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Transcript of an interview with

Tim Brown

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Transcript of an Interview with Mr Tim Brown

TRACK 01

CF: This is Criena Fitzgerald (**CF**) interviewing Tim Brown (**TB**) for an oral history of Connections nightclub, 4th of July 2019. Tim, can you just give me your full name and date of birth?

TB: Yes. My name is Timothy Beresford Brown, 2nd of the 3rd 1966.

CF: Tim, before we start the interview, Theresa [Archer- State Library of WA], who requested it, we thought we'd just talk briefly about terminology to forestall any complaints. And if you could just briefly talk about the terminology that we're going to use in the interview.

TB: All right. Well, I'm likely to drift and use all sorts of terminology. One, because that's my nature, but two, because I've lived through changing times where different language has been used to describe me and my people. And I kind of drift towards queer now, because I think it describes the group of people that I've lived and worked with in my time, be they gay, be they lesbian, be they bisexual, or even just people that felt themselves to be different. I think that will be borne out by the discussion of what Connections is and the community, if you can call it that, that it serves.

CF: Perfect. Okay. And I'll just get you to record that you're agreeing to have this interview lodged in the State Library.

TB: Yes. I agree to have this interview recorded and lodged in the library. In fact, I'm proud to do so.

CF: Perfect, okay. Now just - - I think we'll start really, a brief history of Connections, the building itself. And for people who don't know where it is, just - - I mean we know that it's in Northbridge. Just give me a description of the club itself. When you

first knew it.

TB: All right. So Connections nightclub is at 81 James Street Northbridge, really right at the centre of Northbridge. It's in a '60s building, that is next door to what was the original kebab shop in Northbridge, upstairs, built by the Greeks that owned that in the late '60s. It was originally a cabaret club, and in 1975 it was sold to Dennis Marshall and Walter Furlong, who re-opened it as a gay nightclub called Connections nightclub.

CF: Why? What was the impetus for that in '75?

TB: Dennis worked with a very, very interesting man called James Philips. James was an Englishman. Dennis had been Australian rules footy player, and had come back and got into hospitality opening several venues across the city. James was always - - I'm not quite sure how they met. I believe they met in England with Dennis's wife Wendy, who was in fashion, still is in fashion. And they had opened - - James had opened several venues for Dennis, and I believe he was really the creative energy behind Dennis's enterprises. He'd come to Dennis around that time and said Perth needs a gay club. You should open a gay club. Dennis was like oh, what was that? What's that? That's - - actually probably he was more likely to have been oh yes, they're like those places you took me to, when we were out and about, because Dennis loved a drink and loved to party, and if he found people that liked to drink and liked to party, he would have joined in. It would not have surprised me if he had visited quite a lot of those places with James, with Wendy in tow, Wendy being in fashion. It would not have surprised if he'd had quite a good experience of how much fun those places could be. And his partner at the time, Walter, was married, but probably he was gay. But very closeted. So he would have come along for the ride, and hence they bought what was the Top Hat cabaret from the Greeks that owned it, bought the lease off them, and turned it into Connections nightclub.

CF: So that was in 1975?

TB: Yes.

CF: And when - - you know, what - - I mean I'm going to ask you this and then I'll ask you when you first went in there. I know - - what sort of thing did they offer then that was different?

TB: Well, I first went in there as a customer, the very first time I was 17, with my girlfriend at the time, who was so much older than me. Good 5 years. And her best friend was gay, and they took me up there, and it was something else. It was like nowhere I'd ever been before.

CF: Why?

TB: Why?

CF: I mean apart from the fact that you're really young. I mean what - -

TB: Well, I had been nightclubbing already.

CF: Okay.

TB: And that was in the '80s at a time when the Red Parrot was in full flight. And I'd been to the Red Parrot. Funnily enough Dennis owned that as well, and James ran that. At the time, he was running both venues. And the Red Parrot was something else as well. But Connections was another universe. Why was it another universe? It was a bunch of people that you didn't really see out and about in the real world. Nightclubs are always other worldly. It's what we trade in, they're - - you know, it's about making a fantasy world. This was a fantasy world but it had a cohesiveness to the group of people that were there. I couldn't say I recognised it at the time, but over - - over the years, I realise what it is is a feeling of belonging. They're called nightclubs, they're called clubs, but that had more of a club feeling than anything else. The people that were there belonged there, and they knew it. They owned it. And that - - that becomes

a running story through what that venue is. What it means to the people that use it.

CF: What sort of entertainment was there then, in 19- - when you first went in 1980?

TB: I don't remember seeing entertainment particularly. Because I really did only go that one time at that point.

CF: Yes.

TB: A couple more times in those years, those ensuing years, but I was living away. So I'm probably not a good judge. I left town - - well actually after that summer. Yes, so I went that once, and I possibly went twice in the four years that followed, because I was living away, I was in Melbourne, then I was in the US.

CF: And I'm going to talk about your studies in music later, but when you - - when you went into the nightclub, where they - - because it's quite posh now, were they serving - - what were they serving then? Were they serving?

TB: Well, certainly the nightclub that was then was a much more stripped back version than perhaps what we've got now. All the beer was in cans. Wine was served in middy glasses, served from 20 litre casks underneath the bar. There was a sweet and a dry white, and a red that just sat there. They were still there when I started in 1991.

CF: Really?

TB: Yes, yes. That was - - and there was - - there was a - - almost a mutiny when I tried to serve - - put wineglasses in and bottled wine.

CF: And that seems unusual, because you know, this is probably going to sound like stereotyping, when you look at the gay community they're renowned for a certain flair and a style, and that sounds more like the Greek nightclub.

TB: Look, that's a very interesting one. You know, we could spend a long time talking about those stereotypes, about how the gays are so creative and how stylish

CF: Yes.

TB: The best way that I used to describe it, because actually, now that everybody - - not everybody, but it's so easy for people to be out, you realise how many really bog standard gay people there are. You know, they work in shops, they work in call centres, they are accountants. Certainly at that time, the gays that the world saw were flamboyant, because they were willing to be seen. And the gays that were willing to go out were more flamboyant. But still, it was a bit rough and ready.

CF: Yes, it's interesting.

TB: Yes. And certainly the nightclub had a rough and readiness about it, and it was a lot more like handmade. We actually have a saying in Connections it's called it's an equal mix of dirt and glitter. I think it still applies. There's something a bit rough and ready still, even though it looks posh, it can get sloppy and messy. Certainly in terms of what it offered then. There were drag queens swanning around, but they were pretty rough around the edges.

CF: Dressed in drag?

TB: Yes. Yes. And you know, there were people dressed up, but there's been never a - - been a dress code in Connections. There's lots of jeans and T-shirts. In fact, there will be somebody in underwear parading around. There'll be, you know, all manner of looks, basically you need covered shoes and that's about it. But certainly, it had an element of that too, which was wildly appealing. There's an earthiness to it. There was always an earthiness to it, and you know, that bar - - so yes, it was Wine - - cask wine, beer in cans, very basic spirit collection, not a cocktail in sight. A really fast service bar, because people drank hard, you know, and it was the chance to escape.

CF: And what - - what do you reckon the out there population was? I mean not everyone - - I mean clearly not everyone who came to Connections had come out.

TB: No. And maybe this is a good juncture to talk about what Connections was in this small city, and that.

CF: Yes, sure.

TB: That idea of - - in a larger city the gay communities, and I use that term broadly, the queer community, the - - are often very segregated, because you could have a bar for the young gay men that wanted to listen to pop music, for the older gay guys, for those more sophisticated people that wanted cocktails and such, for the drag queens, and the women would be as broken down into subgroups. Certainly never a big city, say London, you'll find a bar for each of those - - those groups. Perth was so small that all the community were forced in together, and Connections has always been that. It's always had men and women, young and old, gay, and again used broadly, and straight, and everything in between, that has very much informed - - very much informed what the nightclub was, and ultimately informs what it is now, which becomes very interesting as you tell the story of the world opening up, and our community getting its rights, how it places it. It probably is the key factor in its longevity. Because we were actually that mixed venue before they existed. Even when it was a closed shop, you couldn't say this is just gay men.

CF: Right.

TB: Or even gay men of a particular type. There were always gay women in there, and there was always an element of people that weren't gay identifying or gay, because you could separate out those terms. You know, the AIDS Council uses the term men who have sex with men as non-gay identifying straight men.

CF: Yes.

TB: So we could talk about those people, but we could also talk about the people that just came because they love the vibe, that didn't identify with the sexuality of the bulk of the people in there, but loved the place for its party vibe, for the music, for a whole bunch of reasons.

CF: And the tolerance?

TB: And the tolerance. And again, that informs what it's been all along, and how we still do business now.

CF: And at the time you were going, it's before AIDS, before all of that shift in the community.

TB: It's just at the beginning of all of that.

CF: AIDS is in '81. Sort of roundabout '80s.

TB: Yes.

CF: So you're there in '75.

TB: Well, I wasn't.

CF: No, ...(indistinct)...

TB: The nightclub. Yes. So it's hard for me to speak of the time before that. Much of what I would say it would be second hand, my partner Peter, who was my partner in the business and my lover, when we started sort of 1991, he was 15 years older than me, and had also worked in the nightclub, I believe in '77-'78.

CF: Right.

TB: He - - what I know of that time I know through him and men of his generation. You know, I - - I can't even say came out, but yes, it's the best term to use. I came out in the '80s so in the midst of all of that.

CF: Right.

TB: And started work in '91, you know, which really is the height of the AIDS crisis.

CF: But when you went as a young man, when you went to that club, how wild was it? You said that with you know - -

TB: It was very wild.

CF: Yes. So was it a venue for sex then? Was it?

TB: It was never a venue - - it wasn't sex on the premises venue. That's not to say that people didn't have sex, and it was certainly a lot looser, and again the police weren't interested, it was a closed shop. It was certainly - - the times were certainly looser. I think all venues were, but because Connections was you know, I use the term a closed shop, and the police knew what we were and knew what we did, but they also knew it was safe. They always knew it was safe. And that we were self- regulating. And that's the other thing about a closed community, it's like living in a country town, because everyone knows everyone's business, people keep their heads in, or somebody would have something inappropriate, they are pulled up on it by people within that community. It certainly had that, which again contributed - - contributed to its safeness, but yes, certainly a lot of stuff went on.

CF: And how - - and of course, drug usage changed - - has changed, markedly. Were drugs pretty common then in the nightclub scene then, not just Connections I suppose.

TB: Yes. Yes. They have been.

CF: What sort of drugs?

TB: Everything known to man I think.

CF: And that, because I will talk about it - - the changes later, because it's, you know, the whole community's changing in that way. So - - and was - - was food served in that early period? Did it need to be served?

TB: Yes. It did. So with a - - what was then called a cabaret licence, now been changed to a nightclub licence, you had to provide, live entertainment and food. My experience as a teenager in the '80s under that licence was usually a bain-marie at the front door, and if you wanted some food, you could have it. I remember going with my best mate when we were teenagers, into a club, and going this is cool, they even feed you, I wonder why no one else is eating this food? I don't remember that in Connections.

CF: No.

TB: So maybe they got out of that. I don't remember when that - - that part was taken out of liquor licensing. And certainly live entertainment meant cabaret. It meant shows. So Connections comes from an era when cabaret was what you did. Well, you know, if not cabaret bands, somewhere in that period that licensing got changed to include DJs as live entertainment.

CF: So before you went there they were already having that?

TB: Yes.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes, so that must have got changed somewhere in the '80s as well.

CF: Yes. Who - - was it James who was running it for - -

TB: James had only run it for a couple of years.

CF: Right.

TB: James was - - they were just doing lots of different things, and he was always off to the next thing. And there was a series of managers over - - over the time until I took - - took over from '75 to '91.

CF: And though - - I mean you weren't there, but those early cabarets, were they all drag or mixed?

TB: There were women in there. Or there were dancers in there. Both male and female.

CF: Right.

TB: But I don't think anyone ever would have got a lead role, apart from a drag queen, the drag queens just wouldn't have it.

CF: Fair enough. Now back to you. So you were only there - - you went there very briefly and then you went off to Melbourne? So what were you studying there?

TB: Music.

CF: Yes. What sort of music?

TB: Electronic and 20th century.

CF: Is that unusual?

TB: Yes. Which is why I went to Melbourne. Or actually also because I needed to get out of this town. I have to say my father was incredibly supportive and helpful. I wanted

to study music, we went down to UWA, and I was into electronics and synthesisers and all of that in the early days of that, I played piano, but I also had a room full of electronic keyboards. I wanted to study music, UWA was not really the place for me. We looked all over the country to see what there was. There was a course at Latrobe University in Melbourne, that was much broader, it actually involved physics, acoustics, studio recording electronics, as part of the syllabus, and I studied all of those things as well as music.

CF: And was that particular course, how important was that for you later on?

TB: It's informed everything I did. And actually foolishly, you know I went clubbing then, or I went clubbing beforehand, and Latrobe, if you know Melbourne, is a long way from the city - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - And I lived on campus, it's an hour away, and I didn't have a car. I didn't actually go clubbing very much. I now realise that if I had been in the club scene, I would have realised that what I wanted was what we called art music now, the music that is played in nightclubs which is all electronic and is all sampling. And I was doing, studying that sort of music that in a - - in a university setting, in a very academic sort of way that actually I really should have been making dance music.

CF: Applying it?

TB: Applying it, yes, but not putting the two things together, I was young. Young and foolish. Yes, maybe I would have done so, and maybe I would have been making - - that's where I would have ended up, but by an interesting twist of fate, I - - I left university and did a lot of work for electronic and 20th century contemporary classical music, and I realised that just wasn't for me, which is why I ended up in the US, because I did that okay, I needed some time and go travelling and did, and you know, waited tables and worked in bars to pay the bills from sort of when I was at university

through my travelling.

CF: Yes.

TB: And then when I came back. And then this job came.

CF: Did you work in nightclubs in the US?

TB: No, I never worked in nightclubs actually.

CF: At all?

TB: In fact, I largely worked in restaurants and then bars and hotels, and I worked, once I got back to Perth, I worked for the Matilda Bay brewing company in those glory days after America's Cup.

CF: And you said in the interview that your - - was it your great grandmother had owned a wine bar?

TB: Yes.

CF: Where was that?

TB: The Karinya winebar, which now - - what street's it on? It became the one in which David Helfgott played. Is it Aberdeen Street? Or the next - - or Fitzgerald Street?

CF: Were you aware of that, growing up?

TB: No. Not at all. Not spoken about.

CF: Sort of fabulous.

TB: Wonderfully fabulous. I come from very bourgeois, very comfortable, a middle-class family from Nedlands, and I wish I'd spent more time with that grandmother and really learnt her story.

CF: Yes.

TB: Because it's fascinating, and exciting. But her - - sorry, that grandmother being the daughter of the woman in question owned a bar, a wine bar in Northbridge in the '40s. It's now gone, but yes, I never got to ask the stories of my - - my grandmother must have mentioned that in passing, but she married an accountant, very sensible, good people in Nedlands, and I think such things were never spoken of again.

CF: But it's unusual for that period, for a woman to be running a bar.

TB: Very unusual. Well, the story is even better than that, because it turned out that she had run a bar in London, I can't remember exactly where.

CF: During the war?

TB: I can't tell you the dates.

CF: Yes.

TB: She'd actually been a barmaid, married the publican when his wife died. Then he passed away, she inherited the pub, she sold the pub and came to Australia.

CF: How fabulous. And then had a bar here?

TB: Yes. But was married to a carpenter, yes, I mean we could be here for ...(indistinct)...

CF: Yes, well, it's in the genes anyway. Yes.

TB: Only I'm not sure. Everyone else would have it otherwise.

CF: So tell me then about the initial approach to you, to run Connections.

TB: So 1991, in that period where I was working for the Matilda Bay brewing company, or might have been - - yes, it might have been just - - just 1990. Dennis used to come into a bar that I was running on Bayview Terrace Claremont, called Astoria, regularly. I had met Peter - - I'd come back from the US, been working for the company for a while, been at various places, including the Brass Monkey here, when it first opened. I - - in fact I'd met Peter at Connections, and another story.

