

Melanie Blake

Author and Celebrity Agent

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Melanie Blake, entrepreneur and chief executive of Urban Associates. Melanie started her music career at Top of the Pops, working with acts like Destiny's Child, All Saints and the Spice Girls. And as one of the UK's leading music and entertainment managers, she has a roster of award-winning artists who have sold more than 100 million records. Ten years later, Melanie downsized her business to focus on writing – first as a columnist for the Sunday People and the Daily Mirror, then as a playwright, and now as a novelist. Her first book, The Thunder Girls, is a story of glamour and revenge set in the world of pop girl bands, and has already inspired a play.

Mel, thank you for joining me.

Thanks for having me.

Well, let's start with the success of your first novel, The Thunder Girls. It says, "A story of glamour and revenge set in the world of pop girl bands."

Well, I've certainly done what they say, which is they say write about what you know. And the funny thing about The Thunder Girls is that although it's a best seller, it's probably the longest running job to get a best seller ever, because it took 20 years to get it out.

Wow. So, it took you 20 years to be an overnight success?

Basically, yes! Which reminds me, and we'll go onto this later with my management career, I represented Patsy Kensit once, and she'd been in the business about 30 years, and she did Emmerdale and won Best Newcomer, which was quite funny. It's a little bit like that. So, I'd written that book in 1999 when I was working at Top of the Pops. So, I left school at 16 without any qualifications, but I'd always written and I loved writing. And at my school particularly, I had an English teacher who just hated everything that I wrote, and specifically said to me, "Why do you write that women like men?" And I went, "What do you mean?" She went, "These women, they're far too strong." And I looked at her and thought, "I really need to get out of here. I need

to get out of here now.” And so, the die was cast straightaway. Now three years later, I wrote the story, which is about these four women that had been in a band 30 years ago, haven’t seen each other for 30 years, and now need each other again for the price of a cheque. And I’d been inspired to write it because, at the same time as I was working at Top of the Pops, I was freelancing as a journalist. I’m untrained, but we’ll talk about that later. I was the queen of the blag, and I’d got onto the Here and Now Tour buses, and it was hell. And I realised that if you’re only there for the price of a cheque, there was some serious beef coming. That’s what inspired The Thunder Girls. So, in 1999, I landed a top literary agent, a massive one. I won’t namedrop him now, but I mean really ginormous. And they were like, “We think this is amazing. Everyone wants it.” And it went out, and I was offered tons of money for it straightaway. And then the feedback came back, “The women are too old.” Now, the women in The Thunder Girls have not seen each other for 30 years, so they have to be between 40 and 60 for it to work. Not all the women are the same age.

Ageism. Even in characters, fictional characters are suffering from ageism.

Immediately. So, I was skint living in a bedsit, totally broke, really needed that money. Used to make £100 a week working at Top of the Pops. And freelance journalists, you just never get paid. Four months maybe you write an article, it maybe it was £250, and you wait for that.

So, the beers weren’t on you at that time?

Absolutely. I was £50,000 in debt. I was really struggling. But I knew it was wrong. I knew that I may only have been 20, but I knew that 40 and 50 and 60 wasn’t old. I’d seen women in the studios. Cher, Madonna, Mariah, who probably were 40s, 50s, 60s then, because they’re older than that now, or certainly between like 40s and 50s there. Cher was 50 at least. And they weren’t old, and they still had life, and were fabulous and whatever. And so, I said to the agent...

Cher’s awesome, even now.

Oh, yes, but I’m talking about they were saying that then.

Wow.

There’s a little bit more respect for that sort of... it’s the middle ground era that people are really ageist on women. That you can be young or old, but not in the middle.

Yes.

And I knew it was wrong. So, I said to the agent, “No, I don’t want to do it.” And he said, “But it’s a lot of money.” And I said, “Well, get me a different deal with someone that will do it.” So, it got sold again to a massive TV company. I’m not going to name them, but it was huge. And again, it was massive money. And when it came down to the wire, again, they wanted it rewritten to be in their 30s. So it went into a cupboard, and I didn’t think about it for 15 years. I then became a music manager, which I wasn’t when I wrote it, and my own career went off in a completely different lane that

I never expected. So, a bit like The Thunder Girls, I'm having a reunion with myself of where I first started.

Life imitates art.

It really has done. I wrote it before I knew it, and then I lived it.

Tell us about your foray into the music industry then.

Well, again, you couldn't make it up. If I hadn't have lived it, I wouldn't have believed it. So, I arrived in London at the age of 17, as Stevie Nicks would say, and I literally arrived here with about £1,500 that I'd saved up from five different jobs, got myself a single room in a shared house, and set about trying to conquer media. I had no qualifications. I'd left school with nothing. I'd done my work experience in a record shop at 15, because I was always interested in music. And I didn't know anyone that was going to give me a break. I didn't know any record labels or any places. Then I just thought, "I'll just go to where the music is and work out what people like, and then it'll give me an incentive." The headmaster at my school said to me, "Your decision to do work experience at a record shop is an example of what your life will be like. You will never ever do better than this." Now, I went on to spend the summer in that record shop learning what made people really want to buy stuff, why they really cared, people that were fanatical, whatever. That work experience probably went onto make me millions and millions of pounds, and he thought it was the biggest insult and joke there was at his school. But it set me up for my entire career, which was what do the people, the public, the punters want – and I've built everything around that. And I probably learned that in that experience in that shop. So then, when I arrived in London, I was trying to get a job, and I couldn't get one. I ended up getting a handing out leaflet job, which went on for nearly two years. I was handing out leaflets at train stations and products. And I was so demoralised, and I just thought, "I'm never going to break in. Nothing's going to happen." I was on the verge of giving up and going back to Manchester.

Don't ever do that.

Well, I was 19.

It's grim up north. I was there recently.

