the imagery that would underpin it. It was a multilayered input of information that ultimately reinforced and contextualized the whole process of getting a message across. It was quite a unique process really. When we acted, the words we said we just didn't invent what you'd say. There was a little bit of that in parts,

just license to get from one part to another, but generally the lines and the words that we'd say in all shows – whether it was the women's show, whether it was On the Brink, whether it was The Great Divide, and other shows that Banner had done – it was always a reflection of the information they got from the people who were at the thick of what they were doing, whether it was about racism, whether it was about trade union struggles, whether it was about the mining industry, Collier Laddie, the show they did before I got to know them. It was a mirror reflection of those voices putting it in a way that galvanized the message.

Q: Did you come home and sing the songs to your children?

BW: Yes I did actually. I used to sing the same song, I'd Rather Be a Picketer than a Scab, they got that every night for about five years. So they got subjected to the songs because I played the guitar a bit and it inspired me to sing a bit. So every night for a long period of time when they were young I used to sing to them every night the songs that I'd learned. A bit later on one of the big influences, political development influences I suspect has been informative for Colin, Dean and Robert, was the association with the Banner environment, both socially and the people who associate with Banner, and beyond. When Dean was 14 years old in fact he got involved with Banner Theatre under the wing of Pete Yates, who was the technician, and got involved to learn because he was always interested in getting involved with sound and sound engineering. So Banner Theatre work gave an opening for Dean to get involved, and Dean from the age of 14 got involved with Banner Theatre and the shows they did, completely different shows than I was involved in. So Dean became informed and influenced and learned from Banner Theatre as well. Less so Colin and Robert, they would enjoy going along to Banner on theatre occasions. But certainly Dean was an apprentice from about the age of 14.

Q: Could you talk about your involvement around the time of the miners' strike?

BW: The miners were on strike in 1984. Some other strikes had taken place but they were over pretty quick because the government caved in to their demands fairly quickly. But the 1984 strike was something completely different. In the early days of that strike I remember going through town and I think Val was with me. We were walking down from what is the

bullring now down Dale end I suppose, and there's Dave Rogers and Chris Rogers busking and raising money for the miners. There was just the two of them. I forget how it happened, but for whatever reason Dave and Chris doing that very quickly led to people agreeing to doing it every Saturday in the cross section between Union passageway and Dale end or the High Street I think it was. We used to every Saturday for several months go out and jump on the bus at 9 o'clock in the morning, go to town, and I'd be there until late in the night; we'd be singing there all day. Eventually it got to the point where over the several months there'd be people that would be there from the beginning but by the end of the day there'd be about 20 people there singing I'd Rather be a Picket than a Scab and all sorts of songs to support the miners. We used to collect about 500 quid a day, which was a fair bit really that used to be sort of collected in a day, which basically went to the miners to distribute at the labour club in Spark Brook. They used to have a meeting there every week and they would bring people up to date with what was going on in the strike, what was happening. But the local miners that were sort of billeted in Birmingham from the different collieries would go into a room and distribute where the food had been collected, which was lots of food. The money that was collected, they agreed a formula about how that should be distributed. That went on for several months and was in itself an interesting battle. Within a very short period of time we were doing it we came to the attention of the police. You'd see the police come along and sort of, you can't do this. Straight away we thought, they're not going to stop us doing it. So at different times either me or somebody else would go and have a chat with the police and distract them while we kept collecting money. The one time we went up and I had a tape recorder and said to the police, what's your problem? I was interviewing the police. We're singing, we're busking and what have you. Anyway, it freaked them because they'd been sent down there to sort of move us on, they were doing their job or what have you. But obviously they fed that back and the next thing we know there's this guy, chief inspector Raymond Percival Postins. There's a song about the busking for the miners, where he suddenly comes marching down Union passageway with an entourage of police behind him. He just came up and said, who's got the tape recorder? He was basically really pissed off that we were there. Eventually that in itself led to a point where you can do this, you can't do that. We stood our ground. We thought, we're not having it. Eventually it led to a little bit of a, it was interesting because he was trying to stop us collecting money. Bob Etheridge was there with a can in his hand and there was this conversation going on, which