CF: Can you go into that?

TB: Actually, probably yes, it's probably better to tell that story first.

CF: Yes, okay.

TB: I had come back from the US, I'd gone to Connections on a Thursday night. Somewhere - - we don't actually know our anniversary, but it's somewhere between Australia Day and Valentine's Day. And that would be 1989. Yes, 1989.

CF: Just give me his full name.

TB: Peter Malcolm Robinson. So we'd been together a couple of years. Yes, having met at Connections on a Thursday night, moved in together. I was working at Astoria in Claremont. Dennis used to come in. I told Peter about this chap that I'd met, he said ah, Dennis Marshall, wonderful guy. You know my friend Tricia, Tricia and Dennis are best mates, we'll have to catch up sometime, we never did. I used to work for him at Connections.

CF: What was his job?

TB: He was bar manager that time around. Dennis used to come in, we got to chatting. Really liked each other, and then at one day he brought in another chap who turned out to be James Phillips, the guy that had set up Connections with him, and I'll actually make a slight digression. At the time Peter and I didn't go to Connections. In fact, nobody really went to Connections, which informs a lot of this story. There was another club that had opened up down the road called DC's, DC's was the hot place of the moment. Connections had lost many, many of its staff, including several - - the manager and several other key staff to AIDS, because it was right at that time, and it really was a very dark place. The customers that were going there tended to be, maybe not the rougher end of town, but there was a heavy leather scene, and it was quite heavy.

CF: Was it - - was it bleak because of what had happened?

TB: Yes and - - yes, and no. It was bleak because of what had happened. What had happened - - yes, you know, this other place that opened up, and it was all young and new and fresh, people were desperately hanging on to an old time in Connections, and the people that were hanging on to it most were people that were dying. So it had become - - it was both bleak and Bacchanalian perhaps. It was people living like there was no tomorrow.

CF: So were they being - - I mean - - and this is only an observation, you wouldn't know necessarily, but were they being irresponsible in the sense which would make a young gay men not want to go there?

TB: Well, look, certainly there was a whole lot of stigma around that. There's also - - firstly, there's a lot of stigma between the ages, in the gay community.

CF: Yes.

TB: Probably less so now than there was.

CF: Why?

TB: Anybody that's old is a paedophile, but at 20, somebody that's old is 30.

CF: That's interesting.

TB: So we're incredibly ageist. Particularly the gay men. Always have been. But it was particularly bad then. Because there was the added stigma of AIDS.

CF: And if you're older, you were more likely to be infected?

TB: Well, you were. You know, for a 20-year-old kid, you just were. Anybody that's 34 they're in a - - they've had sex with lots of people and they are all - - it was all horribly tied up in that. So - -

CF: So within the gay community itself, there was a sort of prejudice against - -

TB: We're the most prejudiced people you'll find. I think one of my door people, because he's turned transgender, said can we just have a sign saying you're welcome in here, but just know that we can be a bit 'judgee'.

CF: Right.

TB: We're incredibly judgmental, it's really interesting, but I do think that that often happens in small communities. The - - you know, you find somebody else to blame it on. You need somebody to look down on.

CF: Would those older guys who were all - - I mean would they have been less responsible about sex? You said it was Bacchanalian in the sense of - -

TB: Look, I don't necessarily think it should be described as those older guys- -

CF: Yes.

TB: But people who are dying often let loose because they - -

CF: Got nothing left to lose.

TB: Fuck this, I'm going to enjoy this last bit.

CF: Yes.

TB: And certainly that's what the crowd that were in Connections felt like.

CF: And did you think that they were predatory because you said young people - -

TB: No, but it's never concerned me.

CF: Yes.

TB: And I - - you know, my - - like I say Peter was 15 years older than me, my current partner seven years younger than me. I mean I'm incredibly judgemental too, but I try really hard to disengage from those sorts of thoughts. I mean that's dumb.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know. No. I've never thought that. And the fact that somebody older is interested in sex is good for them.

CF: Yes.

TB: But look, you know.

CF: It wasn't a good place to be at that point.

TB: Certainly, Connections at that time wasn't a good place to be. It had a very dark energy, and the place up the road had a very positive energy. It was very exciting. And it was new and it was fresh, and all the young ones were there, so you know - - and they owned it, and you know, nightclubs are like that. Young people want to own it. They all think they've - - they're the first people to discover it and invent it. And older people can be really judgemental in return, how dare you think you invented this, I did all of this before. I'll be the first one to do that.

CF: So that new club, was it offering a different - - different music as well?

TB: Probably - - no, actually. Actually, no, because the DJs were being shared. It was probably a little more forward thinking in its music policy, but no, for the most part. I just think that Connections had a bad reputation. And, you know, that fed upon itself.

CF: Yes. And also people dying.

TB: People dying, yes.

CF: Yes.

TB: And you know if you're working in a team of your work mates, and key staff are dying around you, doesn't do a lot for morale. And morale was terrible. That bunch of staff were a miserable bunch. Rightly so.

CF: So it was all - - it was fading economically, and fading in the sense of atmosphere.

TB: Yes, socially.

CF: Socially.

TB: Yes.

CF: So was - - was Peter working - - I thought he was in Broome.

TB: At that stage he was working winters in Broome and summers here.

CF: And what was he doing in Broome?

TB: Working bars.

CF: So what's - - I mean you've got musical qualifications, what did he have?

TB: Just pretty good life qualifications.

CF: In that - - yes. So when - - when you were offered the chance to take it on - -

TB: All right, so when we get back to - - so Dennis brought this chap James in, unbeknown to me, they were looking for somebody to run the place, and actually James said he seems pretty good, why not that guy? Interestingly, James was dying too. And he was coming back to say his last goodbyes, and give Dennis one last help to try and get this thing back on track. Because Dennis as a straight man, who really had been very hands off in this business all along. He'd done very well out of it, and it had just run itself. Or hadn't run itself, he'd had wonderful managers, a series of them, and they had been wonderful, you know, I'd met many of them, and they were great people.

CF: In the sense of innovative - -

TB: Yes.

CF: - - And enthusiastic? Crazy?

TB: Yes. And creative beyond measure. Wonderful, wild ideas, and the means to put

them into practice. With great teams of people around them to - - to put - - to make those things real. Dennis really just paid the bills and made his money. So he was kind of stuck. You know, he had this dying business that had been wonderful for him for what's that, 15, 17 years.

CF: Yes.

TB: And he didn't know what to do. So James came back, he said James come - - I think he'd actually paid for James to come back, come back, we want to see you, and I need your help while you're at it.

CF: So in that period then, who was running it?

TB: Well, the boyfriend of the manager who had passed away.

CF: God.

TB: Who had an antique shop in Wesley Arcade, and Rolf would work in the antique shop all day, and then come and run the nightclub in the night. Actually, I wonder - - I've no idea where he is now.

CF: What was his name?

TB: Rolf - - Rolf, Rolf. No, I'm sorry.

CF: Because it doesn't sound like the sort of place that you can run part-time.

TB: No, not at all. Not at all. It had no soul left. The thing it was- - was very sad.

CF: So was he - - was he happy to relinquish that?

TB: Yes. Absolutely. He was glad. He was really glad. And actually we got on really

well. He was very help. Some of the other staff weren't quite so, but - -

CF: So when did you and Peter officially decide yes, going to give it a go?

TB: 1991. Must have been - - that was my birthday. Yes, it was my birthday. We had dinner at that lady Tricia's house, who was a friend of all of them.

CF: Yes.

TB: She was sort of the connecting link. And Dennis formally offered us the job, and I swore I wouldn't do it unless Peter did it with me, you get us both. And we took it on.

CF: And was he - - we you paid a wage or how did it work?

TB: Yes. A pittance.

CF: Really?

TB: Yes. But that actually informs how we ended up owning it. So it was - - it was very broken. And I said Dennis, you know, this needs a lot of work. And it's going to be a Sisyphean task to get this back on track.

CF: Yes.

TB: He gave me an open cheque-book. He said do what you think needs doing. I mean I got into trouble all the time for the way I spent money. I said look at what you're up against, you know.

CF: So tell me what you - - what happened. How did you - - what did you institute to improve it?

TB: I did fire most of those staff, which came back and bit me.

CF: You fired them?

TB: I did. Which I always feel bad about, I really do. But it had to happen, the place needed to be cleansed. They were so negative and miserable, and many of them were very bitter. We got taken to court over it. And I - -

CF: For wrongful dismissal?

TB: Yes. Yes. And I do regret it. I do regret it, yet I don't. The business needed it, and it needed - - it needed a fresh broom. And you know, I didn't - - not everybody. But there were key people that were really bitter and dark. Before - - before that. And I brought new people in. I brought younger people in. I employed women. There were no women working for them.

CF: So not till 1991 you had women?

TB: I believe that there had been women in the past, but you wouldn't have a - - and there were a lot of gay men that were - - wouldn't be served by the women behind the bar.

CF: Why is that?

TB: We are terribly misogynistic as well. We're a nasty bunch.

CF: That's amazing.

TB: Yes. Quite incredible. I put women in the bar, I put - - I put in some straight staff. Oh my God. Yes. Actually, it's funny, when you think about it, okay, so we can't have any women working, serving us. What do you mean the DJ's straight? You're just dancing, what does it mean to you? He's - - you're not having sex with him. You're dancing, he's up there, it will be good. And we - - and we won't have it that you are now going to serve us a wine in wine glasses. Actually the reason was, was

because it was two dollars for a middy of wine, so it was cheap in volume - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - and that was the drink that people drank.

CF: And bad though.

TB: Yes, but you got drunk quickly. That really - - you know, when I got to the bottom of what that story was about, it was that actually that was the drink that cheap Riesling, and it was that old Stanley Riesling, it was Stanley - - Stanley - - 20 litre Stanley casks that they'd had forever. Yes, with a tap on the front of the fridge, open the fridge and you've got your ...(indistinct)... cask ...(indistinct)... And in fact, there was a greater number of them that drank it with Raspberry cordial added.

CF: Oh my God.

TB: Insult to injury. But I suppose that's just one of those arty drinks that all the kids now drink anyway.

CF: Yes, yes. So you were really fighting a sort of rear-guard action of entrenched behaviour in some ways.

TB: Yes. ...(indistinct)... cultural stuff, but it needed a polish up.

CF: So what else did you do, because we - - we are talking about the actual club itself, building club.

TB: Yes.

CF: So you got rid of the staff.

TB: We gave it a tart up. Certainly couldn't call it a renovation. But over time, Dennis, you know Dennis wouldn't fund a full renovation while it was travelling so poorly, but what we did was reinvent it every month. We actually redecorated every month. We repainted it on a Sunday night, we would finish work at midnight, then I'd open the bar and the staff would repaint that nightclub, and the next week you'd come back and it was blue instead of red. Or it was - - we would paint murals across the whole thing. We would turn it inside out and decorate it, and the shows - - we actually stripped all of the - - all of the walls between the DJs and the lighting techs on the stage. Kind of - - there was some key things that I saw as its value, and everyone's always said Connections works because - - or worked, he said less now, because it has a monopoly, or had a monopoly. And I always knew this day would come when - - I hoped this day would come where the world would accept us, and people wouldn't care that there was a straight DJ or women behind the bar and all of those things. You know, that was the world that I wanted to live in.

CF: An inclusive world?

TB: An inclusive world. There was a value in Connections, a place that made you feel inclusive, and it made you feel - - sorry, made you feel included, but made you feel even more included if you were different. The difference was - - the difference was the important thing, and in fact our tagline for many years in the '90s was unity in diversity. To try and bring all those different strands together. Like I don't know, actually you all belong here, and you're all valid and you all own part of this, and you - - it is your difference that holds you together, and I always said, you know, we don't have a lot in common other than that we sleep with their own gender, and even that is pretty give and take, and I - -

CF: Fluid.

TB: Yes. And I was saying that 30 years ago. Now, God. You know, it's that all over. So there was an element of that, that was its strength. The other strength it had was this idea of performance, of theatre, and I always saw nightclubs as theatre, it is bloody theatre. The whole thing is theatre.

CF: So this painting it every single weekend, I mean that's huge.

TB: Well, what we did was so we stripped out, the bones of - - the walls between- - I broke the fourth wall of the nightclub, so the night - - the DJ and the lighting technician are on a mezzanine above everybody.

CF: Which is where we met the other night.

TB: Yes. And they looked through a little slot window. They had a window each that was only you know, 50 centimetres across, and 20 centimetres deep. They could see you, and it was mirrored. They could see you but you couldn't see them. I took all those walls off, opened the whole lot out, so you could actually see the guts of it, all that - - maybe it was also my - - my background in the technology stuff, that you could see all of that. I looked up at the lighting rig which is you know, lighting rig in a nightclub, if you've ever looked up is all cables and wires and scaffolding and clamps and - - as well as the wonderful lights, you want to see the lights, you look up and see the fixtures, it's all a vista that makes it work. So we stripped all of that out we even got to the point where we pulled the drag queens out of the dressing rooms, and put the dressing rooms in the room with a spotlight on them. So a man would come in with a suitcase, sit down, take his man's clothes off bit by bit, put his women's clothes on, put his face on, and then he'd perform.

CF: So you could watch him reinvent himself?

TB: Yes. And that was just happening in the corner for three hours, and then at 1 o'clock, he'd step across out of that spotlight, with a follows spot, on stage, as her and perform, and maybe some dancers would come out and join him. So there was an element of turning it inside out, and really getting inside the guts of what it was, what it did, showing people that, and making it part of the show, so the show then became all night, and that repainting it, yes. It was incredibly labour-intensive, but I had a whole bunch of people that loved making do, we joke about it, you know, the sheltered

workshop that is Connections. You know, there was somebody sitting there pinning sequins to you know, a whole back wall.

CF: But to paint a mural, which is actually really, really difficult, well, I mean I think it's difficult to do, you would pay those people to do it?

TB: Yes. Pay the money out.

CF: Yes.

TB: So that was part of the wage costs, you know. Part of making that, that wonderfulness. I had a chap that was just phenomenal. He went on to design for Mambo. And he would paint back walls, you know, the back wall of Connections is five metres by seven metres. He would paint me a backdrop, and he would - - remember those old - - you probably not even supposed to mention his name, Rolf Harris, when he would just get cans of paint - -

CF: Yes, yes.

TB: - - And paint like that. James would paint like that, these incredible backdrops. He'd draw up on a A3 page, and then use an overhead projector and trace it up onto the wall, and then paint it, and then shade it. The heartbreaking thing is he was doing one of those a month for me, and we couldn't afford fabric, and there must be you know, if we look at the Sistine Chapel we'd scrape it back and look at all of those, there must be 30 of them up there that he did.

CF: And was that specific to an act or - -

TB: So we'd tie it in so - -

CF: Okay.

TB: Again - -

CF: That's phenomenal.

TB: Probably culturally inappropriate, but you know we'd do an Indian show, that one was particularly good. It was called the back passage to India. We love a good pun. Or even a not so good one.

CF: What was his name?

TB: James Levack.

CF: Levack.

TB: Yes. And then that stuff would come out so we would theme the room accordingly. I mean it wasn't one of the best ones, but - - and then that show - - the drag show would tie into the backdrop to the stuff in the room. We'd dress up and run that theme for a month. And we did it - - we did one show a month, three weeks on, one week's turnaround and back on again. For years.

CF: But the actual backdrop would be week - - every week?

TB: No, no. That would be - - so that Indian would last ...(indistinct)... - -

CF: Would be three months. Okay.

TB: No, one month.

CF: One month, sorry, one month.

TB: Then he'd paint white over it and paint a new one.

CF: Phenomenal. And that club that you would go - - that everyone was going to, that younger club, what - - I mean what - - how long did that last then once you started to take over?

TB: Several years. We struggled, but we worked and worked and we worked, day and night. We - - the nightclub was open 6 nights a week. I tended to do the creative stuff and they did the day work, and Peter worked nights, and I'd usually - -

CF: And what's the day work entail?