But I was on the verge of going back. And I stood at Euston station handing out free drinks, and it was a red drink, and we were wearing white. And a woman barged past me, knocked out of my hand, and I was covered in it. And I looked at her for an apology and she went, "Get a real job." And I just thought, "That's it, I'm done."

But what a horrible woman.

Well, she was. But maybe fate was listening, because as I walked back to behind the concourse at Euston where we were to change my soaked outfit, the phone rang. And the same agency that had sent me to this job, that was really not a very good

job, said, "Have you ever been a camera assistant?" And I went, "Yes." No idea what one was.

You were fibbing.

Absolutely. They went, "Are you free tomorrow?" I was like, "Yes." They were like, "Can you get to Elstree Studios?" I was like, "Yes." They be like, "Okay, so turn up at Elstree tomorrow." So, I was like, "Okay, I'm going to Elstree Studios."

That's out in the sticks, isn't it? That would've taken you awhile to get there.

Yes. So, I got on a train, walked, made it all the way. Signed in, walked in thinking, "No idea what I'm doing. I hope I can get away with this." Walked past the EastEnders set and thought, "Wow, this is somewhere really serious." And just before I say where I went, I come from a really religious family, and my dad was a born-again Christian who banned all popular music and culture in our house.

Sounds sensible.

It wasn't sensible, it was a nightmare. And the thing that I loved the most was Top of the Pops, and he banned me from watching it.

Wow.

So it was just this... I had to sneak around to try and see it. Anyway...

I was on Top of the Pops once in the audience, and I thought, "I'll dance in a silly way, just to kind of show that I'm in on the joke."

Right?

And then, when you actually see me... there're clips of it on YouTube. It doesn't look like I'm being ironic. It just looks like I'm an idiot dancer that just can't dance. It's horrendous. But I've got over it now, and I actually share it willingly.

I will look forward to seeing it after this. So my job, right? So, as I walked down the corridor and they went, "This is where you're working." I looked up, and it's the Top of the Pops studios. And I literally looked up and thought, "Dad, you're praying to the wrong God, because someone's listening to me and not you, and I've been sent here," and I walked through this door...

What year was this?

1999.

Wow.

And I walked through this door, and suddenly I was in front of the Spice Girls, Kylie Minogue, Robbie Williams.

I've heard of all of them.

I mean, as close as we are now. Right?

Because the top of the pop studio looked big on the telly...

Tiny.

But it's like a lift, it's like a utility room size.

Tiny, and it used to be... so it's square floor, and it used to have an A, B, C, D setup. So A, B, C, and D were the boxes on either side of the stage, and then there would be an E for the middle if you were doing a big performance number. So you'd be assigned to look after a different stage.

Who was presenting that night?

I think it might've been Gail Porter. It was a real sort of 90s...

So Gail was presenting when I was in the audience, and I remember the floor manager before she came in, because Gail, unfairly, got a lot of really bad press. Everyone used to be really horrible to her. And the floor manager sat us all down said, "We all like a laugh and a joke, but if anyone insults Gail or is nasty to her, you'll be asked to leave immediately."

That's really weird, I never heard anything like that when I was there.

And a couple of people went, "Ugh," and I thought, "Well they're the people that are going to do it." They weren't being overly precious. I think he was just protecting her feelings.

Wow, that's interesting to know, because I'd never seen anything like that, but I can tell you stories like that about pop stars that I did see, but I never saw that about the presenters. Anyway, I walked into the studio, and they said, "This is your camera, this is what you do." And the cameraman looked at me and he went, "Let's go." And I looked at him, and I didn't do anything, and I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing."

You can't blag it either.

And he went, "You don't know what you're doing, do you?" And I went, "No." And he went, "Right. You see those cables there?" And I went, "Yes." And he went, "You're supposed to pick them up, and then follow me around and then that way no one will trip up." And I picked them up and I went, "Oh my god, they're really dirty."

Welcome to showbiz.

Yes. And he went, "I think you can sit this one out." So I put the cables down, and I went and stood back, and I just watched the rehearsal. Now, were you in for the rehearsal?

No, the live show.

Right, well the rehearsal was where it was at. So all the managers, all the publicists, nobody was there. Just the acts were there. So you would literally have the most famous acts in the world in this room doing their rehearsal alone, right? So I was watching it and I was thinking, "Some of this stuff doesn't look very good, and there's nobody telling them." So Kylie Minogue was doing a routine, and the lights were all set up, and in the middle of the chorus it was making her face look blue, and her hair was looking a bit odd. And Westlife were there and they'd been on tour, and maybe had taken a bit of advantage of the buffet of the tour...

I think I've taken a bit of an advantage of the buffet generally, I think.

There was a bit more of them than usual, and they were in silk shirts, sat down with a wind machine. Which, to anybody with eyes, knew was not a good combination.

No.

You could make any of that work, you just needed to move some of the elements around. So I watched the rehearsal and I thought, "They're never going to bring me back. So I've got nothing left to lose. I'm just going to tell everyone in the studio what I think of them, and what I think could be useful and could be helpful." So I approached Kylie Minogue, told her and she was like, "Thanks very much. I didn't realise that." Told Westlife, they turned off the wind machine, and I said something to someone else, I forget who it is. And at the end of the day I said, "Bye, thanks very much," and they went, "See you next week." And that began a four-year career at Top of the Pops, as a sort of non-specific roled talker. I just talked to people in rehearsals.

You were just you.

Yes, I was just me, and I was just had opinions, and people liked it, and I was popular with the acts. So, one day, Mariah Carey wouldn't come down because her management had said to Chris Cowey, who was the boss of it at the time, "You have to clap Mariah." And he said, "Yes, of course we'll clap Mariah." And he went, "No, no. As soon as you see her." And Chris was like... I mean, if you've met Chris, you would know. He was like, "Well, tell her to pack her stuff and leave now, because we're not doing that." And I just went upstairs and I waited until there was no one there, and I went to speak with her, and I went, "Do you know this?" And she was like, "No." And often you would realise it wasn't them. It was the people around them. Jennifer Lopez had an entourage of, like, 50 people, I'd never seen anything like it. And we were told not to look at her. I went up to speak with her afterwards, and I went, "Do you we've been told not to look at you?" She fired the manager, right there and then.