was really interesting because some members of the public crowded in and there was a huge crowd around us all and there's the police trying to stop us doing it. But there was a big crowd of ordinary public there that grew bigger and bigger, listening to the conversation. They were obviously very sympathetic to what we were doing and were listening intently to the standoff. Bob Etheridge was there and he's listening and leaning over with his tin and he's not looking. All of a sudden someone came over and dropped a note into his tin. He looked around and didn't realize, and all of a sudden this chief inspector Postins flipped his lid and said, arrest that man. They arrested him. As they were dragging him to the police van Bob got the can and threw it over so that they didn't get the money. So that stopped the play for the day I must admit, because poor Bob's down at the police station while they tried to dream up what they could charge him with, because I don't think they knew what to charge him with once they got him arrested. It turned out later that the person who'd put the money in was county councillor who actually put the money in who was sympathetic and thought, no I'm putting some money in. Something came out about that, about Bob Etheridge being arrested and what have you. We got intimidated quite a lot by the police but we thought, suck you, we stood our ground. There's times they'd line us all up and say, right, what's your name. They would try all sorts of tactics. Eventually I think Paul MacNee and Mick Rice, who were involved in the trades council, managed to persuade the council to give us a busking permit so we could sing, so basically then we won the battle, which really pissed off Percival Postins. In the winter months when it got dark he would come down and stand in the doorway of what was Chelsey Girl at the time, and he was there in the shadows almost like the guy that ? in the pit. He used to stand there and just stare at us and we'd sing, I'd Rather be a ? than a Cop and things like that. He used to be there for about an hour just staring at us with his cap on and his ribbons and whatever. It turned out some time later that Mick Rice and Paul MacNee had to go to the police to get clearance and report that there was going to be a demonstration and what have you. The Tories had a thing where you couldn't just demonstrate, you've got to tell the police about it and what have you. So being in the trades council they had to do it properly, but it turned out that some of the special branch people developed a relationship in terms of communication with the police that were there on a professional level, and they used to tell them that Postins used to go there. He used to come back and write the words down of the songs to see if there was anything that we were singing that he could get us. He got obsessed or possessed by the

whole thing for whatever reason, I'm not sure why. But he used to write the words down and he used to sort of scrutinize them all to see if there was anything that we were singing that could be grounds for subversive or something, I don't know. But it was fun.

Q: Do you remember who the regulars were who would go there?

BW: Well there was Dave obviously, there was myself, there was Vic who I'd talked about who was in the On the Brink show, Val's cousin's husband. He came along every Saturday for most of the time as well. There was Paul MacNee used to come along and he used to bring his guitar and sing. It was all people just singing together, very much chants and music to support the miners and what have you. There'd be a range of instruments that would eventually come in – guitars, melodeons, drums and all sorts of things. It was a real sort of noise of music that was improvised all the time. It was just a day-long thread of improvisation, to be quite honest. It was good fun. You've got a passing audience all the time. It had a propaganda value, it had an agitating and informative value, but it also was to raise money for the miners, which was secondary really or probably equal to it. There was lots of others as well. What's his name now, I can't remember. At some point there'd be a collection of about 20 people from different political persuasions, some socialist worker party members, communist party members led by members, non-party members, trade unionists. It would be a variety of people, but all very motivated to do what they could to win the battle.

Q: Was there much interaction from the public?

BW: I think there may have been people that eventually joined us that may have been political and they'd come and join in just for the fun of having a singsong with a lot of other people. But we didn't really engage in a lot of conversation with people. There'd be a few on the edges occasionally, but we were too busy singing the songs and raising the money. There'd be occasions where we might pause for a bit and you might get somebody passing by that would want to talk to you, so there was a bit of that. But the public was clearly sympathetic, and certainly people of non-white heritage. Everybody that went past that was, like black Asian people, there wasn't one that went past that didn't put anything into

the tin. That was noticeable. A lot of people gave, don't get me wrong, but it was noticeable that any time anyone would go past that was of non-white heritage, they would put into the collection always.

Q: Do you think that had an influence on Banner's audiences going forward?

BW: I don't necessarily think so. I think Banner Theatre's audience generally has been an audience of politically aware activists and to arm them with the information and ideas and to reinforce the activists – that was its main sort of audience target really.

Q: You've been involved for over 40 years. Can you tell us about some of the characters you met in Banner Theatre during that time?