TB: Well, being there for all of that painting and - -

CF: ...(indistinct)...

TB: - - and all the other stuff, all of the business, you know, running a business.

CF: Ordering.

TB: Ordering, getting stock in, bar gets cleaned, you need a plumber, they don't come at 2 o'clock in the morning very often, you know, all of those things that happened.

CF: So maintenance?

TB: We - -

CF: Maintenance and upkeep?

TB: Well, yes, but running the business, but also, most of all, designing all of that stuff, and getting the teams together and making that stuff happen. And then I would work through till midnight, 1, 2, and then Peter would come in at - - when we opened I think usually 10, and he'd work through till close which was 6 AM.

CF: So were you also DJ?

TB: I wasn't DJ-ing then.

CF: Not then?

TB: No.

CF: I don't know how you could have.

TB: No, I couldn't have fitted that in.

CF: Yes. So when you - - when you initially started, did the club close to start with, to get you on - - you know, on track, or what happened?

TB: We had a brief patch where we might not have opened the week nights that week.

CF: Week nights? Sacked everyone and got new staff?

TB: Yes, I got all of those people, and all of my friends and you know, that lady Tricia, and anybody that was involved we had huge working bees and put on food and then we'd maybe drink you know, while we were going, open the bar and just we'd drink and put on music and drink and laugh. I mean, it was a wonderful time. We worked incredibly hard. And you know, we could do that too, you know, it was a time where people could work 14 hours, 15 hours straight. And I just paid them by the hour and gave them drinks, you know, as part of it. You know, they were 20-year-old kids that thought it was the best fun ever.

CF: Yes.

TB: And you know, over the years, that creative part of Connections is a real key to what we do.

CF: Of course, I will talk about its connection with the Fringe Festival and all of that a bit later, but initially then, was it connected - -

TB: Well, that was one of the other things that I did. I - - I got involved with everything we possibly could, and tried to get, to build bridges, to all of those sorts of groups. You know, I came from a much more artsy background than I probably live and work in now, just because that was me, and you know, I find that the work I do now is probably less out there than I'd like it to be, but that's the market, you know. But at that stage, I didn't care.

CF: Well how out there do you want to be?

TB: I want to be as out there as I could, but we live in very - - very narrow minded times.

CF: What do you mean by that?

TB: Yes, well. I don't know, you know that - - that looseness and that freedom allowed people a lot more. You know, I think there's lots of people making wonderful work out there. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen in nightclubs because they are so highly regulated.

CF: And it's the regulations that stop this?

TB: Yes, It's madness. You know, like half of the acts that go on for fringe, if they went on in a nightclub, they'd closed down by liquor licensing because they were obscene or immoral or rude, and yet an arts Festival, it's on, it makes no sense. But we live in funny times.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes.

CF: So you'd like it to be like Berlin in its heyday then?

TB: Yes. Yes. Well, in its heyday now. Berlin is like that now.

CF: Is it?

TB: Yes, if you want to go clubbing in this world right now, Berlin is the place to do it.
Yes.

CF: So that - - so when did you start? I mean did you immediately starts to make those connections to the arts and WAAPA - -

TB: Well, I already had connections, but I made more of them. I really got in and - - and worked on that. And you know, we employed WAAPA people. We've always employed WAAPA people. I had friends that were making art, making theatre, and they were all given a go. Some of them less successfully than others.

CF: Yes.

TB: But it really was a case of throw it all at the wall and see what sticks.

CF: Yes. Were you offering it as a venue for - - as a venue for these crazy acts?

TB: Yes.

CF: And that sort of - -

TB: I mean people had to - - had to give me a pitch.

CF: So they had to do an audition?

TB: Not an audition as such, but they had to give us a pitch, and they had to - - you know, I'm - - I'm pretty good at sorting the wheat from the chaff in that sense. Put on some terrible things.

CF: Like what?

TB: Just - - things that weren't nearly as funny when they got to the stage. Or nearly as clever, or nobody else got the joke. Yes, I remember one of the drag queens, and older drag queen, as her last hurrah, doing - - wanting to do a show based around Sunset Boulevard, and being - - was it Norma Desmond, I don't really know. I'm not a big old movie buff. And it was just her swanning around saying you know, the shows aren't - - what is it, the shows - - it's not me that's got smaller, it's the shows. It was just dreadful. It was just frigging dreadful. Look, that's also something else that I kind of realised at that time is that a lot of the performance that was going on was rehashing musicals. And we had a bunch of kids that didn't care about musicals. Interestingly, musicals have come back in fashion, but certainly in the mid- - in the early '90s they never cared about that. But what they did care about was music video.

CF: Yes.

TB: And they were all watching Janet Jackson videos, and all of that incredible dancing. And I realised that I had some good dancers, I said find me some more like you and we reworked the model of what a drag show was. We still put show tunes in there, and old songs in there, but we put a lot more new stuff in there, and we made them dance.

CF: So what was the model before, if you reworked it?

TB: Well, it really was a lot of swanning around was the best way to describe it.

CF: Running round with loads of sequins?

TB: Yes. Yes. And you know, I am Liza Minnelli, you're not, you're a fat man in a dress. With the same drug and alcohol problems, but you're still a fat man in a dress. Yes. You know, it was very much - - a much more theatre thing and we had a whole - - a whole generation of kids raised on television and music video that was just so much punchier, it was faster, it was harder, it was, you know, quick and bright in comparison. I mean, you look at it now, and you go really? Because the stuff that kids are now watching is the same. You know, for example the lighting that you provide for the dance floor, it's a very different craft to the lighting that's provided for a theatre. Theatre lighting is much more static, it's washes of light and spots on people, so okay, well, they're not sitting still for that, and you've got all of these lights behind you, why not use them?

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, just the simple act of using club lighting for the shows.

CF: But you would be able to do that because of your training in a way, wouldn't you, you'd have an awareness of it?

TB: Yes, it wasn't really about my training, because I didn't do much lighting stuff, but it - - I am a great one for looking at things and seeing how it could be re-purposed, or because you see this differently, what could you do. And actually, I must - - I must - - he really should have been mentioned much earlier. There is another key player in all of that, and his name is Malcolm. Malcolm - -

CF: Could you give me his full name?

TB: Malcolm Thomas Hughes. Malcolm was a Perth boy, with a degree in comparative religion. Doesn't mean anything but for the fact that if you knew Malcolm, of course he does, who had also worked with - - worked at Connections in the '70s, but had a great love for the theatre. Had gone on and had a wonderful career in the theatre, and I met him once - - he knew Peter, so maybe they'd worked at the same time, I don't -

- I'm not exactly sure. When Peter and I lived in Melbourne, Malcolm - - Peter said my friend Malcolm has invited us to the opera. He works for the VSO, the Victorian State Opera, he's got us tickets to see Aida. And I hate opera. And I'm still not all that fond of it. He said yes, but I think you would love Malcolm. So we went to see this production of Aida, and it was magnificent, it was wonderful. I met this - - this very kooky guy later, but he was just fascinating, and I loved him. We got on like a house on fire, and - -

CF: Because he looks sort of like an Oxford don.

TB: Absolutely. He was. He was - - and - -

CF: I mean, that photograph, ...(indistinct)...

TB: That sums him up perfectly. He was the cleverest man I know. He was my Google before Google, if I needed to know something, it was Malcolm I asked. And that informed our relationship greatly. He loved having somebody that wanted to know. And you know, that - - that interesting story about mentoring and playing that against that ageism within the community, for me it was I don't care that you're that much older than me, you know lots of stuff, and I want to know it.

CF: So this is going to sound rude. Working at the VSO and then working at Connections seems like a sort of come down.

TB: So it's even more interesting than that. He worked with the VSO, he'd worked at the - -

CF: I don't mean that to be rude.

TB: No, no, no, no, not at all. Sydney theatre company, you know, with the likes of Kate Blanchett, and he'd come home, he was home sick, that old story about Perth people going off and doing wondrous things but then missing Perth and then coming back,

but not knowing what to do. And Peter said - - Peter made contact with him. I said I wanted to do all of this stuff, he said well Malcolm is in town, you need Malcolm. But he's worked as director of Victorian State Opera and Sydney theatre company, he's not going to want to do this, and he was at a bit of a crisis point in his life. I think his mother had been ill, somebody - - a parent had been ill and he'd come back and needed to be here for a while, and not sure what to do.

CF: He was gay?

TB: Yes.

CF: Had a partner?

TB: No - - no. But also, he knew all of the history. Like anything you wanted to know about gay history in this town or anywhere, Malcolm knew it. Malcolm just knew everything. Actually, he made up a whole lot of shit but anyway, discussing that with another friend once he'd passed away. He didn't know everything, did he? Because he made that up. Yes, he did. But he certainly was a font of knowledge. And in the theatre, he was like nothing I'd ever met before. We offered him a job - - no, we went and had a drink and I told him all of these grand ideas I had, and he was beguiled by my youthful exuberance.

CF: Had you started there by then, or did you

TB: We had just started.

CF: Okay.

TB: And I wanted all of this, like I don't know how to make it happen, and he was there, and he came with us, and he stayed with us for a good 10 years.

CF: And did the performers - - I mean was he sort of - - I don't mean in charge, but did he help?

TB: I had to stand between him and the drag queens. The drag queens didn't quite have as much discipline as Kate Blanchett does. Perhaps that's a nice way of putting it. There was a huge gulf between the people he had been working with and the people that he worked with now. I was the bridge between the two. And I mean he loved the game of it too. Applying all of that wonderful big knowledge to this tiny thing with no resources, and he was very resourceful. He was one of those people that would say well, we can make that up out of that, out of that, you know, he'd ring round the salvage yards and find stuff again before you could use the Internet to find it. We were a wonderful team.

CF: And those drag queens who were working with you, I mean now, you have drag queens who perform at bucks' nights and that sort of thing. Were they out there in that sense - -

TB: No - -

CF: - - Or was Connections their only venue - -

TB: It was their only venue. The only place

CF: - - expression?

TB: And really, it's been like that until only the last 10 years.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. So much as they - - there was a real funny relationship between the drag queens and Malcolm. But they loved what he brought to them.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know. And they got production, you know, we became known for production. Being able to turn our room inside out and do shows with, you know, pyrotechnics and reveals and he knew all of those tricks. I'd go how do they do that thing in the theatre where - - or I saw this play and they did this. Oh well, we do that like that, and then we can - - we can't really do it that way, but we could do it on the cheap this way. And really, we worked on that magic, and again, we pulled it out from just being 30 minutes in the middle of the night to being something that unfolded over the course of the night, or you know, we do, you know, at 3 o'clock in the morning, a drag queen would appear out of nowhere and be on a box and do something completely out of - - either do something that was very much the music that you would expect in a nightclub at 3 o'clock in the morning, or at a time in the night where people's realities might be loose slightly sideways. You can get in and deliver something that's completely out of the bag, or completely left of centre, because they are open, you know, they've been dancing for hours, and they'd had a few drinks, and they are open to whatever you might throw at them, so we do crazy stuff late into the morning.

CF: And where did people sit then? I mean, was there seating?

TB: There's never been seating. Interestingly, there is a tradition in Connections that when the show comes on, everyone on the dance floor sits down. In those days, we had them trained, they just did it. Nowadays they have to be told by the drag queen beforehand, and unfortunately, because they have a tendency to take their drinks on the dance floor, it's usually wet, which isn't as nice, but yes, people sit down.

CF: Because when - -

TB: Simply- - they sit cross-legged on the floor like preschool children.

CF: Right.

TB: It's cute.

CF: Because when I went there they were setting up for the bingo, that's seated.

TB: Yes. That's seated. But that's a different thing. So now that we've built the other room, that main room doesn't open till 11 so we do a lot of stuff early in the night, before 11, and that has a completely different format. We have a whole set of chairs and tables so we can actually do, so the bingo happens every Thursday, but we do cabaret solidly through Fringe and then all year round. And of those shows are sit down, whether it be at tables, in cabaret style or in row seating. And they are a very you know, solid hour's performance where people clap at the right points and - -

CF: Right. And when did that start?

TB: Look, we did it in bits and pieces over the years. I've always wanted to do it. I've always wanted to make it a part of what we did, but it's only really happened in earnest in the last five years.

CF: So only that recently?

TB: People wouldn't come to Connections because it was a nightclub. They wouldn't come that early in the night, there is almost this - - this - - this fundamental rule that you go to a nightclub at midnight, and we could never break that, but we have broken that.

CF: So what time do you open though?

TB: Eight now. But we also opened that second bar, which happened - - first half of that happened eight years ago and the second half happened five years ago, which allows us to open that, and it operates more as a bar. It feels like a space that you would be in at eight, nine o'clock, allowing us to reuse the Connections room as theatre space.

CF: And that's what that room is called? The Connections room?

TB: Just the main room.

CF: The main room.

TB: It's Connections, because that's the room that's been there forever.

CF: Okay.

TB: But it was always set up, if you - - if you looked at it without the nightclub up and going, it's set up like a theatre, and Malcolm and I made it more and more that, that it would operate actually as a theatre with a stage, a proscenium arch, frontloaded sound system, and a space in which you could sit and watch a performance.

CF: Yes.

TB: Just took us this long to get there.

TRACK 02

CF: This is track 2 interview with Tim Brown. Tim, without Malcolm, do you think it would have been possible? I mean - -

TB: No, impossible. Certainly that - - that dream I had, I knew what I wanted, but I couldn't have - - couldn't have put it into practice. And I couldn't have - - I don't think anybody else could have - - not anybody else, I think I would have been hard pressed to find someone to pull it off in the way he did. And interestingly, he was rarely there in the evenings, and he rarely saw what it was that he made. Because he wasn't interested in it. He loved opera and the theatre and all of that stuff. Yes, he'd come in every now and again, sometimes he'd come in for an opening night. But for the most part, he did his work.

CF: So for those quite formal things, when did rehearsals happen?

TB: In the day. For all of those things the rehearsals happen in the day. In fact, if we go down now, there will probably be half a dozen men wandering around in T-shirts, board shorts, usually socks, and high heels. It's a wonderful thing. People are going to go what is that. So that's what a drag queen looks like in the daytime. In fact, the - - this weekend is called switch ball, where all the staff do drag. And I walked in yesterday to my manager, the current manager, Scott, who is a rather camp Scotsman, funnily enough, who was wearing his underwear, his T-shirt both in very clashing patterns, pulled up socks again with another pattern, and very high heels, dealing with one of the authorities that had walked in whilst they were rehearsing. Excuse my outfit, we're just rehearsing. Of course you are.

CF: Who - - who would be some of the sort of more infamous acts that have gone now? Those drag queens? Anyone that you particularly remember?

TB: Oh, goodness. There's been so many of them.

CF: So many.

TB: When you say gone, gone gone? Or just not doing it anymore?

CF: Yes. Both. I mean - - at what age - - I guess they can go as long as they can go.

TB: Yes. Yes. Some of them do. You know, I've got one that at the rate he's going, he's going to be around - - I mean Matt, Barbie, who actually runs all the drag queens now, has been doing it solidly for 20 maybe five years. And if he keeps having Botox, the way his doing Botox, he's going to be a circus act. But you know, I mean it comes down to what you do too. You know, there's another wonderful one called Arpie, who's actually just retired, who - -

CF: He made my wedding dress.

TB: Oh, really? How wonderful. Yes. So - -

CF: He'd huge. Big guy.

TB: Yes, yes. Wonderful. He - - his story is quite incredible, we don't need it all now. You know, he actually worked as a stripper, got older, started doing some drag to host the stripping then found the gay scene, did drag in the gay scene in Perth, then set himself up a studio up on Lake Street, where your dress might have been made.

CF: Make up for the 5 o'clock shadow I think.

TB: Yes, yes. And in fact he made a career out of that. He's moved to the Gold Coast now and was still doing that.

CF: Why do you remember him particularly? Because he was impressive.

TB: He was impressive, but he was also - - he was professional. He saw it as a career. And made it a career. Many of them are just having a - - having a laugh. You know, certainly up until recent times it was very hard to make a career out of it.

CF: Yes.