I've met J.Lo, actually, I was at the Grammy's last year.

Lovely.

Yes, she's lovely. Yes.

Super nice.

And she worked... I saw her dance, and it was absolutely incredible.

Amazing.

Incredibly, physically gruelling.

She's amazing.

And it just doesn't come across on TV.

No.

It just looks like it's CGI.

Well, she did a double, we did a double special, the day I was there with her. It quickly became clear that I had something that these stars liked, and it was actually common sense. Which nobody was giving them, because people were too frightened to tell them that. So what happened was, I struck up a friendship with Claire Richards, who was the lead singer of Steps. She was the only one from Steps that used to come into the rehearsals and watch the other performers rehearse.

Steps were on the show that I was at.

Right. We were probably there.

Wow.

I was probably doing nothing whilst you were there.

The planets have aligned.

She and I would sit together, and over the years she would listen to my critiques, and I'd go, "That's a flop. That's a hit." I remember Atomic Kitten were in, and they were on their last chance, and there were really demoralised. The label was about to drop them, and they did Whole Again, and I was like, "That's a number one." And they were like, "We don't believe it," and it was. I just had a really great ear. Geri Halliwell was in and it was her final album. She did a really big run of massive hits, and I said, "That's going to be your first not number one." She did not want to hear that, and it was right, it was seven. And then after that it was 21 and then she was dropped. And

I just had an instinct, and Claire said to me, "You know you'd make a brilliant manager." I said, "Who's going to hire me to be a manager? I'm not even meant to be in here." And she was like, "I would." And I said, "Yes, but you're in Steps." And she went, "If I ever go solo, I'll hire you." And I was like, "Yes, yes..."

I actually quite like Steps, as well.

Yes.

I know it wasn't cool when you're, sort of, a 20-odd-year-old lad.

Oh, it wasn't an issue of Steps here, it was just the fact of that, you know, all bands break up and everybody has a go on their own. And she'd said... they had a Steps manager, so there was no way that she was going to be able to go to Steps, "Oh, Melanie Blake here would be a brilliant manager for us."

Weren't they Stock, Aitken and Waterman?

No, they did a bit with them, but they were with a jive, and they had a different team. They just did the Tragedy and a couple of the other hits.

I see.

And some Bananarama stuff that was reused for them.

Wow.

But they weren't with Pete all the way through.

I still like Bananarama now. Cruel Summer is an absolute top tune.

So do I. Mr Sleaze tops it though. So she said that to me, and then my job came to an end, and I disappeared back into obscurity. And she left Steps, and she went and did something with H & Claire with the same management. And then after a couple of years, had a baby. And then I was in a bedsit again. I think I was about 24 at this stage, and I was like, "Well I had four years of fun, I didn't make any money, but I certainly had a good time, and maybe it's time to just give up." I was working for magazines, I was writing for Hello, I was working for a couple of different ones, but I wasn't making any money. I was broke, and then one day...

I hated being broke.

It was terrible. One day out of the blue I got a phone call, and it was her, and she said, "It's me," and I knew it was her, and she said, "I'm ready." And I said, "Really?" And she said, "Yes, I want you to be my manager. I'm sending a cab to pick you up." And she sent a cab to pick me up to her house. She hadn't left the house in about two years, she'd had the baby.

She put on a lot of weight, didn't she?

She had done at that stage, and she said, "Right, I trust you. What do you want to do?" And I said, "Well, let's get you back in there." And I basically created her first performance, which was a BBC show called Everybody Dance Now, where they sang songs of their bands, but on their own.

A dancing show on the BBC? That'll never work.

I know, that's what they said. And I learned to be a manager by going to the corner shop and buying all the magazines, and opening the front page and seeing where it said editor and the number, and literally cold calling them.

That's what we do even now.

Yes. But that was unheard of. Literally. And I was on the phone to one ringing up going, "So I represent Claire Richards, and we are doing an exclusive," it was literally coming out of my mouth. I was thinking, "I don't even know what I'm saying." "And we have a freelancer in the office today and I'm just checking, is it you that has bought the exclusive interview, the first one in two years, because I can't see it on the paperwork." It just came out of my mouth. It was a lie. And the editor went, "No, but we want it." And I went, "Oh, well I can't confirm you can have it. Obviously, I need to know what your fee is, because I've got confused with this." I said, "Just send me an email with what your fee is." She said, "How much do you want?" And I learned then a massive agent trick is, never ever say what you want.

Absolutely.

Always say, "Just send me a maximum offer." And by the end of the day, I had probably originated about £100,000 worth of deals for her, and...

And you get what, 10%?

Twenty.

Twenty per cent. So, £20,000 made in one day.

Oh, the most money I ever made in a day was £200,000, but that's a different story which we'll come to later.

Wow, well congratulations on both.

Thank you very much.

As a fellow entrepreneur, I like people who are making money, creating jobs.

With a G in maths. Even though I can do the VAT return on a £4 million turnover, just because they didn't teach me properly. That's the story.

Or you could just install QuickBooks on your laptop like I've done.

No, I do it for real, did it for real.

Old school!

Old school. Yes. But at the end of the day, one of them said, "Who do we make the invoice out to?" And I literally hadn't even thought of a name for the company. If I'd thought about it, I would've... because I am quite a go-getter, and I'm feisty and I'm glam, and I'm always thinking, so I might have thought of something like Pink Parana or like Blonde Management or something, whatever. And I just saw this ad and it was for a trainer that said like, "The Urban Trainer," and then on the other page it was something like Clinton Solicitors Associates. I went, "Urban Associates." and Urban Associates was born like that, and within a year...

