

Humming a new tune

SHARON STEPHENSON TALKS TO THE KIWI WHO WAS THE KING OF THE MUSIC WORLD – UNTIL HE THREW IN HIS CROWN

He's dined with Bono, shot the breeze with Madonna and the Beastie Boys, and caught private jets as often as most of us catch a bus.

Yet it takes some doing to get Brent Hansen to mention even a handful of the musicians who've entered his orbit during the last 20 years. The former Christchurch lad isn't wowed by celebrity – he says it isn't the Kiwi way.

"I've never gone out of my way to hang out with pop stars or to go backstage at gigs. Being part of that sycophantic world has never appealed."

Still, if you're going to name-drop, they might as well be the biggest names on the planet.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he laughs. "The thing is, I was only doing my job. It just so happened that my job involved rock stars."

His job, as he so modestly puts it, also involved shaping the tastes, trends and desires of a generation spread across major chunks of the globe. As editor-in-chief and president of creative for MTV International, Hansen oversaw the creative and editorial output of 97 music channels that beamed to around 1 billion households worldwide. Not to mention the dizzying array of sub-channels now operated by the MTV behemoth: MTV2, MTV Hits, MTV Brand New as well as the children's channel Nickelodeon, classic rock channel VH1 and the comedy channel Paramount.

For 19 years, the cultural juggernaut was Hansen's life. Two years ago he walked away from it all.

Today he's on a fleeting visit to the capital as keynote speaker for Thrive Wellington, a gabfest that's been billed as a 'big day out' for business types.

In between raids on the fruit bowl ("I haven't had a tamarillo in years"), Hansen attempts to answer the question that dogs him everywhere he goes: why would someone leave arguably the coolest job on the planet?

"I was turning 50 and basically, I'd had enough. I could see that MTV was about to go down a path that I wasn't happy with – the music was being devalued and it seemed to be less and less about the kind of music and art that I cared for."

He wanted to leave while the world's most widely distributed TV network was still a class act.

"I didn't want to be one of those middle-aged guys who stay on in a job long after they should have left; I wanted to leave while both MTV and I were at our respective peaks. Maybe it was the Kiwi in me, but I just said 'stuff it' and walked."

Music was Hansen's first love and growing up in Christchurch, the oldest of four children, he can remember sneaking a transistor radio under his pillow for secret nocturnal listening sessions.

The first record he ever bought was the seven-inch single Mr Tambourine Man by the Byrds and he played it until it drove his parents to distraction. Oddly enough, there was never any aspiration to emulate his idols.

"I did play the drums at school and joined the St Andrew's College Pipe Band, but that was mainly to get out of military training. My love of music is and always has been as a fan."

He was an average student and enrolled at Otago University intending to be a lawyer. The arts, however, won him over and he did a BA in English literature and history, followed by a move home to complete a Masters in English.

With vague notions of becoming a teacher, Hansen stuck out the year at Teacher's College but his heart wasn't in it. In one of those serendipitous events that seem to have characterised his career, he received a call from a producer at South Pacific Television who'd seen some of the music reviews he'd been writing for a local paper.

Would Hansen like a part-time job as a runner, doing unglamorous tasks like sweeping the floor and helping behind the scenes on children's show 'Romper Room'?

"I had to stick my hand up this puppet called Mr Doo Be and entertain the kids while lying on the floor among the wires and hot lights."

His puppetry skills obviously impressed someone because that gig morphed into a full-time job at the Christchurch studio ("I only took it because of the free albums") where he became a floor manager, working on shows like A Week of It and That's Country and assisting when bands such as Th' Dudes dropped by to film their videos.

When the call came to direct the holy grail of Kiwi music shows, Radio with Pictures, Hansen and his new wife, Pip Dann, the presenter of youth music programme Shazam, moved up to Wellington to take on the role.

It was, he says with much fondness, the best job he's ever had.

"Karyn Hay was the presenter and we had huge artistic licence to do what we wanted and break all sorts of rules. I often wonder what direction my life would have taken if that job had lasted."

He didn't get the chance to find out because TVNZ pulled the plug after a dispute with the record companies.

MTV was barely a blip in the public's consciousness when Hansen and his wife left New Zealand, intending to backpack around Europe for six months. He sent a show reel to MTV bosses in New York, asking if he could check out their operation on the way home.

Instead, they offered the deeply unimpressed Hansen a job at the embryonic MTV Europe in London.