TB: And lots of them in the early days were complete car crashes. They are complete car crashes. I mean incredibly entertaining for it, but - - and living double lives, you know, they really were living completely separate lives. Yes, I think you know, Arpie's, because he's had such longevity, he's made a career out of it. He always saw it as such, and made no apologies for it. He often - - he just made no apologies for who he was back at a time where you did kind of have to apologise for being gay, let alone dressing in women's clothing and performing for money. I mean in the early days they didn't even get paid for it. The drag queens didn't get paid.

CF: From Connections?

TB: From Connections. No, they were happy just to do it, because it was their way of expressing themselves, you know.

CF: When did they start being paid?

TB: They were certainly paid by the time I started. But I put - - I put the prices up, because I expected a lot more from them.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, so their wages went up quite considerably at that point, because I expected them to rehearse, and Malcolm made them rehearse. They got a professional choreographer, and they were made to choreograph those routines.

CF: So until you came along really, it was just a - - it seems to be a venue for - - I'm going to use the word gay, gay people or people to express themselves without any of that structure - - theatre structure.

TB: Yes. It was about - - yes, it was about putting some structure into it, you know, for better or for worse. I think there are people that would say that that ruined it. You know, it's far more structured now than I ever wanted for it, but that's allowed it to

grow and still be relevant, and actually stay on the right side of the law.

CF: So what - - how structured is it now?

TB: Very structured.

CF: In - - can you describe it?

TB: It's a big organisation, you know. There's four directors now. Five managers. 90+ staff including drag queens, doormen, DJs, you know, it turns over a lot of money. It's gone from being a small business, you know, not only a small business, a sizeable nightclub. We put through 3,000 people a week.

CF: And that's six nights a week?

TB: No, four nights a week.

CF: Four nights a week?

TB: Yes. Two to 3,000 people a week. Yes.

CF: And in the sense of when you first started, you said that women weren't employed, that you know, that all changed. What would have been the percentage of women, gay women - - I mean I know that straight women and straight people came, but gay women frequented?

TB: Look, I think the percentage of women was probably only 20%.

CF: Right. When you first started?

TB: So - - when I first started. Yes.

CF: And that includes people coming to the club - - I mean clearly it's 0% people working.

TB: It always wasn't until I started.

CF: Yes.

TB: And certainly before I started. I mean you know, when we started, I remember that the first couple of Saturday nights, and there was 30, 50 people in there. It was that -
- it was gone.

CF: Totally, altogether?

TB: As a business it was gone. It shouldn't have still been operating, by Dennis. Dennis actually loved it, he cared for it, and, you know, it had been a moneymaker for him.

CF: So he bankrolled it for how long? Until you started to get going?

TB: A long while. Yes. And actually - - that might be a good point for the story about how we ended up owning it.

CF: Yes.

TB: So he didn't offer us very much money for that, and we're like, you know, this is going to take a massive effort, huge long hours, that's not worth it. Dennis said well I can't afford to pay you more, and we cut a deal with him then about buying a share, and set the price then.

CF: And bought him out?

TB: Or to buy a share.

CF: Okay.

TB: We decided on half. But we set the price when the business was worth nothing. Then we got it going and bought half of it.

CF: Bought half of it on the price that you'd agreed?

TB: Yes.

CF: Which is good.

TB: I'm actually not a very good businessman, but I'm proud of that one.

CF: So how long did it take you to get it going?

TB: 6 months? No, little bit more than that, 6 to 12 months.

CF: Yes.

TB: We sort of crept back and crept back, and we did a very strong advertising campaign about - - about our place in the community and how involved we were in the community, as well as getting involved in the arts community, we got on board with everybody, with the AIDS Council, with gay and lesbian counselling, with all those things we did fundraisers, we - -

CF: And I'll go into that in detail, but - - and we are going to also talk about technology and how it's changed the feel of the club and all of that later. But when you - - how did you advertise to start with?

TB: Print. Yes, you know, the - - there was a gay paper, we advertised in that. We used Express, which was the general street press for clubs in town. And put posters up.

CF: Did you advertise - - and were they arty, those posters, those - -

TB: Yes.

CF: Who did them?

TB: Me.

CF: Yes. Art. And were - -

TB: On a photocopier.

CF: And were they advertised - - was the club advertised as a gay club or a nightclub?
Depending on the press I guess.

TB: Yes - - we've never hidden from the fact, from our queerness, ever.

CF: Yes.

TB: Always been a key part of who we are, where there is no - - yes, like I say, we were never hidden from it, and we've never ever denied it or tried to put it away. You know this is who we are, that's not to say you're not welcome. You just need to understand the rules of engagement. That is, this space belongs to queer people, and you need to respect that. That - - that's my baseline, and I actually think it's probably my baseline about life. I think - - I don't really care your sex, your sexuality, your religion, your race, as long as you don't care about mine, and you're respectful of my stuff, and if I'm in a mosque, I'm going to behave appropriately.

CF: Yes.

TB: As far as I'm concerned, that space is as sacred to some people as that mosque is. Now I'm sure that there are many people that would take umbrage at that as a concept, but I see this community like any other community, a culture with stories to tell, people, places, ideas, music, all of those things that define what a culture is, what a community is, in the same way that you would describe the Greeks in Perth, the Chinese community. You could describe the gays, again, used broadly.

CF: Yes.

TB: With all of those things, I joke that we have everything except cuisine. We have language. You know, we have language, we have high days, we have holy days, we have, you know - -

CF: And that's what I wanted to ask you, because I've got a note here about holy days.

You were sort of in a way describing Connections as like - - not church I think- -

TB: It is the temple.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. And I think we should see it as that. It's a very big word, and I know it would offend a lot of people, but it has performed the same duties for this community. For these 44 years. That is a place where a community comes together, celebrates its highs and lows, you know, we have a funeral for somebody that dies of AIDS, we have the wake at Connections. It's pride. We end up back at Connections. And every week we go there and we dance together as a group. What do religions do? They dance around - - to start with, they dance around the campfire and sing their songs together. Putting my DJ hat on, when I'm DJ-ing to that room, it's not really that far removed to those people dancing around that campfire, coming together and dancing together in their sacred - -

CF: Safe.

TB: - - sacred, again a big word, or safe space. Let's - - let's just call it their space. That's their space. I see that as what it is. Now, as a businessman, that's a very high ideal, but I do think that running through it, just as an obligato underneath the - - this whole orchestra of noise is really important.

CF: Because I'm going to talk about that wider role within the community, in effect like to do with raising money and - - for people with AIDS and all of that sort of thing. But the very fact that this one place has lasted that long, and has remained relevant I think is hugely important.

TB: Yes. But I think it comes down to those - - those very strong base ideas. That no, aren't - - they're not put on big signs. I hate the idea of a gay bar that says out the front, and puts big rainbow flags up saying this is a gay bar, you have to do this, this, this and this, and be tolerant of this. No, you should be like that every day of the week, all the time. Everybody you come - - come across, and actually, you should

understand spaces do belong to people. People have a sense of ownership of spaces. You get it when you walk into church, or some people don't get it when they walk into a church and I thump them. But just because it's not holy to you.

CF: Yes.

TB: Just because it doesn't mean anything to you, doesn't mean you can read that it does mean something to other people and behave accordingly.

CF: So it's more - -

TB: Or even just keep your mouth closed until you work it out. You know, no, no, I don't want your opinion on what you think about this just yet, certainly not when you're in my space. I think if you have to put a sign up at the door that tells people that, you failed at your job in creating a safe space.

CF: Yes. So before we get onto other things, I'll just stay with Connections. You said to me when we spoke earlier that Tuesday is initially was a men only night. Now is that - - why was that to start with?

TB: Because in a world where - - because the love that dare not speak its name, you know, when it was a hidden, quiet thing, as a gay man, you know, as anybody of different sexuality, very hard to enunciate that out in the world, let alone make it known so that you might meet someone, very hard to meet people, and again because Connections was a mixed room, you might misread the signals. By holding a men's night, and there had been men's nights before Connections.

CF: Where?

TB: The Underground had a men's night, and actually maybe I say again the times and dates escape me, because the Underground was open at the same time as Connections, and maybe the men's night started there and came down to Connections or maybe there were two different ones running concurrently.

CF: Yes.

TB: But the need for a space where only men went was not about only where only men went, it was where only gay men went. A space like that, if you had gone into the space, you've tied your colours to the mast. And if you and I, assuming you're a man, Criena, were both in that space, it was pretty likely we were both gay. So if you were my lawyer and I was your client, and we had never been able to speak of this, suddenly we knew, and it was okay to go ah, you are, I always thought you were, and that was how you met people.

CF: And is that - - do you think that's peculiar to Perth, because of its smallness? And because everybody knows everybody?

TB: No, no, no. There was always men only spaces all over, but often they were a whole bar that was a men only space, you know, so - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - if you were in Sydney, I mean, I don't think it has one now, but there are places you can go in the world where women are still not welcome in that bar, because it is a men's only bar, or they'll be stared down once they got inside.

CF: Yes. But this is - - this is particular.

TB: Yes.

CF: If you're - - if you haven't come out, publicly, you can go there and know that - - that it's in this small community, it is a safe thing to do?

TB: Well, I mean imagine - - so put yourself in my shoes, even now. I mean you can always get knocked back when you're trying to chat somebody up.

CF: Sure.

TB: But when knocking back means you could get thumped or worse, you have to play very carefully. So even now, in a much more open world, people are less - - there is less need to be gay identifying, to be say flamboyant or whatever, you know. Lots of people are just living their lives and being regular guys, you know. Lots of gay tradies.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, great big blokes in hi viz vests that you know, most people would never think twice. But if you put yourself in my shoes, how do I know that then? How do I meet these people? How do I go and chat them up? It's hard enough going and chatting somebody up, but chatting them up, not even knowing whether they are interested, or that they may take offence at your sexuality, makes it fraught, and it still is. It has an element of that to it. Imagine what it was like 30 years ago.

CF: Yes.

TB: It was downright dangerous. So we needed places where we could meet, and meet our own people without fear of that.

CF: And is that still going on? Is it still Tuesday men's - - men only night?

TB: No. No. And there's less - - look, I think there probably is still need for it, but - -

CF: When did it stop then?

TB: 20 years.

CF: Okay.

TB: I mean yes, time to talk about the Internet, the rise of the Internet. Gay men were dating on the Internet well before anybody else, you know. There were gay dating sites well before Tinder existed. We were very early adopters on that technology.

CF: Well, I mean you couldn't get thumped on the Internet, so ...(indistinct)...

TB: Well, you can do.

CF: True. That's true.

TB: And all sorts of stuff happens, but you know, that technology, we hooked into that very quickly and started using it. It does make it much easier to meet people. And it makes it easier to meet people that aren't those people, and not everybody wants to go to a nightclub, you know, even if - - even if you are camp and flamboyant or really obviously gay or completely out to all and sundry, doesn't mean you like the music that we play or want to be out at 2 o'clock in the morning or maybe you don't drink or you know whatever it might - - excuse me - - whatever it might be.

CF: Was there ever women's only night?

TB: Yes.

CF: When was that?

TB: So they weren't weekly. We never had them weekly.

CF: But the men's only was weekly? To start with? Yes.

TB: And they were very busy. You know, they were as busy as a weekend night. Yes. But well, you know, it was chance to meet someone.

CF: Yes.

TB: Mr Right or Mr Right Now.

CF: And when was - - and so the women's only one, how often was that?

TB: It depends. It changed from year - - over the years. They've never managed anything as regular as weekly, probably the most regular we would have done would have been

monthly.

CF: Yes. Why - - why do you think there is that difference?

TB: The women's community operates kind of differently to us - - to ours. I think women are better at networking, a gross generalisation.

CF: Yes, but go ahead.

TB: Yes, some of them - - those funny generalisations about of the sexes broadly fit still within the gay community. I do think women are better communicators and better at reading signs. I think out there in the world women are much better at picking that stuff up.

CF: And also less dangerous if they were picking another woman up?

TB: Certainly that, and I also think that for a much longer time, I think - - and again, it's a terrible broad generalisation, but I think they are often more willing to experiment with their sexuality, and less hung up around it. I think - - I think men are far more threatened by homosexuality than women are, and again, it's a gross generalisation, but I think in my experience, I think I'm reasonably well versed in it.

CF: Yes.

TB: To - - and you know, for me, a large amount of that is the social experimental. I love watching it all unfold, you know, fascinates me. All of this stuff fascinates me, the ins and outs of it, but yes I do think the women are better at networking, better at reading signs in the general world, have other ways of meeting. And also are less inclined to, club like the guy at the gate - - I'm not sure what that's about.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes.

CF: When you first opened, and I asked you this before, you said you'd tried to introduce gender neutral toilets, but the dykes were against it.

TB: Well look, the main reason we had problems with it was that the health department were really against it.

CF: Really?

TB: Constantly. You know. Remove the signs, I just removed the signs and went know, you can all use all the toilets. There's enough toilets for everybody, because there was a very small number of toilets in the old Connections. But the women were very upset was because actually, because there were so many more men than women, then it was much harder - - the opposite of most places, much harder to get into the men's toilets than the women's toilets. Because there were less of them. In fact, no there were more men's toilets, but there were a lot more men in the venue.

CF: Yes.

TB: So that meant that the men were all going into the women's toilets and creating a mess, and all of that stuff, and then there were the drag queens and the women were offended that the drag queens were coming in with the men, and I have to say that the women that we were seeing out were much more militant about their sexuality, because often, still in that - - in those times, their lesbianism was tied up very strongly with their feminism. You know, there's another whole story around that.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, that often times the out and proud women were very strongly tied up in the feminist scene, and we were still men. We were still the enemy.

CF: Well, Germaine Greer doesn't think that transgender people can be ...(indistinct)...

TB: Yes, Germaine Greer. Germaine Greer thinks a lot of things. And she's not afraid to say them. Sometimes I agree with her.

CF: So in that sense, they were sort of like that quiet - -

TB: Yes. Look the - -

CF: Was it - - not of anti-men but - -

TB: Look, the women were certainly more politicised than the men. And they're - - look, there's also an element of - - there is also an element of the - - in the women's community, probably less so now than there was then, women who are lesbians because of bad experiences with men.

CF: And yet they were coming to Connections, which was - -

TB: Yes, but they were- - they were the most militant of all, because they didn't like men at all. And rightly so. You know, when - - as I got to know some of them, work with them and so okay, I get your story. Yes. You know, maybe not a lesbian because you like women, maybe you're a lesbian because you hate men. You know, that - - that plays into it, yes. Certainly not the story of all of the women at all.

CF: No, no.

TB: There is certainly an element of that, and that feminism, you know, I mean okay, so it's 1991, so it's, you know not the feminism of the '70s, but the vestiges of that were still very much in evidence.

CF: And were - - and I will sort of stick with Connections, so you had the Tuesday night women, that's every week, and women's nights were sort of fluctuating.

TB: ...(indistinct)...

CF: Monthly. And lesbian mud wrestling, that's a more recent phenomenon is it?

TB: That's more recent but still - - it's about 15 years now.

CF: Were they all lesbians?

TB: They haven't been over the years, so really is women wrestling in mud. In potting clay. But that's what ...(indistinct)... Thank you Jacksons. And a word that goes out to our sponsors.

CF: Must have made a mess.

TB: It makes a terrible mess. There are two staff that are employed for half a day on Wednesday setting it all up, and half a day on Thursday cleaning it all up.

CF: Right.

TB: The entire stage is wrapped in black plastic. Totally recyclable I promise.

CF: And are there any of those sort of specific things, apart from drag queen bingo. What's it called? Sorry - -

TB: Tag a drag bingo.

CF: Tag a drag. When did that come about?

TB: It is been going for about five years.

CF: So recent? Only recent?

TB: Yes, yes.

CF: And why bingo?