Good name.

Well, it was ahead of the time but then there wasn't anything that was urban. So it was really weird because we had a really sort of like vanilla-y client list and an urban name. So it quite strange but the world has changed around us. But within a year we were the number one boutique agency – boutique meaning that nobody owned us. We weren't part of an affiliation, we weren't a subagent of anyone else. Had a client list of about 12 people, and we turned over that first year I think about 300,000.

Wow. How did you get the other clients? Obviously Claire was client number one.

Yes, she was. Once you've done one, you get attention that people spot what you're doing, and then basically some people seek you out, sometimes you see them.

So with Claire, I went to an event and I bumped into Gaynor Faye, who I had met years earlier, and we reconnected and she was like, "Oh, what you doing now?" And Claire was like, "Oh, she's an agent." And she was like, "Oh, I'm looking for a new agent." And literally I signed Gaynor, who'd been with a ginormous agent, and put her in Dancing on Ice, and she won Dancing on Ice, which was when Dancing on Ice was a huge show. And at Dancing on Ice, I met Gillian Taylforth. Who I then became her agent for. And then literally it was just one after the other.

Gillian Taylforth from EastEnders?

That's right, yes.

Wow.

She was in Footballers' Wives at the time.

Oh, that was right.

But what we discovered is, at the end of that year, I had a broad spectrum of artists that were music, presenters and actors, and I had created a multimedia agency. So that first year was that, and the second year we turned over one and a half million within a year.

Wow, Congratulations.

It was just, it was so unexpected. It was never what I intended to do. It was never what I planned to do. I just was really, really good at it.

Yes, and you're a grafter, like me.

Yes well, well, I mean, you know, you do some amazing things. I follow your Twitter and I'm jealous of some of the things that you do, and certainly some of the people that you contribute to. I'd love to, but that's like in a different world for me now, where I have to sort of reposition myself to go over there. But in this world, I sort of fell into this. So I'd failed at writing, and I'd failed as a journalist, even though I was working for people and I'd got all those jobs, but I wasn't making any money. And I do consider, if you're not making any money, that it is not a success.

If you're not earning the money, you're not going to butter any parsnips.

I think so. Absolutely. And also because I'm from a very poor background, we lived on food bank handouts, charity shop clothes, free school dinners. I've been poor, dirt poor.

Me too, me too. Yes, me too.

We had nothing.

I moved to London and I was literally bankrupt. I had no money at all.

Same as...

I had to get the special Oyster card that unemployed people get where there's a picture of you on it and you can get 50p bus travel.

Yes, but that's to be admired in us because I'll bet we're such a small minority of the people that are in media. I certainly know that that's the first story I've heard that's been similar to mine in all the years that I've been doing this, and I've been here 18 years. So the fact that you've just told me that story is the first one I've heard other than mine. So I wasn't even going to go into mine, but the only reason I was talking about how poor we were is because, so money was really important to me. So I then got on the idea that I wanted to make a lot of money. So it wasn't that I wanted to...

That's not an ignoble goal is it?

No, but it was the goal. And I think it's important to say that that was the goal. And I basically happened upon a lot of talent of people that had been slightly forgotten. So it was the dawn of the new millennium. Things were changing. Twitter and Facebook were in the way off, but media, digital was changing. Reality was coming in, and it was just different. And there was a real surge of, if you'd been famous before 2000 and then – I think Hear'Say were kind of like the crossover point, I think it was 2001 – it was like then you became famous, a different type of fame and people sort of forgot the previous ones. And I just knew having grown up watching television...

There was still a market.

Not just that, but that there was a massive market. Because more people in this country are poor than are rich. More people in this country are working class than they are middle class. More people in this country watch television than don't. More people in this country need escapism. And that means we've invested in those stars. So whilst another agent might see a Gillian Telford or a Michelle Collins or a Claire King type of like slightly past their best – "They're in their 40s so we'll just get them what we can now" – I looked at them and went, "Actually women at home have grown up with them, watched them get married on TV" – the soap figures in those days were like 25 million – "so you're never going to get that audience again." So I signed a stable of actresses, and Coleen Nolan from The Nolans, because I knew there was a market for her. And I would go out and get book deals that were worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, clothing deals that worth hundreds of thousands of pounds by manipulating that I knew that their market share was there, and that no one was touching it.

It's cash on the table isn't it, the classic entrepreneur's driver. There's cash on the table, an entrepreneur will take it.

But with the right projects. So everyone said to me, "Who's going to want to see The Nolans perform again?" And I said, "I'll bet a hell of a lot of people want to see them. You don't have to be cool to be popular." So I argued the case, and finally got Universal, who were amazing, who got behind it, and The Nolan's reunion tour went on sale and it took two million at the box office in 24 hours.

Wow.

Two million that people said wasn't there to be had.

They were wrong.

They were so wrong. And they were wrong because they were classist and they were ageist and they were sexist. So it was three levels like that...

But other than that, they were all right?

No, they were horrible! Because those elements of people are what make them horrible. Like you know, if you judge someone because they're not cool, it's like so

like cool is ridiculous. Cool is when you don't need to try. Like, you are cool because you don't need to be. So I said, That is it.

Being cool is like the clap, you've either got it or you haven't.