BW: Some of the past characters that were influential and brought a big contribution to Banner's being – people like Pete Yates. Pete Yates was someone that I understand used to work for the BBC, a very skilled musician, a very committed member of Banner's ethos and what it did and everything to do with it. I think for some time he may have worked with Charles Parker for the BBC I'm guessing. But he was a quiet person, he wasn't a very in your face sort of personality. He was almost like slightly in the background, very modest and humble about his skills, about his music skills, about his political understanding. He was a really strong, solid character. Bob Etheridge, an interesting character, quite eccentric was our Bob. He used to work in the motor industry going way back, very highly skilled guy with mechanics, but again very committed to the folk scene. I think he came from the folk scene and the Grey Cock Folk Club, so he brought an interesting sort of role within Banner in terms of his presence. He was quite quirky at times but then again people who were in the arty field, you learn that you've got lots of quirky characters. Some of them are prima donnas and some of them are just very humble skillful people. You get a variety of different people. Bob Etheridge was good.

Q: What was his role in Banner?

BW: He used to sing, he was part of the Grey Cock, he would sing there. With the On the Brink show he was the master of ceremonies. He'd performed in The Great Divide and he'd been in numerous other previous Banner shows. Bob had been around quite a long time. Bob and others, Banner Theatre is a journey for many people. They get onboard with the journey and travel so far along the road, and they jump off the bus at the next stop or they keep jumping back on the bus now and again off and on. Banner Theatre has lots of people who have been influenced by its process and influenced by the whole concept of culture, song and theatre, and the political socialist sort of message that it delivers. So there's lots of people come and gone. Other people that were part of Banner, people I didn't perform with but people I got to know was Doreen Fry and John Fry, very nice people, very interesting people, supportive of Banner. Joyce Canaan, she got involved in Banner, well got involved into getting to know the people around the circle from about 1984, '85. I think Dave met her and over the years she became interested in Banner, not necessarily directly involved as such. But Joyce I seem to recall was one of the participants in the water show, so I think she actually participated in that.

Q: Did you have much involvement with Charles Parker?

BW: Not as much as I'd have liked, because he was a really interesting, humble, clever guy. I obviously got to know him and he visited our house once or twice. He had a presence, Charles Parker, but he also was very humble around ordinary folk, humble in the sense that he was very interested in what they had to say. He very rarely, I can't recall him every pontificating about his views so much. He was keen to listen and would I think get metaphorically drunk on the stories that people would tell him in the work that he did going back to when he was working for the BBC and the radio ballads. I think he was just intrigued by the other world that existed outside of his middle-class world that he was brought up in. So he discovered a new world of a texture of stories and lifestyles that absolutely bowled him over really. I think he was quite interested in me when I first started with Banner because I worked on the tools, I was a working-class guy. I hadn't come through the Grey Cock Folk scene, I'd come into it through a different route, so it was slightly different. But other people that have been a big contributing influence and somebody that I'm very privileged to have met is people like Dave Dale as well. Extremely good guy, good musician,

absolutely solid and very humble about his skills. He was a major presence for certainly latter years in some of the shows they did where it was more song based, reliving the battle of Saltley Gate and things like that. So Dave Dale was a good person. Miriam, his wife, got involved in part of what Banner did, I think with the administration. I never really got the chance to get to know Miriam really, it was a passing sort of thing in the night rather than anything closer than that. There was obviously Fran Rifkin; Fran Rifkin was part of the core group for the early years certainly. She was a highly skilled director, she was a good director in terms of pulling the best out of people and facilitating the process of ultimately getting to the end result. She was highly skilled, in my opinion she was. She would have techniques of working, and that was a skill, that's what she did. But she did it in a way that I think generally sort of created the end piece in the days, certainly from a theoretical point of view.

Q: Who influenced you the most when you first became involved?

BW: Well I suppose the person that influenced me the most was the person I met first, Dave Rogers. Dave developed a friendship in parallel with everything else going on. Me and him used to go away for weekends and do youth hostel and walking. Basically we'd have two or three days of just very deep philosophical debates about things. We'd agree with some things and disagree with others, we'd challenge each other's views. But it was very enjoyable, we had a very close friendship. Obviously Dave met Joyce and you move on, so we didn't do that in recent years. But we went youth hosteling and walking probably about four or five times, which was quite enjoyable. So there was that going on.

Q: What influence did different characters have on Banner in shaping it?