TB: Why bingo? You tell me. I think it's a most boring game. Well again, it's about us diversifying our interests. In fact, originally, it came to us through an outside promoter, and it happens all over the world, as you can imagine a drag queen calling

bingo numbers is more entertaining than your standard - - standard bingo person, and it's foulmouthed, it's employed by the sex shops a bit further down the street, sorry, it's sponsored by, and you win cheap sex toys, and get a foulmouthed drag queen swearing a lot. But really the largest amount of the clientele is middle-aged women having a girls night out.

CF: Really?

TB: Yes. Yes. And you know, young gays as well.

CF: Is it part of the pink dollar as they call it? That sort of part of the economy?

TB: You could - - look, you could see it as that. I don't know. Is because it's in - - happening in Connections does that make it cashing in on the thing? I - - we toy with all of that stuff a lot about is this the right thing to do? Are we selling out? Are we - -

CF: Are you?

TB: No, I don't believe we are. Because I think - - I always go back to that idea of culture, and being respectful of the culture. Whilst I have my hand on the wheel, that won't go. Connections will be full of those people first and foremost. But we ask ourselves in management meetings, which we do weekly, we probably ask ourselves at least once a month, sometimes most weeks, are we relevant to what gay looks like now?

CF: Yes.

TB: What does our world look like now? Who are we, and where do we sit in this world? And we've been asking ourselves that question all along. I couldn't be the nightclub that I started working at in 1991, and I sure as hell couldn't be the nightclub that opened in 1975. And any business does that. How do you grow and change? How do you evolve? And how do you evolve something that has a cultural heritage? Because it does. It has a cultural heritage and a business history concurrently.

CF: And you want to make a profit.

TB: Yes. You know, I mean we've put aside profit many a time for our principles, or for our culture, you know. I could let in everybody, you know, right now we are very popular, and everybody wants to come to us, because it's great going to a gay bar, because they are loads more fun than everything else. But that means a whole bunch of people that wouldn't respect what it is.

CF: So how do you police that?

TB: Pick them at the door. You actually choose them, and you know, say, guys, you know, this isn't for you, you know. Yes, you might get told you're wearing the wrong shoes, but I mean that is the job of those people at the door.

CF: The doormen?

TB: Yes. We tend to have a manager down there as well, just because they're are usually more aware of the - - all of that, the cultural reference stuff, because the doormen come in. I have to say they do an amazing job, particularly as most doormen that work in this country are from different cultural backgrounds, and you know, when they ask them where they are from, you know, and the countries they've come from, you know, they've come from places with very, very, very different views on homosexuality. That becomes a fascinating story too.

CF: And so you've got - - yes, people like that as doormen?

TB: Yes. You know, I mean there was one point where 75% of my doormen were Muslim.

CF: And gay - - and being gay is a crime in some Muslim countries off the ...(indistinct)...?

TB: Absolutely. Yes.

CF: So how do they reconcile that?

TB: Well, they were cool guys. They were all really interesting men. They were all men

at that time, because I do have women - - my head doorman at the moment is a woman. You know, they were all University educated, you know, I had a doctor, I had several engineers, they were clever people. They - - you know, they were worldly. They'd come here for a better life. You know their - - maybe their qualifications didn't stand up here and they were working on doors to pay their way, to get their wife and kids out here, to become an engineer again in their new life. You know, sometimes they didn't get it. But they wanted to hear. And again, this is that story about the assumptions we make about people of different - - and then people's willingness to listen and learn, you know, yes. You know, how do they reconcile it? Well, they can't do this, okay. These are the rules in this place, this is how it works. What you want to do is find people that get it. And if they don't get it, you find out pretty quickly. If they work for me, they - - you find out very quickly.

CF: They're going to be unsuccessful as a doorman?

TB: It's just not going to work.

CF: Yes.

TB: Or as a barman. Part of the job is to be able to weed that out, but you also want to weed that out with your client base. So I've got a team of people that try and do that at the door, and then another team of people that are inside the place always looking. You know, we're all on the floor all the time looking for that stuff.

CF: Monitoring?

TB: Monitoring. Yes. You know, if we are seeing a guy constantly hitting on women, constantly - - or hitting on lesbians, it's like no mate, that's not cool, you know. Once she says no you go I'm sorry, didn't realise. You move away. But if you go back to her three times and you keep asking, we'll walk over and ask them to leave. I'll give them their money back. Here's your\$20. Thanks for coming but you don't belong in here.

CF: Have you ever had any issues, sort of like - -

TB: We do, but as licensed premises go, we have no issues compared to most places. We do. We have fights and we have, you know, we have dramas and you know, we do have guys, you know, that one - - I find that one particularly offensive, guys that oh, yes, ...(indistinct)... you just haven't found the right man yet.

CF: Oh, yes.

TB: Yes. You can imagine how - - how a homosexual woman takes that, you know.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. Most of them are used to laughing it off. But when they're in their space, they shouldn't have to put up with that

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes, you know, we do get complaints about that stuff, we say find a manager, go to the bar. Tell somebody.

CF: You said in one interview that one of your doormen was ex-army. Was it Julian?

TB: Julian ...(indistinct)...

CF: Yes. Was he the long serving barman?

TB: No, but he was there for quite a few years. And he loved it too, but he was an odd sort.

CF: Well, you said he - - in that interview that he helped with getting you marching and -
-

TB: Yes, yes.

CF: - - in formation.

TB: In a pride parade, we rather than doing, you know, glitter and sparkles, for a couple of years running, actually, we put ourselves in uniforms and marched, and he taught us to wheel, around the corner. I can - - I can get a group of people wheeling is the way in which a battalion of - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - people go round a corner, and we can do it. Down William Street and around James. Probably not quite so successfully now, but yes.

CF: Tell me then when - - when did the Connections become involved in the pride marches?

TB: From the very beginning.

CF: Right.

TB: We've had - - we've had a float in the pride parade since day one.

CF: What was the first one?

TB: I knew you're going to ask me that. A couple of years after I started.

CF: Because you've talked about several of the most infamous ones, like the mirror balls.

TB: The mirror balls, yes. Truck full of mirror balls, don't do that again. Note to self. For the listener, we had a truck full of mirror balls, which we thought was a wonderful idea until we took off in the truck and they all moved, and the first corner we went around, they all came off. Just happens the first corner was Brisbane Street and William Street, and if the reader knows that corner, William Street's got quite - - quite an incline at that point, and mirror balls rolled down the street.

CF: I'll get you to provide that photograph to ...(indistinct)...

TB: Yes.

CF: Any other ones you'd remember?

TB: The year of finding Nemo, where the entire float was UV coral with all of the drag queens and dancers dressed as various sea life. Quite a few mermaids.

CF: Yes, that's right.

TB: A couple of mermen. Mermaybes.

CF: And tell me, when - - why did you start that new bar to start with when you were also sort of running Connections? You started a very small bar, was it the dive bar?

TB: Yes. And long before small bars existed in this town, it would have been in '96, '97.

CF: So Connections was taking off by then and doing well?

TB: Yes.

CF: And what made you sort of do this?

TB: What I've always wanted to do more than just Connections, and always end up seeming to just do Connections, but yes, at that stage I thought the town could use a smaller, more intimate earlier place that had food, that really is you know, what the small bars are now.

CF: Yes. There's loads in Melbourne and places like that.

TB: Yes, and this city has loads now.

CF: Yes.

TB: Unfortunately, I probably opened it 20 years too early, you know. For years people

were oh, you just opened that too soon. Maybe if you opened that later, it would work. You know, it would work now, there's small bars everywhere. Yes, I know there are.

CF: And where was it?

TB: It was in William Street. Can't remember the number, but between - - sorry, between Francis and James, where the strip club is now.

CF: Did it take away any clientele from Connections?

TB: No, because it was very different. It was two rooms, downstairs it was a bar, and it ran early and had food and was very low key and sit down chatting. And then there was a nightclub upstairs that really didn't fare very well. We closed that room after a few months.

CF: Yes, why?

TB: Why did we close it, or why didn't it work?

CF: No, why didn't it fare well?

TB: I think it was probably again, a bit of a stretch for the imagination of the community at the time. It was a lot - - a lot more music base, a lot - - I was going to say darker but probably less sparkly is a better way to describe it, because I wouldn't call it dark. Again, if you go travelling in the world, there are some very dark nightclubs, but I mean it musically dark, not as in dangerous.

CF: Danger. Yes.

TB: Yes, just a different - - a different sound and for us to go to that into great lengths, it was at a time where the music we were playing, I had two very good DJs, both women, actually both lesbians. And one of them tended towards one sound and one of them turned to the other sound, you know, with Connections at that stage, it was only one dance floor. And it was a fight between which sound was going to be pre-eminent. My plan was to take one of these women out and put her in this new room and leave

the other one in Connections. Unfortunately, the success of Connections is probably part of the reason for the demise of Dive Bar. That people go where people are. And actually unfortunately the woman that I chose to take to the new bar at the 11th hour said I want to stay at Connections, because she lost her nerve. And I knew that she could pull a crowd across, and they would fill the room, but without her doing that, she wanted the other room, so then it was a fight to the death between the two of them. But everybody wants that room, because that room is so wonderful, you know, it's got such atmosphere, it's got such history, it's got the most incredible sound system, the most incredible lighting rig. And it's got momentum.

CF: Which you brought into it.

TB: The momentum or the- -

CF: Both, all of it.

TB: All of that, yes, well it had momentum before that. I mean everybody forgets that time when I first took over, because there was a couple of years there where there was nobody there.

CF: Yes.

TB: And everybody forgets that we've had periods since when - - it's never been that bad, but when business has turned down quite dramatically, everybody thinks that Connections is always there, and it's always been busy. I'll show you the books if you want. I won't.

CF: No, that's fine. I can't - - I'm not very numerical. But I want to move now onto the time that you took it over, when really it was the height of the AIDS crisis, really, I mean it sort of starts in early '80s, and then you take over. How was Connections - - I mean apart from, you know, the obvious, of staff dying and people knowing people who died, how did Connections get intimately involved in AIDS awareness?

TB: Well, it was one of the first calls I made actually, to get the AIDS Council in there,

and they were desperately trying to get peer education happening. So fine, where do we start? You know, we sat down, we thrashed it out, whatever - - and it really was whatever you want. We put posters up, we put free condoms on the bar.

CF: Were they not already there?

TB: No.

CF: In toilets?

TB: No. Some, but look, it was broken. It wasn't - - I don't think it was anybody's fault, there was just no resources left, and everyone was wrung out, you know, it needed new life and enthusiasm. And it also needed new life and enthusiasm that understood that stuff, because - - because of our funny ageist thing and all old people have AIDS, and you know, kids being kids, going off and partying, and not caring about tomorrow, for me, and I was only 24,, for me to come in, and wanting all of that party, but also wanting to do good things, and having Peter behind me, or next to me, you know, he wasn't behind me, he was right next to me, being 15 years older, who had lost a lot of friends, saying yes, we need to do this. You know, he was instrumental in that. He was like no, no, we need to get involved with these people. We need to do this stuff. And I'm like yes, we do. Yes. Sure. Let's do it. What can we do? Can we do some fundraising? So we did. And in any way that we possibly could you know, there was permanent AIDS Council presence in there, whether it be the free condoms, whether you know, it was the advertising, whether it be people coming up on stage. You know, we used to, after the drag shows, people - - Peter would always go up and give a little speech, address the audience, and - -

CF: About?

TB: Whatever might come to hand. The pride was coming up, that we were doing this next show, you know, but it was about being safe, about you know, what the AIDS Council are doing, what we're doing, you know, the need to be safe. You know, always a joke about, use before, Mister Right, Mister Right Now, that was one of his sign offs, stop - - time to stop looking for Mister Right and start looking for Mister Right

Now. But be safe. Yes. Yes. All of that, public service messages all the way, and we met with the AIDS Council and in fact we then started - - we put \$2 charge - - at the time Sundays were a very busy night. It was much cheaper to get in on a Sunday. I can't remember what the base price was, but we put an extra \$2 on, nonnegotiable, and that was all donated to - - in fact, in the first instance what didn't go to the AIDS Council, it went to the refurbishment of the AIDS ward at Royal Perth Hospital. Which was like a prison cell. It was ghastly.

CF: Probably the old tuberculosis ward I think.

TB: Yes, think it was. Yes.

CF: Which was like AIDS then.

TB: Yes. So you can imagine how it was decorated, and we couldn't have it - - the gays couldn't have it like that. No.

CF: So what did you do?

TB: To the - -

CF: Did you decorate the ward?

TB: The whole thing, yes. ...(indistinct)...

CF: So the hospital was involved and gave you permission?

TB: Yes, yes. We got involved you know, because they were working very closely with the AIDS Council at the time. And it had a balcony on it that was closed off. So that got opened up, and we put plants on it, and we painted it and we got art and we got quilts, and we got stuff. All made it comfortable. We made it somewhere you wanted to go. Not somewhere you wanted to go, but you know, as a visitor, that you'd want to see a friend.

CF: Yes.

TB: Because it was a nice place to be. And a place that people you know, that were very ill could at least feel comfortable in. We got televisions into it. We - - you know, it had nothing. It was horrific. It was horrific. It was soul destroying to go there. And certainly as a place to live out the end of your life - -

CF: Yes.

TB: Horrendous.

CF: Well, I mean amongst the medical community, there was a - - you know, there was a fear for some of them at that stage as well.

TB: Yes.

CF: In looking after people with AIDS. So it wasn't - - you know, these are people who should know what they're doing.

TB: Probably by '91 when I started that was - - that was largely gone. You know, by the '90s we knew what we were up against. Certainly the medical community did, and there wasn't that - - that - - that had passed by the time I got involved. And they were wonderful up there, but they had nothing. They had nothing. So that fell to us.

CF: Yes.

TB: And we did a whole bunch of stuff.

CF: Yourself?

TB: Anything - - you know, we - - I think we did cake stalls at fair it, you know it really was whatever - - whatever we could do, we did. But you know, sometimes - - and sometimes those terrible things could happen to a community galvanise that same community.

CF: Yes.

TB: I don't think we would have the freedoms and the - - the acknowledgement and the acceptance that we have, or be as politically savvy and aware as a community, and that's worldwide, had that not happened. It's an awful thing, awful thing to think, but I think - -

CF: Well, it had to be talked about.

TB: Yes. So we had to talk about the illness but then we had to talk about the bigger picture, that there were people that were gay. Men having sex with men. Which then opened up the conversation to women having sex with women that then opened up the conversation to bisexual people right through to the gender stuff that's going on now. You know, I do think there is a - - there is a direct link in that what is really a very fast evolution of our community and the broader community's view of our community, and acceptance of our community. I do think that none of that would have happened with such speed and such power and - - what's the word I want?

CF: Not clarity?

TB: Yes, maybe clarity, but more than that. More of a willingness to just get in there and thrash all those things out had we not been galvanised and brought together by that. You know I think that fundraising and that sticking together and looking after our own made us a community. You know, I talk about it as a Holocaust, and it is. We lost a generation. But in the same way the mark that the Holocaust left on that group of people and galvanised them into political action, and all of those things. I think you could see the same thing happening with our community. Something terrible happening does make people pull together, and I think it's actually interesting pulled together all of those people, including those people less at risk like the women ...(indistinct)...

CF: Did that same group become politically involved in arguing for legislation?

TB: Yes. There was a lot more. We became a lot more politically - - politically aware, and we likely had a voice. I think that's the other thing. We didn't have a voice before. Then we all, no, I got a voice.

CF: So in the sense the AIDS Council was an umbrella organisation to give you a voice in some ways.

TB: No.

CF: No?

TB: I wouldn't describe it as such. I mean they were great advocates. I think - - yes, it just - - the community coalesced. It made that happen but having the AIDS Council, and then pride appears about then as well.

CF: Yes.

TB: So then you get a peak body, and you know, I like to think we played our part in pulling - - you know there was a gay and lesbian counselling service, and there was more political arms and you know, all of those groups, probably came together more than ever in that '90s period. You know, I actually would see it as the high day, you know the glory days of the community in many ways, in it did pull the community, it's when Mardi Gras became so big in Sydney. Gay dance music became a thing, and it's when the world realised we were there, you know, and it's the point really, at which our culture seeps into the mainstream in far more ways. We become far more visible. And certainly musically yes, gay music had always played a part, but there's a real nexus there of club culture and gay culture coming together in that same period of the '90s.