Right, definitely haven't got it but I am cool. So I was kind of annoyed about that, and I felt like because I was from a minority, you know, coming from the north and coming from the wrong side of the tracks, and not having any sort of... so I tried to get jobs with other agents, and I had done these deals for these celebs because I've met them already and knew them through Top of the Pops, and each agent ripped me off. Nobody gave me a job. Everybody just took the jobs and the commission. So I tried to do it the right way. And again, I won't name names, but they've all fallen by the wayside, those agents. They all had big moments and days. I'm still here, and I'm still representing, at any one time, 10 or 12 hours of what you're seeing on TV from BBC right through to satellite. I've got someone on everything from breakfast to drama to everything. And they've been and gone. And I've done it by being honest and staying true to the vision, which is respect the artist, but tell them the truth. Don't tell them that they're, you know, something to be untouched, idolised in life, removed from reality. And that's how I got my break at Top of the Pops: by being real and telling people. Because people don't tell celebrities the truth. So I would then broker a deal with a magazine or a newspaper and I would go, "Let's be clear, this is what they want to know. How much do you want to be able to make this worth your while to tell this story?" And the editors couldn't believe that I would be so brutally honest and like, because they were used to a cat and mouse game of sitting around and hoping that maybe they might say something juicy and whatever. And I'd be like, "Okay, so she's going to talk about this and she wants this much money for it." And it works. So I realised, and this was a really massive pivotal thing, was that everybody had forgotten that the classics titles – Woman's Own, Bella and Best – were at that time, still selling 200,000-400,000 copies a week. And that that is where the main mum's market really was. And our clients were very much there. And I realised we had most of the Loose Women panellists at the time, that we could create a sort of HRT brat pack, and they were all menopausal women on the cusp of, or in, which meant that the women that were reading and watching them were too. And their marriages were falling apart, or their children were leaving, and they were at stages in their lives where it was relevant to be open. So private pop stars and private stars and your people who didn't share it weren't worth anything. But these girls were worth a lot. But if you went to Hello or OK! they didn't rate them, but if you went to Woman or Woman's Own, they were like, "This is a big deal." So, and this was the game changing moment...

The so-called mid-market.

It was called classics for me. It's like, so that's what we knew it as, and everyone had forgotten them, and Coleen Nolan was getting married, and I went to OK! and Hello. And they were like, "Oh, we'll give you like £5,000 and we'll shove it in the back over a page." And I thought, "No, you're wrong." Like this woman's wedding is a big deal, and it's going to sell a lot of copies. So I went to – she's sadly no longer with us, she died a couple of years ago, terribly young, she was a wonderful woman called Jackie Hatton – and she was the editor of Woman magazine. And I went to her and I said, "You're going to think I'm crazy but I'm proposing that you do a deal for Coleen

Nolan's wedding and devote the entire front cover to it as a commemorative special, and put like 18 pages inside. And she went, "That is crazy." And I went, "And I'm telling you it'll work, and I want you to pay this much money, and I want it to be this, and we want to put the price up for the issue." She was like, "It's so crazy, I've got to go and try." So she went to the board and they approved it. Coleen Nolan's wedding was the cover of Woman and it sold 186,000 copies more than it'd ever done before, and she won editor of the year.

So what came next?

Well, that put me in a really strong position. At that point we were charging £10,000. So I had this supermodel idea in my head, which is we don't get out of bed for less than £10,000. And so we went, "They don't do it for less than £10,000 a cover," and we got £10,000 a cover, and no one was realising that we were nailing this market where there was all this money, and people were going to like other magazines for a fraction, and we were getting colossal fees and turning it into this sort of like, we reached the audience and it was like a bubble really. So we sort of just mushroomed into, I would describe it really as like if it was a snack, we were like tea and toast. It was what everybody has every day, you know? It was comforting. It was nice. It was something accessible. Whereas other agents were sort of trying to create something fancy or a brioche or something that was slightly different. We literally just went, "Everybody has a cup of tea, everybody has a piece of toast, let's just reach that market." And we steadily climbed within the third year, I think, to like three million, and then we hit four million, and then we stayed at like two and a half, and then we turned over two and a half million every year for like 14 years. In the same genre, in the same era of expanding. I did an interview, and they used the phrase that then went into the Bros documentary, because I represented one of them, and it was the fact that, "We made all the money when the screaming stopped." and that is when there was the most interest, because actually what happens when that stops, that's when you get real and...

You worked with Luke didn't you?

I did, yes.

Matt is a very good friend of mine.

Yes, that's right. I worked with Luke, a really lovely guy with a very, very lovely heart. And if you capture the moment of when it's over, but they're still there, the audience want them more than ever. Because they can't buy the record, because the record doesn't exist.

I've seen Matt a couple of times live in Vegas and it's quite interesting is that the audience, because half of them know him as a kind of Michael Bubl -type crooner, king of Vegas type thing, and then the other half are like people like me that wore Grolsch tops on their trainers and everything. And he does a few jazz versions of like When Will I be Famous and Drop the Boy and stuff, and it's really good.

Absolutely. I mean, you know, he's had a lot of success out there.

Well, he deserves it. He works hard.

Absolutely.

I like Matt a lot.

Very, very hard. I mean, they are both damaged from that era, as are a lot of pop stars from there, which takes it to The Thunder Girls, which is basically, I couldn't have written a story if it wasn't about damaged pop stars. And that brings me to the conclusion of why I moved away from pop stars in the end, because you'll see that my career, I had 10 years in music, then I moved on to drama, really. And for the last 10 years, well, the combination and the height of my music was The Nolans reunion tour in 2009, and then I stopped music and I just concentrated on everything else. Because, by the very nature of the beast of being a pop star, you have to massage a pop star's ego enough in order for them to be able to be a pop star, because otherwise you can't go out in front of a live audience and just be you performing, and it is exhausting.

We work with a few musical artistes.

It is exhausting. It's not their fault, because if someone has to believe that they're so special, they can entertain 100,000 people, you can't then expect them to come backstage and offer to put the kettle on and give you a cup of tea. So people are very unfair to pop stars that lose it, because the pop stars don't know what to do when that's over. Geri Halliwell said a very famous quote and it was, she had had very humble beginnings, by the sounds of yours and mine, that and she'd done everything herself. I don't know if you've ever read her back story, but she really was the grafter. She was the one behind the Spice Girls. And she said, a year into the Spice Girls she didn't even know how to make a cup of tea. She'd lost the skills, because literally they don't do anything for themselves. So I did move away from that, and I do still find that my most bad memories have come from my pop star years. I've never really had any prickly moments with anyone who wasn't a pop star.