BW: I think everybody that's been with Banner Theatre has brought something to the table and brought something into it, and I think everybody in Banner Theatre has got something out of it. Some people may have been frustrated or annoyed about certain scenarios or circumstances at particular times, but everybody generally that came through could not be touched by what Banner Theatre was about. If there were issues it would be around personalities and petty stuff. But some people brought something and brought skill and

brought their experiences and the passion and the commitment, and they have a variety of skills both musical and theoretical, and supportive skills. That's what makes Banner what it is. It's been a journey, it's been a process and it's been a project, but it's been a journey that as I say different people have been on the wagon for a bit and then jumped off the wagon. It's outlived, because of the passion and commitment of a number of people, it's outlived many other similar organizations that may have existed in the community arts in the '60s and '70s and '80s. I think a lot of people who were with Banner still do things that may be slightly different, but they took what they learned in Banner and the passion and inspiration that Banner would've given them, they take that into the work that they do, whether it's political work, whether it's cultural area of work or whatever it may be. It's quite a unique entity really.

Q: You mentioned not only being in shows but going to some. Can you remember some of the shows you've been to?

BW: I think I've probably seen every show, some of them possibly more than once. I'm thinking of the steel show, they did a very good touring show that was again at a time when steel workers were under major attack having to defend the steel industry. They did a show that toured promoting, advocating and informing people about what was happening and what the issues were around the steel workers and the steel strikes. They did shows on the Reign of Pig's Pudding, which was basically a journey of a couple of people on the road together traveling around Birmingham and telling their stories and experiences about the West Midlands and reflecting on things that Birmingham used to be, its manufacturing and how people get deceived and led to believe that everything's going to be rosy in the garden tomorrow but really they're being led up the garden path and misinformed. It was a show which again sort of generated information around the general political framework that we exist in in terms of capitalism. They did a lot of show supporting health workers and defending the health service going way back. There was a show about pier five, very forward thinking when you think they're battling the NHS now. The shows about the consequence of private financial initiatives, they were in front of the game and in front of the campaign. Now there's people jumping up and down about the NHS. Banner Theatre was producing a show and alerting people to what was coming down the line, shows on supporting

education, supporting teachers and trying to raise awareness about the changing nature of education and the influences from America about privatizing education with academies and what have you, again well in front of the game in terms of highlighting what was going on. If Banner Theatre, and arguably it's just a little component in the struggle everywhere, if everybody who'd seen Banner Theatre worked for education there might have been a different battle for schools now. What's happening with schools now is it's facing massive change and massive cuts, but it's a defensive action and one out of despair rather than one of making demands and defending what was. So they've done lots of shows and continue to do so, and I think they will do into the future, I've got no doubt. Whatever comes and goes in this world, Banner Theatre will continue certainly in its form with Dave Rogers around, because Dave Rogers personifies right through Banner Theatre's origins to today. He has developed his own political awareness, skills, understanding in the process itself, so it's helped to shape his politics and commitment or reinforce it.

Q: What impact has Banner had on its audiences?

BW: If anybody's come across Banner Theatre it's one scene they've never forgotten. Generally people are quite blown away by Banner Theatre when they see them. I was in Victoria Square a few weeks ago where Banner Theatre were there as part of an anti-EDL sort of rally in Birmingham and sort of galvanizing people to sort of resist. Then you'd see Officer Dave Rhume his name is, he just went, I love Banner Theatre. He just absolutely loves the entertaining value of being informed by the theatre, because Banner Theatre singing things, a lot of activists may have ideas and want people to hear them sang and reflected back. It lifts the spirits up, a song can lift the spirits. The thing is, culture is political, all culture is political. The thing is, Banner Theatre is political from a socialist perspective, but all theatre and all entertainment has a political slant, either to mesmerize you and to sort of give you the opium of the people by just sort of exposing you to deluded type of society, or song is political, theatre is political, it's a question of how political it is and in what way that effects itself. It's not neutral any more than the news is neutral.

Q: What influence has it had on you?

BW: If I was to say from one to ten, ten being the biggest influence, Banner Theatre has had a big influence, an eight out of ten. It's had a big influence in helping to shape and clarify my own thoughts, view and political perspectives, but I've also enjoyed it and been woken up to the whole aspect of song and culture. It's had a big impact, it's been something of great value to myself certainly and I think the members of my family. We've had a great deal of value and pleasure out of Banner Theatre work over the years, definitely.

Q: Anything else you'd like to say?

BW: No, that's good. I'm glad for the opportunity to be able to reflect some of my thoughts about Banner Theatre and I'm glad to hear that its work has been captured so that it's preserved as a long project that's had a start, it's had a middle and I can't see it having an ending really. It's a never-ending story.

[END]