CF: Yes. And so we've talked sort of several times about the smallness of the Perth community and the fact that - - that people who identify as queer, I'm going to use that word, mix in together, why - - why is it then that WA was one of the last places to have legislative change?

TB: Laziness?

CF: There is a dissonance there in a way.

TB: Yes, there's a great dissonance but you know, look, I think - - I think that dissonance relates to Perth, not to the gay community.

CF: Okay.

TB: Or even the- - even the legislators really - - you know, it is an odd town.

CF: Yes.

TB: As you've probably worked out.

CF: Yes.

TB: It has a very interesting mentality. But you know, some of it's quite sweet. You know, I think that you know I talked about it before, that overgrown country town where everybody is looking out for everybody. Well, we don't need to change the laws, because everybody's alright, and everything is doing just fine. Yes, the mere fact that Connections existed for all those years, when it was actually illegal, is in itself like to outsider, gob smacking. But it did.

CF: Because unlike Sydney, where there were murders, you know, actual police murders of gay men, there doesn't seem to be that in Perth.

TB: No, look I - - I have to say I haven't put my mind to it very much, but I couldn't explain it. But I do think it's part of that easy-goingness of this place. I mean it is - - it can be - - certainly then it could be really quite redneck, but it also did have a sort of live and let live attitude. And you know, there was - - certainly in my youth, ...(indistinct)... the '80s, so it's the same sort of time as we're talking about, you know, there were Goths and new Romantics and all of the - - Goths in Perth, what a ludicrous idea. Let's wear an army greatcoat on a 43 degrees day, in the middle of the mall. But you know all of those - - those subcultures did exist here. They were here, it wasn't as if

you had to hide all that. They were all in the Mall back then. I had all of those friends. I used to go out as a 17-year-old wearing a full face and make up. Not as a gay man, I was a new romantic.

CF: But - -

TB: Looks pretty gay to me kid.

CF: But small, like small groups.

TB: Yes. And there was lots of name calling and nastiness, but seemed like it didn't get that much further beyond. I mean, I'm sure it did, I'm sure there were some awful things that happened.

CF: But it doesn't seem to be as bad as what was happening in Sydney?

TB: No. No, and you know, I think you know, the police force here too. You know, sure there was corruption, am I allowed to say that?

CF: Yes.

TB: I'm sure there was, but again, I think it's much more that small town mentality. And you've got to remember how small Perth was then. You know, it was very small. And that isolation. Just, you know, it was another - - it was another world. We all slept with our doors and windows open and our cars unlocked. Nobody wore seatbelts, you know. You know, by then, Sydney was a big city, with all the stuff that comes with being a big city.

CF: And yet, I mean there weren't - - someone said that no cameras or photographers - -

TB: Yes, that was me. And that - - that's a very interesting thing. There was a no camera policy in Connections when I started. And that comes back to that idea of people not being out. And the fear of having their photograph taken and their work finding out, their family finding out, their friends, their colleagues, them losing their job or you

know - - you know being cut off from their family and shut off. That's changed in my lifetime dramatically. There's still people that don't want their photograph taken. You know, high profile people weren't gay, and even everyday people, you know, if you work in a bank you could lose your job. For - - for being out.

CF: Seriously? Then?

TB: Yes. Absolutely. Still. Still in the '90s. So yes, again, small town-ness. But it - - a - - tempered by small town-ness of just keep it to yourself and we'll all be good. I think that's probably what your - - that's my read of how it - - how it was in this town.

CF: Not the fact that everyone knew everybody else?

TB: Well there was that - - that too.

CF: You know, so that tempered behaviour to Fred's son for example because you liked Fred?

TB: Yes, possibly. Look, it wasn't quite that small town. I think it's - - it's a double edged sword that one. But I - - yes, I've never been able to explain that dissonance between the legalities and what actually went on. I think maybe you'll find that happens elsewhere in the world where - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - where it's not - - where it's not legal, because we are everywhere apparently. But no, in all honesty, you know, I do think that - - you know, I've never been one to get into the argument about nature and nurture, but I know I am gay. Yes, you know, I've had relationships with women, but I am for the most part attracted to my own gender. That is me. I don't know why. I have not had great heartbreak about why. But I think we probably are. It doesn't make any sense, the scientist in me says it makes no sense at all, but having lived in that world for so long now, the breadth of sexuality and my eyes being opened to the breadth of gender, suggests to me that there's got to be more to it than just socialisation, so if that's the case, in all those places where it is illegal and death penalties stuff, those people are probably there, and you probably find that

they are getting together and doing what they do. And that's not just sexually, doing what they do - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - whether it be going and dancing or drinking together that there's a bar in that town, you know stuff...(indistinct)... that they live under - - under fear of death

CF: Of death.

TB: Or whatever else. I think - - you know, if you step back and look at it like that, that dissonance that we are talking about, you go, oh yes, you'll probably find, if you could get inside Saudi Arabia, or central African country or a really strongly Catholic South American country, where it was completely frowned upon or worse, but you will find those people there living their lives in a similar way that we might have in the '70s and '80s.

CF: And talking of cameras, I just wanted to get onto the role of technology and how that has affected Connections. Or has it?

TB: Dramatically.

CF: In what way?

TB: So - - the camera one? I think the best way to describe it is that the 40th birthday a couple of years ago I told the story of having a no camera policy in Connections once, and if I look up now at you, at my audience, I was on stage giving the speech, three quarters of you will be filming me. And I looked up and they were. That's a great change in how our world works. All the kids have got their phones out all the time. Yes. Everything is recorded. You know why we keep the photos? And they will go with this? But you know, I have a handful from the first few years, a bigger number as it gets into the '80s, when I took over in '91 we start to get more photographs. Now there are thousands of photographs every night, and everybody's taking photographs of everything. It's been good and it's been bad. You can't do anything without having

your photograph taken now. And what was a very private thing, where you could get away with all sorts of stuff, you can't anymore. But it gives us great freedoms, and people know that, and you know, people still do call us and ask us to take their photographs down, or send us Facebook messages, because that's where most of it goes now. And invariably, it's because they were doing something really embarrassing like showing their tits or they're drunk and they look dreadful, or the fact that they lied to their boss and said that they were sick the next day and didn't want the photograph up.

CF: So have you got a Facebook site for Connections?

TB: Oh, yes. It's huge. 25,000 friends, you know, a couple of hundred thousand people look at it each week, and it's all about the photographs. They want the photographs. That mentality, it's gone from not wanting their photographs to absolutely wanting their photographs. The photographs that we take, both, we have a professional photographer, who works for us, so there's albums of photographs from her, and we have a photo booth in there.

CF: Right.

TB: And that's usually the one that they want the photograph taken down, because - - just because you're in a photo booth doesn't mean that you can show those parts of your body.

CF: ...(indistinct)...

TB: Yes. ...(indistinct)... No - - so, certainly technology's changed us in that way dramatically, but that's, you know, society. More interestingly it's changed the connection as a place to meet people thing.

CF: Because Connections is like meeting.

TB: Absolutely. I hate the name by the way.

CF: Yes, do you? What would you call it?

TB: I wouldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't call it anything else. I'd be too scared. It is what it is.

CF: But why do you hate it?

TB: I think it's cheesy. But - - but it is. And, you know, now that - - now that I've been doing it for nearly 30 years, and it's been going for more than 40, it's kind of like - - you know, it is what it is like you know.

CF: Yes.

TB: You couldn't call it anything else. That ability to meet people for sex tonight, or a relationship or more, has been not largely - - not entirely removed from the equation, but taken out of the equation quite - - quite dramatically. And we saw it happening like I think I said earlier about you know, they were early adopters of gay dating sites. We saw it 20 years ago starting to happen, that less and less people were coming to Connections to meet a partner. So we had to change our business model some more.

CF: Yes, how did - - because you said to me when we talked that people would come and just hang at the bar waiting for their date or whoever to turn up. And now they are on the - -

TB: Well yes, I mean that's - - I mean that's an even - - even more broadly that's an interesting story that if you and I were to meet out once upon a time, I would say I'll see you at Connections at midnight. And I'd get there at midnight, and you weren't there, so I'd buy a drink and I'd wait for you, and I'd wait till you came and then you know, I'd wait for a good half an hour and then by then I'd probably have had a couple of drinks and wouldn't care if you came or not. But kids today don't do that. You see them coming in, and their friends aren't there, so they are straight onto their phone and furiously texting, and it seems to be what happens is that people are madly chasing each other around the district, or the venues, but also they are sending their texts saying it's not busy here. How is it like where you are? I'll come to you. So you're

getting a lot more movement back and forth, and back and forth, it's much harder to get a crowd to gravitate, which is always hard to do in a bar.

CF: Yes.

TB: Our first 20 people are the hardest people to get in to a nightclub. Once you've got that 20, 30 people, depending on the size of it, but for us it's about 20, 30 people, the next two that come, there's people here, we'll hang out. But two people come in, two people go out, two people come in, two people go out, often for the first couple of hours. Now they are coming in meeting, going oh shit, there's nobody here. Where is everybody? And they actually go straight to their phones to look where everybody else is, whether it be the friends that they were meeting or even just trying to find out where the crowd is.

CF: And you said it's made you change your business model again. How?

TB: Well, it's certainly changed the sexual element of it. So the - - or the meeting people element of it let's say, we will come back to the sexual bit. The meeting people - - it's changed the meeting people part of it, and that sort of coincides with the men's night stopping, and the women's nights as well, because they were places, one of the few places you could meet your own kind. There was no need to do that, because you could meet your own kind in the safety of your home, and you could look at all their pictures first, and you know, I don't understand it. I joke that I want to be able to smell them. But you know, I don't want to see the five curated photographs you've given me, I want to see you laugh like you just did and see that funny thing that you do with your - - with your mouth, or whatever it might be, before I make that call, but no, no, you get the five photos that you curated and probably photo shopped as well. So that part of it has been pulled out of the equation. But it's also changed the dynamic in the room because the sexual element has moved right into the background. If there was something that you know, like when you asked me at the beginning about what it felt like when I first went there, and certainly the first 10 years at least of my time was that it was sexually charged. It was palpable. You could feel it in the air. And in fact, that was one of the reasons the women sometimes could get a bit narky, that you could feel male sexual energy. You could smell it. There was a lot of testosterone in

the room. Odd testosterone. Not the footy club changing room sort of testosterone but you know.

CF: Why would women get narky? Just uncomfortable?

TB: Well, it made them uncomfortable you know, to have such male sexual - -

CF: Palpable.

TB: - - energy, and yes, you know, you think if we go back to that talking about the - - those lesbians that were strongly feminist, that was just downright offensive. You men are all looking for sex. No shit, so are you. But yes, when you've got 80% of it being men like that, that must be pretty confronting. You know, if 80% of the crowd is men.

CF: Yes.

TB: And they are all looking for sex.

CF: Yes. So that's gone?

TB: Large amounts of it are, yes. It's still there. But it's - - it's a top note, not a bass note. But that's a change in our world. I mean you know, there are clubs all over the world that are like that still. Less and less of them I have to say.

CF: Would they - - they might be fetish sort of clubs?

TB: Yes, or just ones that cater to gay men, that, you know, target their market out there, or even those that - - that keep you know, have a conscious door policy, no, this is for gay men only.

CF: Right.

TB: Or are just so confronting that no one else wants to go into them. Yes.

CF: But that - - I mean Connections has never been just that though.

TB: No, but it has been in the past confronting for many people. No, look, I have to say that I delight in a level of confrontation, because again, it sorts out who's cool. Well it is, you know like if you can take this then you'll be alright. ...(indistinct)... two blokes kissing. Really? You're offended by that? You don't belong here.

CF: Out you go.

TB: Yes. You know, certainly when I say confrontational it's, you know, but you know, some of the performance stuff can be quite confrontational, but - -

CF: And you said some of those performances earlier would have been you know, the regulations - - the regulatory bodies would have stopped those performances in a club, but allowed them say on the fringe, is that still so?

TB: Absolutely. Infuriating. Absolutely infuriating. Crazy.

CF: Why? How can that be? Because you see at a fringe Festival it's much more open to - -

TB: Fringe Festival, everybody loves fringe Festival, everything is different for fringe which is fine. I'm just glad that we've got that far in the city that we get to there. I really am. You know, I can live with the fact that we can't do that. So, it's madness, and I could yell and scream but - -

CF: So what are the actual restrictions?

TB: Well actually, interestingly Connections has very few actual formal restrictions on its license. But new licenses that are issued now have all sorts of, pages of what you can and can't do and what you ..drinks you can and can't serve and you will not you know, they're glorious. There is a whole lot of stuff about bare buttocks and bare nipples, bare breasts and not exposing to the public or not confronting your staff with such

things.

CF: What about topless sort of Kalgoorlie - -

TB: Well, they don't have them, those rules and regulations. But if you - - if you get a new license now, you get three pages of ludicrous nanny state. Completely at odds with the world that we think we have become.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. But again, it's that funny - - this funny disconnect in the city. Look, I don't what it's - -

CF: And would that have always been heavily policed? Or would Connections have got away with it before now? I mean has it ..

TB: It's more policed now than it ever was.

CF: Yes, why?

TB: I don't understand. When people are more open-minded, and they get more of that in turning on the television.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes.

CF: And when did that change happen?

TB: Just slowly over time. I think we live in really interesting times in which the world's got, the democratic west, has got more broadminded, but at the same time more small-minded. You know. I kind of think we might have unfortunately peaked with liberalism, but - -

CF: Yes, well, remains to be seen.

TB: Please make - - please make that not true. Certainly the way it looks right now.

CF: And there were a couple of questions. You were - - you will give me a list of how people flagged the sort of sex they wanted in a dress code. No necessity for that now?

TB: No, because actually they're not doing that out and about, and even if they are meeting out and about, you probably find that they go downstairs, go to the toilet quickly, and check their grinder profile to find out all of those things.

CF: Right.

TB: They do. You know - -

CF: So how did it happen before, like just one example, I don't need a whole - - one or two, one or two. So how did they sort of indicate that?

TB: Look, there's one classic one, which is what you ask about the dress code thing. And it started in San Francisco in the '70s, which was bandannas, coloured bandannas, worn in your back pocket. You know, it's the most obvious one and it's very old, and I haven't seen anybody do it for decades.

CF: Yes.

TB: Left being top, right being bottom as in pocket, as in giving and receiving, and then colour-coded for various sexual activity.

CF: Did women have them also?

TB: Nope. No, look actually I think that some of the dykes did, because there was certainly - - there we go, I used dyke because I'm talking about a particular - -

CF: Subset.

TB: - - Subset of the female population. There was certainly in days gone by, and actually there is still, a subset of women that are more men than men, that are - - and we call them - - that they were the dykes, or worse, the diesel dykes, and they were blokey. They were absolutely blokey and you know, wore men's clothing, and no different to drag really. But they were - - they were rough too. And they kind of tried to out male the males often.

CF: But in a sense, some gay performers dress more girly than - -

TB: Absolutely

CF: - - I would for example.

TB: Yes. That caricature of - -

CF: Yes. So the same - - same thing holds - -

TB: The same sort of thing happens. So - - and that was what I was about to say about - - I said it doesn't happen now, but actually it does. This whole subset of young girls that dressed like rappers, so you know, all of that, baggy pants, big jewellery, all of the hand movements - -

CF: What did that signify?

TB: Well, it's tomboying, you know, it's - -

CF: Yes, so in a sense ...

TB: .. overplaying - - yes, overplaying gender roles. It's drag, you know. There's a great saying from RuPaul, we are all born naked, everything else is drag. I love it. It's a good way of putting it.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. Because it is all dress ups and in our world there are a whole lot of other signifiers about, you know. What you want to be portrayed as, you know. How you dress does actually talk about what you're looking for often.

CF: Yes, except as you said, you didn't want Connections to have a rainbow flag out there.

TB: Oh, for fuck's sake.

CF: Yes.