So you kept doing the same job but you then changed markets in a sense, that you focused on TV.

I just changed lanes, so I focused on presenting and drama. And then of course I was in the right place at the right time for the birth of what I simply could not have bought my house without. And that was Celebrity Big Brother.

I mean, I know Peter Bazalgette quite well. Baz is a friend of mine. He obviously brought Big Brother over from...

Absolutely.

Well he brought that over from Holland, and also Deal or No Deal.

That's right.

They were both Endemol products, weren't they?

That's right. Well, I didn't really make any money from his run of it. I made all the money from Channel 5's run of it.

Oh, I see. So this is, of course, I've got my years mixed up.

So I only had one contestant in Channel 4, which was Stephanie Beacham.

I love Stephanie Beacham.

Have you done her here?

No, she'd be amazing. But I remember her from Dynasty.

Yes.

And she also was in season six of Star Trek The Next Generation in a single episode, she played Moriarty's companion. She was fantastic.

She would also want you to know that she was in Sea Quest and Beverly Hills 90210.

And wasn't she in Howard's Way as well, or was that someone else?

No, and she would want to kill you for that.

Oh, right, okay. Well, she won't be listening anyway. This podcast has no listeners.

I'm sure she will listen, and she will hunt you down.

Well to be honest, I wouldn't mind, she's very welcome to hunt me down, I'd buy her dinner.

You would regret it. She would kill you. So it was the fact that there had never been a Stephanie Beacham type in Celebrity Big Brother. The celebs that had gone in were like the lower rent celebs. So I again changed the market and I went, "Look, pay all those Z listers nothing."

Pay them Z list money.

Yes. "Give us all the money, and we'll change the demographic of the show." And they listened. And they did. And I can't repeat numbers obviously because that's for her accountant to know, but it was very much worth her going into that house. And she went in.

Wow.

And that then created what was possibly my most lucrative run when it moved to Channel 5. I think I did 11 series, and sometimes we had up to three contestants in the house at a time. It was literally like a factory. And we were the only top dollars, because we were the stars. Well, our clients were the stars. And at one point I had three clients in that house and in one go, and the collective fee was a million pounds, which meant I made 200,000 in one month.

And that's what you've mentioned earlier.

Earlier, yes.

Wow, well, congratulations.

That was the biggest. Well, no other agent did it. And at the wrap parties, because they used to always go, "We've got terrible fees because you've had all the money." I was like, "I've got the clients." But you see, they wouldn't go in if it wasn't the right fee. So, because the thing is with Celebrity Big Brother, you could go in and you could come out to nothing, because you could ruin your life and career. So, you're only worth something if what you could damage is worth that, so you can't sell something that's...

It's an opportunity cost.

Absolutely. Again, I spotted it, I ran with it. It took a lot of work to convince a lot of people to do it. And we won it twice, people came second, third twice. We only had two bad experiences in it where people didn't come out of it well. Other than that, it was brilliant, and it was silly money. It was crazy money. It was never going to be sustainable forever, but it certainly was an amazing ride. It changed people's lives, that people who'd got into massive debt... people would be like, "I can't pay my tax bill." You'd be like, "Into Big Brother for you, then."

What came next?

Books. So, at that stage, I then realized that people had forgotten the autobiographies, which I loved, were massive. And, again, I changed the landscape of that. Colleen's autobiography, 13 publishers turned down, said, "Who wants to read this?" and the 14th publisher said, "Okay, we'll do it, but we'll give you £30,000." Which is nothing. Colleen wouldn't care about me telling you this. So, I said, "Look, it's not a good fee, but we're going to hang onto the serial rights," which nobody was doing back then either. I said, "I know it's going to sell," and it did. Sixteen weeks at number one, sold 500,000 copies.

Wow.

Serial sold for hundreds of thousands of pounds, and suddenly I had a whole model again. And again, we sold... I did 10 autobiography deals; nine were number ones,

and none of those were less than six figure deals. Again, I just found money in places that people just weren't looking. Then everywhere I went people followed. So suddenly, there were other agencies that were doing PR, marketing, presenting, acting, but we started that off. I actually was living in America at one brief stage between Claire hiring me, and I saw that in America that it was the multimedia way, and I just brought that concept over here. So, I didn't invent it, I just brought it into the UK. And now it is the way of everything. James Grant Media, I don't know what the Shalit Organisation is called now. It's changed its name just a few times; it was ROAR, and now it's... is it InterTalent?

Oh, I don't know.

Well whatever it is, they're a big agency. But, but they do it all in house. All of them do it all in house. But we started that. You never saw stars during those sort of things before. So James Grant in particular, they also offer like accountancy services and everything. So they do everything in house, which of course is a double earner, all the time.

We work for a number of business managers who work for talent.

Yes, and that is the way. So everybody's safe, everybody's trusted. You know, The Nolans originally had sold 25 million records and only made 30,000 pounds each.

Incredible.

Because they had a terrible contract and had been robbed from...

I think S Club 7 were on about £100 a week for years, weren't they?

Well, that's a totally different story isn't it? Because they were a manufactured band that was sort of on a deal. Whereas the Nolan situation was different because their dad had been their manager, and he just signed a terrible deal, and it meant they literally got like a 10th of a share of a 10th of a share of a 10th of a share, or something.

Yes. Pitiful.

And it was never... and also, don't forget, I think there were like five or six of them at one point. So they're paying for all those costs, they didn't realise. So at the end of it, there was no money. They actually made more money when we represented them in that year.