"I didn't really want to work for MTV, but places like the BBC wouldn't even look at me. I took the job because they offered it to me and because I thought it would pay for the Kombi van to take round Europe."

Within six months, the Kiwi upstart had been promoted three times – from news producer to director of news to director of programming. A few years later, he found himself in the Chief Executive's chair at MTV Europe's sprawling HQ in the heart of Camden.

The secret to his success, he believes, was being "confidently outspoken".

"I wasn't afraid to say no to things I thought were wrong, which surprised a lot of people – especially my American bosses who were used to their staff always saying yes. Again, being a Kiwi helped – I didn't fit into the British class system and I'm not sure they quite knew what to make of me, either."

To this day, it amuses him that someone from a country at the bottom of the world with no business skills was hired to head up MTV.

But while the promotions came easily, the work didn't always.

"Believe me, I had my share of waking at 3am in a cold sweat, wondering if I was up to it, or if I was just some charlatan that would



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO BRENT

- On manufactured pop, as produced by shows like Pop Idol: "I really dislike it. These shows are not taking music forward. They are fine if you just want to be entertained, but as yet they have not produced the future of music."
- On New Zealand art: "I love the vibrant, gutsy and unique flavour of modern New Zealand fine art from McCahon and Angus onwards. It is a pleasure to own and a continuing dialogue in my life."
- On living in London: "A wonderful but frustrating city with so much to stimulate the senses. I feel privileged to have been able to use this city to the full."
- On the best song ever written: "That's impossible to answer and unfair as there are so many songs that fit that bill depending on my mood. If I have to name one it would be Joni Mitchell's Free Man in Paris, the chorus of which sums up my professional life."

***"I was a free man in Paris
I felt unfettered and alive
There was nobody calling me up for favours
And no-one's future to decide
You know I'd go back there tomorrow
But for the work I've taken on
Stoking the star maker machinery
Behind the popular song."***

– Free Man in Paris, by Joni Mitchell

soon be uncovered. It was a matter of digging deep and finding resources in myself that I didn't know were there – things like how to lead and manage people."

Digital encryption was introduced during his watch, which greatly increased the number of television channels and allowed MTV Europe to regionalise its operation in 1997.

It was, he admits, a huge punt that fortunately paid off.

"The one-stop-shop channel from London no longer fit a Europe that had started to think more in terms of its own backyard. MTV Europe grew from a single pan-European station to 45 regionalised channels, including MTV Romania, MTV Nordic, MTV Russia and MTV Africa."

His biggest creative risk, however, was introducing the MTV Europe Music Awards, pop's ultimate bun fight that is staged each year in a different European city. That awards show is now the company's most widely viewed product, with an estimated 30 million globally tuning in to

the 15th extravaganza, held in Liverpool last month.

But Hansen has few, if any, regrets about pushing the stop button on his career. He hasn't watched MTV since leaving and isn't terribly interested in the direction it has taken.

These days he's too busy making up for lost time with his children – 13-year-old daughter Cassidy and 17-year-old son Marley, named after the late, great king of reggae.

"Having to split my time between offices in London, New York, Tokyo and Sydney meant I was always on planes or in hotel rooms. It's great to be living in one place and to have my family around me."

Music is still a central force in his life: Hansen goes to a couple of gigs a week and DJs "now and again" at a pub near his North London home. He almost chokes on his tamarillo, though, when I ask if he's interested in managing bands.

"God no. Despite what my job entailed, I'm not really a networker or a terribly social

person. I much prefer to deal with people one-on-one."

What he is relishing is his role on the Board of London's Southbank Centre, a part-time, voluntary position that sees him help set the cultural agenda of the entity that includes the Royal Festival Hall and the Hayward gallery.

"To be involved in an institution like the Southbank is a fantastic experience because it involves everything I love – music, visual art, dance, literature and performance. It also represents what I think is best about living in London – the access to so many and wonderful artistic events."

Despite having lived in Britain for two decades, Hansen's homing instinct remains strong and he and wife Pip are currently building a home in Auckland.

"As our parents get older, we feel the pull home more than ever before. I think we've lived in London too long to ever move back here permanently, but the plan is to eventually split our time between the UK and New Zealand." **YW**

LEFT Former CEO of MTV Europe and part-time Kiwi, Brent Hansen.
Photo: Kent Blechynden