TB: Yes. Which got me into a lot of trouble over the years.

CF: Why?

TB: You have to have a rainbow flag. You're not proud. Proud as can be. I just don't need to signpost it. If you don't - - if you get into this town, and you don't know that this is a gay bar, your - - you know, you're really misinformed. And if you get inside here and you haven't realised it's a gay bar, then you're just damned stupid.

CF: Has Connections become part of like past tourism, you know, a great place to go, a great nightclub?

TB: Look, I think it might have. Certainly we are seeing a lot more people that are coming because it's just great fun. But I think we're seeing overseas tourists coming in groups. Yes. I haven't quizzed them on that, but certainly people that are coming in as groups say you're not from the - - you've read up on where to go to and where is fun, and you've just come here because you want a good time. That's really nice. And you know, they are invariably respectful, in that way that you often are because - - because you're in another culture and you don't know the rules of engagement, so you play it down, which is, you know if you go to another - - you know, if you go to India, you go to France, you go to - - where ever it might be, you actually temper your behaviour because you're not sure of the cultural boundaries.

CF: Or the signals.

TB: Or the signals. So you automatically pull yourself in. Why can't we do that when we walk into a disco?

CF: When I went up there, the renovations that you've done now, it's a very posh sort of good looking bar now. So when - - when did that happen?

TB: That particular bar, the outside bit was built 8 years ago. And it had just a little bar on it. Just as a sort of test run, and then that big bar that you came into, one you call the posh bar - -

CF: Well, it looked lovely.

TB: It is, it's beautiful.

CF: I mean, you don't sell kegs and beer in middy glasses.

TB: No. We do actually- -

CF: You sell wine in - -

TB: Yes, wine- - it's bottled wine in glasses of a quality, and there is cocktails. But that was about broadening what we did. I mean I - - I love the rough and ready, but I also love the glamour. And we can be glamorous. I mean, Connections, in the past, had one doorway that was - - and a staircase that was only two metres wide. And it was a dark hole off James Street between two kebab shops, and you snuck up there. It now has a lobby with a chandelier and it's open to the world. And it has this bar that is so much more polished and sophisticated, because we can be that, and you know, we go right back to where we started, with oh, the gays are so stylish and all of that, yes, there are gays that are that. There are those that just want to get down and have a dance and get sweaty and you know, want a beer in a can. There's nothing to say that we can't be all of those things. And there's nothing to say that we can't have all of those options at night, and in a town where there aren't many options, to offer a breadth

of product, to a breadth of customers, seemed like a good business sense, and it's been incredibly business - - good business sense. It was also talking about what somebody of say my age, and I'm 53, I still want to go out, but I don't really have it in me to go into a nightclub, and hear, over that din, and you can't talk to somebody in the nightclub with the music going at full tilt, I want to sit down, I want to talk to you, and actually, I do like going into a nightclub and having a dance, but it's nice to get some respite from that, so the idea that you could have both in the same space, and move freely between them, and then some of those people that had loved Connections in their youth, that really felt like they didn't belong, could love it again, on different terms, could come in at 8 o'clock, they could see a drag show at 8 o'clock, they could have a cocktail, they could bring their friends up and have a quiet drink early in the evening, that could turn into a night out nightclubbing just like in the good old days, but didn't have to be. And those kids could see that it didn't just have to be going nuts and dancing on the tables, having drunk too much. I've always said that having older people in the venue moderated the behaviour of the younger ones, and this has shown that even more.

CF: So you can have - - so is it - - is it sort of protected soundproofed from - -

TB: Completely.

CF: - - If you're having a rage - -

TB: Yes.

CF: - - you know in the other area?

TB: They have different music, two different DJs, so the main room is club music, it's loud, and it's big, and fast and lots of flashing lights, the new space, the lounge and the terrace have DJs playing but they are playing at a lower volume, more mellow music, more vocals, a more cruisee - -

CF: Just like the dive bar that you wanted it to be.

TB: Absolutely. It's completely informed by you know, the DNA of that bar that I built back then, exists in that new bar.

CF: Do you think it's also reflecting that you're now not 24?

TB: Now? Really?

CF: Young and fabulously ..

TB: Certainly ...

CF: Catering for something that's sophisticated and - - I mean if you still want to have a reasonably ...

TB: Look, I would have loved that bar when I was 24.

CF: Yes. Yes.

TB: And I think we all do. You know, even 24-year-old kids love thinking that they are fabulous and glamorous. And again, nightclubs are about that. They are this fantasy world where you throw away the drudgery of - - of the week.

CF: Yes.

TB: And come out and be a more fabulous version of you. And actually, that you know, caterpillar into butterfly-ness idea talks about drag, talks about being in the closet all week, coming out and letting your hair down. That fantasy world of - - that's what we trade in. So it's all really talking about the same thing. Taking the guts out of the stage and the DJ box so you could see what was going on, getting inside that, like be a more fabulous version of you. Or be the real you. Maybe the real you is fabulous. Because for tonight it can be.

CF: But, you've also kept some of the original brick - -

TB: Yes.

CF: - - sort of structure as well, so you haven't totally changed it?

TB: So the real you's got a bit of grubby in it too.

CF: Yes. And is there a dress code?

TB: None whatsoever. Closed shoes.

CF: That's it?

TB: For insurance reasons, yes.

CF: Yes.

TB: You probably need your bits covered. We wouldn't care, but somebody's going to take offence. We saw a penis.

CF: Okay, Tim, sorry, you're just going to add something about a dress code.

TB: The dress code. So no, look, there isn't a dress code. If I had my way, everybody would dress up to go out, but, sometimes the dressing down is part of what is entertaining about Connections too, which is why there's no dress code. Dressing down to me shouldn't be just shorts and a hoodie, I don't understand people wearing shorts in a nightclub, I want people to make an effort, and if that effort means that they are wearing lingerie, then more is the power to them. We don't have a dress code for staff, and every now and again somebody says we should have uniforms, and I look at you all, you are the most un-uniform bunch of people ever. You all got employed because your personality and different. Why would I dress you all the same? So the staff are allowed to wear what they like to, and yes sometimes they don't wear very much, but in fact if anybody does turn up in something like shorts and a hoodie we have the pink dress of shame, and the pink dress of shame is a fairly large women's ball dress bought from the op shop up the road here, mid-'80s, horrible shade of pink, a lovely leg of mutton sleeve in polyester taffeta. It's a pretty ghastly dress

and if somebody turns up in unacceptable clothing, they have to wear the pink dress of shame.

CF: Men or women?

TB: Men or women. It's large, it'll fit anyone. And it's particularly funny on a very small girl, or a particularly large man.

CF: All right, thanks Tim.

TB: No worries.

TRACK 03

CF: Okay Tim, we're just going to cover today the music at connections, because friends who have been there said that was the main reason they went, the music was so different, so fabulous, so exciting, so I want you to give me some - - well, just talk about the music, the history and the background.

TB: Well, the music - - the music has always been key to Connections' charm and its strength. It's been a really important mix, or a really important part of the mix of what we do. Yes, we were the primary venue for the gay and lesbian community of this city, but we always, always had a reputation for very good music. And in fact that probably is a large amount of what drew me to it. I came from a music background. In the other interview I spoke of my studying music, I'd worked in hospitality. Part of the main reason I took the job was because this was a chance to continue working in hospitality, a job that actually paid the bills, but be involved in music. From there, I actually went on to learn to DJ and become one of the DJs, but that comes further down the track. So from the very beginning Connections had a reputation for the quality of its music. Gay nightclubs all over have had a reputation for their music over the years.

CF: Is that the sound or the actual type of music?

TB: All of the above.

CF: Yes.

TB: The venue's always had a very high quality sound system. In fact, these days, it has the best in town by - - by a country mile. And I've worked very hard on keeping that up, because of my musical background, because of my sound technology background, it was really important to me to have the quality, of the gear that good, and if we've got a reputation for such good music, it needs to be played on good equipment. So to put it in context, it opened in 1975 at the height of disco. I think most people, when

you mention disco, would probably somewhere in there thinking about what that meant, would think gay gay clubs, gay people.

CF: Mirror balls?

TB: Mirror balls. We have the largest collection of mirror balls in the country.

CF: Really?

TB: 144 at last count. Yes, and in fact it's a bit of a running joke.

CF: That are rotated?

TB: Yes. In fact they are not in - - there are only two in the roof at the moment, but even in the corridor that goes down to the toilets that are the furthest distance from everything, when we renovated, which is sort of the old warehouse space which is very raw and warehouse, you get to the end of the corridor and just before the toilets there is a cluster of a dozen mirror balls. With lights on them of course.

CF: Yes.

TB: Because why wouldn't you have mirror balls outside the toilet?

CF: Correct.

TB: Sorry, we started with disco, and it was very much about disco. So 1975, the - - which is really the tail end of disco, but also the beginnings of new wave, small elements of punk, and actually always an element of pop, right through to now. We've always said the music at Connections was a tagline we used for advertising once, that was a refreshing blend of cool and camp. Which we kind of stick to. We tried very hard to keep the underground roots going, but whilst keeping it vocal and accessible, it's a bit of a balancing act between the two. And I think that's part of the longevity of the nightclub, and the musical policy, that it was always very credible, if you were really into your music, it was cool, but that didn't mean you'd get the vocals you knew, and

references to things you know. That sort of forms the backbone of our music policy, that we try to be both things at the same time. We can make it a little eclectic, but it can be done, and that balancing act is very important.

CF: And were you directly involved in deciding what was going to play, or was it someone else who did that?

TB: No, very much so.

CF: Yes.

TB: I've always worked with the DJs, hopefully with them, and some of them might say against them, about music policy, but you know, we all have different opinions.

CF: Yes.

TB: But we got a very strong view of the quality of the music, that it needs to be quality, and it needs to be music that moves people, you know, they are out there to dance and have fun.

CF: Yes.

TB: You want to make them have fun, so it's got to be credible and it has an element of underground to it, but if it's too underground, people don't get it you know, and they don't dance. By the same token, if it's just pop music, it's just pop music, and it's a bit throwaway and so yes, that - - we always talk about the tension between the two, that balancing act. By the '80s, Connections - - well, gay music had formed a very particular sound that actually was probably more underground just by virtue of the gay community after the fall of disco, there was a real backlash, not only against the music, there was a backlash against the gays, a backlash against the gays and the music, and then we had the AIDS crisis, so much as our community became more visible in that decade, in many ways, the clubbing experience got pushed back underground again.

CF: And what - - what is gay music then? You talk about that.

TB: Well, to my mind - -

CF: ...(indistinct)...

TB: To my mind, it was more discernible then than in any other time, certainly during the period. Gay music and the mainstream came together with disco, and there was this flowering, but then the '80s came and all that fell apart. And through the '80s Connections' sound was incredibly different to other venues you'd go to in the city.

CF: In what way?

TB: It had a particular style of music, which, by name is called high energy, which did come out of the gay clubs of London, San Francisco, primarily, New York to a lesser extent. Connections was very hooked into that scene in that boxes of records were flown in from a couple of key record stores in each of those cities, each month. So we had our own music that nobody else had. And that's something we might expand on later, that in those days, right through the '90s at least, much of the music that you heard in the nightclub, you only heard in a nightclub.

CF: Right.

TB: And you had to go to a nightclub to get it. And that's one of the key ways in which nightclubs have changed, not just Connections. But we can expand on that later. So Connections at that point was probably an even more interesting mix of that high energy sound, which was pretty underground in the beginnings, and pop music. So I'm guessing, not having spent that much time there then, because I was a little young, I'm guessing the tension was even greater. That sound ended up becoming very popular and appearing in popular music in the late '80s with the likes of Dead or Alive, and in fact if you know anything by that band, you know the sound of high energy, that sound, actually went on to become the sound of Stock Aitken Waterman, which was Kylie, in the early days, and the Pet Shop Boys. So there is a definite crossover, and the music of gay world always did this crossover into the mainstream in varying ways, shapes or forms. There's always been an influence of that, and in fact also the

disco thing. Disco never really died. It just got pushed back underground where it came from, and reappeared in various forms. We then got garage house music which were black and Hispanic gay music from the US once again, that then got chewed up out of that black gay culture and found their way across the Atlantic to England, and became hugely popular, and then got fed back to the mainstream as pop music.

CF: And was the US your main source?

TB: I'm not sure. But certainly those records came in, came in from both San Francisco and London, yes. So I think there was a lot more cross-fertilisation between those worlds, because it was easier for people to move. But interesting little old Perth, at the end of the earth, had access to that music, and I think that really is where Connections' reputation for music was cemented. That there was this music that was other, and very different, and very danceable, and designed for playing in nightclubs, not designed for playing on the radio. Not designed for listening to at home. Designed for dancing. Musically, and sonically, that makes for a very different sound, because it's designed to play on almighty great speakers, with a whole lot of other stuff going on. Musically, it tends to be more rhythm driven, or beat driven, or stripped back, less vocals, but then either stripped back vocals or great big soaring vocals. So when we talk about disco not dying, and being reborn in various forms, all the way through that period, right from disco till now, you get big black wailing divas, and gospel. You know, I've always said that when the nightclub is in full flight, and everybody is dancing, particularly when you're the DJ and you're in control of it, it's like church.

CF: You said it was like a church.

TB: Yes. And I think the use of gospel vocals has a real - - it's saying something about what's going there, and you know, it goes back to something very tribal, you know, it's - - it's a group of people meeting with their own and celebrating.

CF: Like a congregation?

TB: It is. Yes. It is a congregation, so it's not surprising that gospel vocal - - gospel type vocals have informed the music all along, and many of the great singers of that sort of stuff are all gospel trained. You know, they are all people that grew up going to

church singing, and then found disco and jumped ship. So we - - we do that '80s thing.

CF: Yes.

TB: And then we move into the '90s, and we get the birth of house music, which is again a very gay form. It actually came from a club in Chicago, and black, gay American DJ, called Frankie Knuckles, who worked at a nightclub called the Warehouse. And that's why it's called house music. That quickly bubbled up and moved from there to New York, and from there, where there was another club called Paradise Garage, another gay club, and we get the other key form of the period, which is garage music. So we have house and garage music.

CF: And what would have been that, you know, where that sort of time gap, where it was popular there and then it arrived here? Was it almost instant?

TB: Well it was in Connections - - yes, instantly.

CF: Instantly? Okay.

TB: But it wasn't necessarily in the other venues.

CF: No, in Connections I mean.

TB: Yes so in Connections, definitely. So again we stood out, because we were hooked into that thing. And at about the same time, DJs learned to mix, which was the act of moving seamlessly from one record to another. You run two records at once, you listen to one with your left ear, the one that's coming up with your left ear, and the one that's playing on the system with your right ear. You speed them up and slow them down to match their beats, and then you fade one of them up as the other one is coming down, which allows you to keep the beat going consistently all the way through, so you go from a time where DJs spoke between records, to the time when they played a record, stopped it, or let it finish, put the next one, to a period where DJs actually have a technique by which they seamlessly move from one track to another so you start with a beat, at 8 o'clock at night, 10 o'clock at night when you start, and you keep

playing that beat, that beat stays continuous, for eight hours. So you can keep dancing, till you're going to have to stop. So that's technique all DJs use now.

CF: And when did you start becoming a DJ?

TB: Well, just a - - before I - - long before I started - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - That technique in the '80s became a thing, and the first DJs that mixed records together in that fashion were the DJs at Connections.

CF: Who were? Do you remember?

TB: Barry Helm, and Brian - - one of them was the manager and one was the DJ. Barry was the DJ I believe. He was the first DJ to beat mix in Perth. Something that caught on very quickly, and became the thing to do, so the other DJs were coming down to see what he was doing. And that's all on vinyl. It's all being done on vinyl. A major change in what happened in dance - - what we would now call dance music, but in the music of nightclubs, yes, and Connections was at the forefront of that. By the '90s that was what everyone was doing, and that's what clubs did. And that music crossed over, across the Atlantic, became incredibly popular in Britain and dance music took over the world at that point. Connections continued to do that, and be very engaged in the moving of that sound forward. We also get techno at that point and you know, we could go into all these different genres but, you know they were the key ones that you know Connections stood by. There have been other things along the way that have come in and out and had an effect, but they have really been the genres that we would - - we would probably call our own. I didn't actually learn to DJ until the mid-'90s.