Than in their heyday. Well, this was their heyday now.

This was 2009, when we did them. Not only did we do the tour, we did an autobiography, which was a Sunday Times bestseller, a clothing range. We got a clothing range to sponsor the tour. And then we did individual autobiographies, and then individual clothing ranges and individual TV specials. And then we got two of

them into prime time TV. So I mean... and people laughed at The Nolans. "Who wants to see them?" And the Nolans must have generated £10 million worth of business, at least.

What came next? I keep asking that, but it's such a page turner of a story. I just keep, all I have to do was keep nudging you out. It's fascinating.

So what happened then that takes me to about, no, no let's stick with The Nolans. So I was at my career height, I was 30, because it was 10 years ago and I had hit the peak. And unbeknownst to me, Bernie Nolan, who I was representing, and my mum both had cancer, and we were all backstage at The Nolans reunion, and unaware that within two years they would both be dead, and they were in their 50s, which was a big shock.

That's obviously a terrible tragedy, I'm very sorry to hear that.

My mum was a teenage mum and I'd always said, "You'll be grateful that you'll never have to look after me because I'm so young." Then it turned out that we never did, but not because the reasons that she thought. And Bernie fought tooth and nail to live, because she had a 14-year-old daughter. She'd had a stillborn child, she'd nearly lost her own child again, at another stage... she really had gone through the mill, and she did not want to die. And I saw death, basically. And I had the house, I had the money, and I'd never really had a life. I hadn't even been in a relationship, I was so busy. I was just focusing on this and that, and I suddenly went, "Oh my god, I'm going to die. I'm going to die and I'm going to have no control over it. And I've got no legacy of my own. Like I've done all these things that everybody, and that's great, but there's nothing here that's got my name on it. That I did, that's for me." And I was a massive Jackie Collins fan when I was little. I used to read her books when I was on my mum's cleaning rounds to just try and transport myself away from the smell of Brasso as she was on her hands and knees scrubbing other people's houses. We lived in an awful house. It was really just disgusting inside, and awful. And having to go to these other houses that were lovely and gorgeous was just like sticking a knife in you really, to make it worse. And in her books I noticed that all the women characters came from nothing and clawed their way up to the top. So I think she inspired me somewhere, early doors, that you could do that. Because if you look back now and sort of go... so I arrived in London at 17 and, and everything that happened happened, where did I get the belief from? I think I got it from a Jackie Collins, book and then, a Shirley Conran book, *Lace*, and all those blockbuster novels of the 80s where women fought against the odds and made it to the top. And I bring her up because she was the final death in like a three-year period. She died. And just as I was already wavering about the fact that I wasn't happy, that this was all I was going to be known for, she died and I was like... she hadn't announced that she was dying. She came on *Loose Women*, I met her several times. I saw her on *Loose Women* and said, "She's dying," and I knew she was dying, and she died within nine days. And I just went, "That's it. I've got to do something for myself." So I got engaged to a stranger, which literally happened like almost overnight. I decided I wanted to be in a relationship...

Well, you don't really do things by halves, do you?

No, I don't.

So, I can tell you're a go-getter.

Absolutely.

That doesn't surprise me in the slightest.

I went to the TV Choice awards, and I literally met somebody at the awards, and within two weeks we were living together. Within six months I was engaged, and then like within a year and a half there were stepchildren involved, and it was all very, it was a big deal and I sort of thought, "Oh, I've had my career now. I've built this business. I don't need to run it anymore. I'm just going to focus on like the children and, maybe we'll have children and then I'll focus on them, and I'll give them the life that I never had." And I decided it wasn't going to be for me, and that that was going to be the legacy. So the legacy was going to be that I was going to be able to help them have what I didn't have. And you know, is there an interest you want? Do you want to go to a special college? Do you want to do something? You know, and then that ended, and the wedding didn't happen. And I was broken hearted, because I'd never really been in love. So I guess it was like a teenage love because it was so late. And late one night, broken hearted, I noticed online that there was an auction for Jackie Collins' jewellery. And I just decided to bid out of nowhere. And this next part of the story is probably the most unbelievable, but it's all true. And I was lying in bed at night and I bid on this auction for these five pieces, I'm actually wearing two of them right now. And there was a power cut in Crouch End, and everything went out. I had no idea if I'd won or not. And I woke up in the morning, and the power came back on and I'd got an email saying I'd had won these – well, not won, you have to pay for them, but I won the bid – and they were delivered FedEx to me within 24 hours. And I put this pendant on that I'm wearing right now, and this ring, and I was with Colleen on a TV set for a pilot about psychics the next day. I hadn't mentioned the jewellery to anyone. She didn't know. I hadn't talked about it. And this psychic – I didn't believe in psychics, I had no belief in anything like that – said to me, "Can I have a word with you?" I looked at her, and Colleen looked at me, and I went, "Yes." And she went, "In private." And I'm like, "Okay." And she went, "That jewellery that you're wearing." And I went, "Yes." She went, "It used to belong to a really powerful woman." And I went, "Yes." And she went, "And she's really glad you've got it." And I went, "Yep." And she went, "And you've written something." And I went, "Yep." She went, "And you need to get it out, and give it another go." And that night I went home, got out *The Thunder Girls*, rewrote it, and it sold within a week.

Wow.

True story.

So this was the... the final pivot as it were now, is that you're now a writer and novelist, it's been turned into a play. I mean, what's the day to day now? Do you have the ultimate portfolio career?

So that moment, that divine intervention somewhere, changed my life again, just like that, that fast. It's really weird. So considering that I was raised in a religious prison really, someone's been looking out for me, and the people that were in that situation that I left have got pretty bad lives. I know I haven't, I've got a great life, and I didn't obey the rules. So I think it's pretty clear that they got it wrong, and I was right, and it's now led me down to... I've crossed over in front of the camera, and it's weird that now I have a Twitter profile, and a following, and people write letters to me...

People are inspired by your journey, and inspired by your success.

I've heard nothing but positivity. Nothing.

It's inspirational.

I've never had a single, I've never had one troll. I haven't had anything. I had a few bad book reviews, but I didn't mind that.

My wife gets an occasional bad book review, and she takes it personally.

I didn't mind, because they said why they didn't like it. They said, "I shouldn't have bought this because I don't like this sort of book, and I didn't like it."

What Heather, my wife, does is she looks at other like, you know, bestselling books and there's hundreds of bad reviews for those as well.

Absolutely.

It's just the nature of being a published author. You're going to get moaning Minnies. Also, you can't please everyone, all the time. But yes, you can rationalise it, but it still hurts a bit when somebody says your work's not very good...

Well, it doesn't hurt mine, because they're really weird, minds... mine is a bit like, my whole career is polarising. I have either five-star reviews or one star reviews, which is, "I love this book so much I read it 10 times," Or one, "Hated it, it should never ever be read ever again." And my whole life's been like that. People either got me or they didn't... and I'm fine, I've reconciled with it. That's the way it is. But now we have a play that has sold out, and we've already been offered a West End transfer, which is life changing. That will make me a West End producer that doesn't have a GCSE, and sort of did it all backwards. So I'm now in a position of power where I'm dealing with international rights for projects that I own myself. We're dealing with international companies, big ones – not Disney, but Disney sized, so that would be a comparative – and I learnt very early from when I was doing my deals for the clients, to hold back on as many rights as I could. So when I sold my novel, I held on to the dramatic rights. Held on to the play rights. And the reason that I wanted to write a play is because so many of our actors, when they came off soaps, would find that they were offered touring shows that just weren't very good. And I just thought, "I bet I can do better than this." So I did, and I have, and it's sold out.

Do you enjoy like, not running the business and scaling and making, doing the deals?

But I still do it. I still do. I do everything. So I am still wearing every hat.

So you haven't actually taken the hat off and put another one on, you've just put lots of other hats on at the same time.

And I've created more work for the people that I represent, in house. So what I've actually done is I've defied the next era, and now I've hired women onstage that are in their 50s and 60s that would absolutely not get hired by a producer. And I've created the show for them to repay it, and it's sold out. And every promoter that we went to first, because I thought let's see if somebody else wants to put it on first, said, "Nobody wants to see these women." So full circle, all over again, we came back to where we were, which was ageism, classism, sexism. And yet again, we've bucked the trend, because now we have a sell-out show with four women over 50, that are all working class, that they said no one wanted to see.

What's the next hat you're going to put on?

It will be...

Global domination?

Well, yes. It will be...it's America, so I tend to go to America to write, which is what I've done, because I have to sort of be in a different time zone for it. And I've been offered quite a big deal with an American publisher and an American network. And so, probably we'll be spending more time there, but I won't change what I'm doing. We already reduced the client list early when I did all this. So I'm now really representing people that if they're actors, they can be in my shows, and if they're presenters, they're in shows that we're already working on. So we very rarely take people on now, and we've got just about the right size client list. I mean, pretty much if you put on EastEnders, Coronation Street, Emmerdale or whatever, we've got them. If you put on Loose Women, This Morning, Lorraine, we've got someone in there, so we have a little world that works for us, but now it's about making sure that they stay happy and that they get a focus, and that they get attention, because it's not about me, this era. If I'd had a Melanie Blake on the books, I would never have done any of it myself. I just didn't have one. I just happened to be her.

I think we can kind of guess that the answer to this in a sense, but I'd like your take on it, is what advice would you give to someone who's listening to you and is hugely inspired, who's just starting out on their career?

Never, ever accept anybody else's opinion on what you think about what know. If you know it, you know it, and you can always get it better, you can always change it, you can always finesse it, but if you have an instinct that you know you're right, you probably are. Because if I had listened to anybody, I wouldn't have got anything done and I would never have got anything away. And everything I ever heard was no. "No,

no, no, no, no.” “It won’t work.” “Nobody wants it.” And when I just stopped listening, I started getting.

I’ve worked with Metro Bank for many years, and they’ve got a really good culture. And one of the things that they’re having the businesses that it takes two people to say no to any idea at all, so that anyone can’t just say no to something. There has to be a second person. And they said that tons of ideas have come out of that just because it’s their rule in their culture that one person can’t say no to anything.

I would say the biggest advice that I could give to anybody that isn’t yet where we are, which is inside the media bubble, is the way in now is that there is no excuse not to get in. Like when I started, there were fan clubs that you had to write letters to. I mean, now you can tweet a celebrity direct. Simon Cowell hired someone a couple of years back who tried to derail their number one campaign, but because it was so good that they actually hired them. He did it from his bedroom, I think, in Hull. You can be anywhere.

Rage Against The Machine.

You can be anywhere... like there is no excuse. Anybody that says they can’t crack it is not trying hard enough, because I see bloggers, certainly bloggers, podcasts, social media influencers. There are people who literally, have created entire platforms for themselves that then get picked up by bigger platforms. So if you want to do it, you just do it. If you want to write, you write. If you want to broadcast, broadcast. It’s like, even if you just broadcasting to like a few people at first that are seeing it, if you’re good, word will get around. There has never been more opportunity ever, and the walls have come down more than they’ve ever come down. But my business story remains the same, because the prejudice, ageism and classism of working class, older women is still intact, massively so. So my work will never be done. Because we fight that every day, and women don’t have an expiration date on them. And a lot of men in power believe that they do.

Mel, it’s been an incredibly inspirational conversation. I’m a huge admirer of what you’ve achieved. Thank you ever so much for your time.

I’ve absolutely loved being on, and I hope that anything that I’ve said that is inspirational to anyone that wants to achieve something, if they’re told they can’t have it, is useful.