CF: And why? Why did you?

TB: Well, I always worked very closely, at the very beginning in those first few years, at Connections, I was best friends with the DJ at the time, and he and I worked together, and we talked music all the time, and in fact - -

CF: And who was he? ...(indistinct)...

TB: No, his name was Philip Buller, who, after several years, he was an Englishman, he was going back to visit his mother, but went via San Francisco, never got to his mother, and never came back to us. And he's still in San Francisco doing incredibly well for himself. Philip and I were very close. He taught me a hell of a lot about music, but I taught him different - - different stuff about music. I didn't learn to DJ. I'm not quite sure why I never even asked him to teach me, but I watched him, and watched him, and I learned the technique very well, and we would work together on the show tapes - -

CF: Which are?

TB: Which are pre-recorded, which might have been half an hour long, but they'd be half an hour long with six, seven tracks and maybe dialogue and things cut into them, which were all done on real to reel tape.

CF: Wow.

TB: So I had studied that, and, you know, all the editing that we now do on a computer was all done on spliced reel to reel tapes where you actually sliced it with a razor blade - -

CF: Yes. Cut it - -

TB: And put it together. So he and I worked on that together, we did all of that, and I learned vast amounts about dance music, because I really had a crash course in dance music coming into Connections. I kind of knew - - I thought I knew it, but actually I didn't really know it.

CF: By show tapes you mean for - -

TB: For the drag shows.

CF: The drag shows?

TB: Yes.

CF: Okay.

TB: For actual shows where the night stopped. I mean, sometimes we would make - - make a tape for something during the night, whether we wanted - - we'd re-edit a song if the song wasn't long enough, or you wanted to add a bit to it or to and fro, but it was very hard to manage that, because you were then having to do it on tape back and forth. And then you couldn't do the same tricks with tapes that you could do with vinyl.

CF: So - - so the sound was both tape and vinyl?

TB: Well, the sound for the nightclub was vinyl, almost exclusively. But you can't edit vinyl.

CF: No.

TB: And there was no - - well, there was minimal digital technology at that point, so anything that needed to be edited needed to be done on tape.

CF: And was that done up ...(indistinct)...

TB: Yes. We used to sit up in the DJ box, and that's what we do during the week, you know, we might be say on a Tuesday afternoon like this, we'd be sitting there cutting tape and putting that all together, manually, which is a heap of fun.

CF: Yes. So the DJs when - - are they ever part of downstairs? It's always done from upstairs?

TB: No we actually - - we move them downstairs often - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - Because it's kind of nice to be downstairs. It's a bit - - it's a bit give and take. It's lovely being in the thick of it, and you feel a lot more, but it also means the public can get to you. For example, last weekend, when the DJ box was on the stage, with bollards in front of it, and a lady came to make a request tripped on the bollard and threw her drink all over the mixer. Thus cutting out all of the sounds for half an hour until the mixer could be replaced. So, you know - - and you do get some pretty stupid requests.

CF: Really?

TB: Oh, yes.

CF: That you wouldn't even have?

TB: Yes. Or totally inappropriate. There was a period there a few years ago which was very annoying, where people would just come up with the picture of the song on their phone, and just shove it in your face. That was kind of disturbing.

CF: That's with the recent technology?

TB: Yes. I've got it on my phone, can't you just plug your phone into the mixer?

CF: Right.

TB: You go over there and dance and I'll do my job.

CF: And so when did you start then? And why?

TB: So in fact we opened that second nightclub bar on William Street, and I had a very definite idea of what I wanted to do musically, but none of the DJs really could get it right. So I got this, I'll do it myself. And I did. That was actually not for the nightclub itself, that was for the bar downstairs. Interestingly, that style of DJ-ing, which was

much more laid-back music for sitting around having a drink to chatting, maybe dancing a little bit, but not club dancing, dancing has become what you now get in bars and pubs and in fact the new room that we've built in Connections - -

CF: The posh room?

TB: The posh room as you call it, yes. Exactly what we play in there. So you know, it wasn't - - wasn't the wrong thing to do, it just was a little bit early.

CF: Yes.

TB: Because it was 20 - - 20 something years ago now. It was a bit before its time.

CF: And that was only more common now?

TB: Yes.

CF: Fundamentally?

TB: Yes. Very much so. Didn't exist then. Which is why none of the DJs knew how to do it, but bit by bit, I taught them a different way to do that. Not I taught them, I'm sure there were other people doing it, but I know there were other people doing it, I'd go overseas and I'd hear it in other places, just Perth didn't - - didn't understand that you could have a DJ, but not require it to be so intense an experience, but it could be not gentle, but an easier experience. And actually, into that mix we added R&B, which was something in Perth had been segregated. There had been R&B clubs, there used to be Juliana's underneath the Sheraton, the Hilton. And things like that. But they were very, very much black R&B clubs, and given that we don't have that much of a population of that here, they were always very small. I kind of figured that that music had a lot of crossover value, and was great to dance to, it was just dancing slower, because most dance music is at about between 120 and 130 beats per minute in the nightclub, whereas you know, that's not all music is at that speed. R&B is down at 100 bpm, and there's stuff at 110, 115, to play music that's slower, that you can still dance to, was something new.

CF: So there are two sorts of dancing now in Connections or just at different times?

TB: No, no, there - - the two rooms are very different. They have a very different vibe. There is one room that is entirely focussed on dancing, and it is your typical nightclub. It's big, it's loud, there's lots of flashing lights. The other room is smaller, more relaxed, there are people sitting down. There might be some people dancing, but the music is sort of lower level, and it's just, just it's easier perhaps, yes. So I learnt to DJ at that point, but out of that learnt to then - - because once you got the technique, you can mix any sort of music. And I learnt to be club DJ as well. Because I loved all of the music, and now I certainly have the technique down, which meant that then I could play in the main room in Connections, and I did for quite a while.

CF: How long?

TB: Well, if that was 20 years ago, it's 20 years.

CF: 20, yes. You still do it?

TB: I still do, yes. Yes. I tend to play in the other room more. I have more of an affinity to that. I might be a little bit older now. You know, I mean the main room is very much a young person's game and a young person's room.

CF: Is it more intimate in the other room?

TB: Yes. Yes. Much more. Well, it's a different sort. I mean the rooms are very much designed - - there is an intimacy to it in the sense that you can - - it is easier to talk, and get to know somebody than the big main room, but actually it's set up so that you get to meet lots of people. It's a very social, it's a very social room. The socialness of that, of the main room is physical.

CF: Yes.

TB: And tribal.

CF: Yes.

TB: Whereas the socialness of the second room is you're out there amongst it getting to meet people, having a chat, having a drink, having a bit of a shimmy, rather than a full on throw your arms around dance.

CF: But also the music is - - is good to listen to?

TB: Yes, and it's designed for that. It's designed for people to be able to talk and - - and to socialise in that manner, but not - - it's not - - it's certainly not background music. And that's the key thing, you know. The DJ drives the room. The DJ takes control of a room, and in a nightclub, in say the main room, of Connections, that's - - that's crucial. They are the ebb and flow of the room. They are pushing the room on. They are giving them a break to go and grab a drink, or have a breather, or going okay, well that group of people over on the left-hand side of the room have been kept happy for a while, but those people on the right don't look like they're having much fun. I think they're going to like this sort of music, let's take it over there for a little while too. You're really driving the energy of the room. What we've - - what we've done with that second room, and what we've developed has been using that same technique to move a room, and to build that energy in the ebb and flow of it. Just not at such a high intensity.

CF: Yes.

TB: So applying the same - -

CF: Principles?

TB: - - rules and principles, yes, for a socialising experience that's not as intense.

CF: Sounds much more complicated than I thought.

TB: It's much more complicated than most people think. I mean it's - - and I think that's the other thing, you know, when people come and make requests, and they want to

talk to you, and tell you about everything, it's, I'm actually working. It's an incredibly intense job, with an immense amount of responsibility.

CF: And a lot of forethought beforehand?

TB: Yes.

CF: You've got to plan that whole - -

TB: Yes. So for every hour that you do you spend several hours sitting at home in a pile of records, or on your computer with digital files.

CF: So is it a digital now? Or is it still vinyl ...(indistinct)...

TB: Not entirely.

CF: Not entirely?

TB: We run both in both rooms. And we have DJs - - the bulk of the DJs play digitally. Then I have a couple that play entirely vinyl, that refuse to play anything but.

CF: Sort of seems more funky now.

TB: Absolutely. Well, that's the funny thing, and then there are those like me that I'll play it on whatever media I have. I don't care. It's just about the sound that comes out. And it is actually easier to move with digital stuff than carrying around bags and bags of records. But yes, the irony of it is that after years in the wilderness, vinyl is back. And everybody thinks it's really cool. And everybody is buying vinyl again.

CF: And do you think that that will ever die out? I mean it's gone through its revival - - well, it's in its revival now, because I know various people are buying record players.

TB: Yes, and JB Hi-Fi has got rid of their CD section, but have a - - have a vinyl section, and all the kids are buying vinyl. They don't understand, but - - and yes, you know

those - - those that are learning to mix are largely learning to do it digitally, but the largest part of the act is the same. The act - -

CF: It would seem easier though, digitally.

TB: Yes, it is. Look, it can be really easy if in fact, if you want to, you can get a computer program that does all the work for you, that does that - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - speeding up, slowing matching the beats. All of that. I mean if you want, you can actually get a program that just does the whole lot for you, or you can just run Spotify. But - -

CF: They're not mixing the room, there not looking - -

TB: They're not driving the room, and that's the key thing.

CF: Yes.

TB: And I think that's the thing that people miss, the ability to use the music to set the tone, people understand that. They want to choose the right music for their place, and we've all been to the restaurant where the music is too loud and completely inappropriate. But I think everybody understands that as a concept, but the idea that a person playing that music has the ability to direct the evening's entertainment. Whether people or dancing or not, they don't have to be dancing, and that's another thing, we get the level that you - - oh, everyone would be dancing if you played this, my aim is not to make them dance. My - - if I were in the other room, perhaps. But in this room, my aim is not to make them dance. Great if they do, but you know, that's - - that's not my primary motivation for this space.

CF: So you've been through the various sorts of music, so what's current now?

TB: Well interestingly, it's - - it's more of - - of those things. ...(indistinct)...

CF: Mix?

TB: Yes. I mean there is elements of house, there is techno, there's been electro, there's been drum and bass, and we get all of those things, you know, there was always the joke that pop would eat itself. I think it's doing that well and truly, but that's the nature of it, because it is a very recycled art form, and we live in a very post-modern world artistically anyway, if there was ever a - - an art form that was cut out for that, it was dance music, because it was always about cutting and re-cutting forms that you already had so one of the key drivers of disco music was the introduction of the 12 inch single. People come into my house and I've got a room full of 12 inch records on the wall, and they go all the albums you've got. They're not albums, they're all singles. So we went from a period - - and I don't remember the exact date, but in the '70s where an album had a dozen tracks on it, six on each side, and a single was a 7 inch object with three minutes on it. And that's about how much music you can physically fit on a bit of plastic. Somebody had the brainwave that you could get, if you put it on a big record, a 12 inch record, you can get - - what, you could actually get half a record, you'd get half an hour of music on that. But if you still put it on 45, so it would get through quicker and you cut deeper, bigger grooves in there, you could get bigger, better sound and seven, eight, 10 minutes of music. So one of the things that disco provided was the 12 inch single, which was eight minutes of a three-minute song that you loved. That means you would get more of the song, you might get a breakdown in the middle of it where the drummer got a solo, it's probably the best way to describe it, or something else happened. Those drum breaks became key, because they are the bit in which you as a DJ got to go okay, there's no vocals, there is no vocals, I've got drums here, I've got drums here, I'll go out of this one and into this one and that's where that mixing thing has come, because you don't want to mix two people singing two different songs on top of each other, because it sounds like a car crash for the most part. But drums are drums, if this guy's just gone back to his percussion and the new guy's come in with his kit drum and stuff, you tie those two drums together, and that's what made mixing happen. So you got 12 minutes of music, 10 minutes of music, eight minutes of music, of the song and this song, but you cut off the two minutes there and the two minutes there, at the end of one and the beginning one, mix those two drums together and then you've got that seamless

transition.

CF: And does that size of single make the sound better, make it deeper, make it - -

TB: Yes, it's much - - yes, you can get a lot - -

CF: You can get a lot more dynamic range on to it. Because you can cut a bigger, deeper, wider groove, and actually get more information in there.

CF: And is it - - the - - I mean because you listen to music, because you studied music, is it a better sound than from the computer? Do you notice it?

TB: Well, yes and no. It can be as good on the computer. The thing is that most of the files that are used on computer are what are called compressed files. You can put more information on, but then it's a bigger file. So when we didn't have access to large amounts of memory on computers, they were compressed greatly. That is, a lot of that - - the depth of that music was pulled out. I always described it to the DJs when we did that transition, that compression is the act of you got a big basket of apples, you're walking down the street and you're throwing down - - throwing out apples as you go. You get to the end of the street, there was 100 apples at the beginning, there's 10 apples at the end. You still got a basket of apples. It's just not the same basket of apples you started with. That's the best way to describe compression, so in the same way that a 12 inch record had more information in it, compressed digital files have less information in. So you can, now that we have access to as much memory as we want, have the full thing on digital file, or you can choose to compress it. And I do a - - I actually every now and again, and in fact I tweet, when I bought the latest sound system we've got in there, the new sound system which was dollars 100,000 worth of gear and really wonderful, and I brought all the DJs in, and I brought them a copy of the same song on vinyl, on CD, on digital, uncompressed, and then digital compressed at a couple of levels and played them all one by one so that they could hear the difference in sound quality as you went down the line. And it's dramatic when you get to the really compressed file. And because you're amplifying it so much, you're just amplifying on the badness.

CF: Yes.

TB: Amazing.

CF: A hundred thousand bucks?

TB: Yes. It's wonderful. It sounds great. Very loud. If we're going to talk about the quality of the music - -

CF: Yes.

TB: - - And our reputation for having good music, it's going to need to sound good too.

CF: Yes. Yes. It is. So those DJs, have they got any musical background? I mean apart from a passion for it?

TB: Some of them. Others not. Some it's just intuitive.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, we've got a lot of DJs . We've had lots of DJs over the years. I think we've got 16 on the books at the moment. And that's an interesting evolution in - - in music that once upon a time a DJ would work a night, and he'd work eight hours solidly. Now they do three hours and complain that it's tiring. So you have three in a night. Or two in a night.

CF: Well that would make the whole vibe different too wouldn't it?

TB: Yes, it does.

CF: The person.

TB: But unfortunately you know, what its meaning is that - - and it's something that we'd never do, well, not while I have any hand in it, or say in it, is you will get people

rostering on six DJs in six hours so they play 12 songs really that is, which means they all play the same 12 songs because they all play the same favourites, so you either get the same thing again, or you just get - - you don't get any journey, so if you think about a DJ playing longer, and doing that mixing and driving the room, you can't really drive anything in an hour.

CF: No.

TB: You don't - - you don't get to unfold any sort of story. You know, I really did prefer it in the old days when a DJ played a long set, because they started off easy, and then they brought you up, and then might bring it back and then they'd go off into a different genre and then bring it back here, and then build it to a peak, and then there were a lot more peaks and troughs in it. If - - if the different DJs are working well, together, they produce that result.

CF: Yes, but six just seems extraordinary.

TB: Yes, that's which is why I'd never do

CF: Okay.

TB: Ever. But many of the kids, and they are kids, that are DJ-ing like that, anybody that's - - that's known any different, would just laugh and go I'm not playing an hour. There's no point. But everybody is a DJ now, because again, in the changing music, everyone has access to the music and we probably - - how are we doing timewise? ... (indistinct)... a little bit. Yes. So we go from that period that we talk about in the '80s where we were importing music from - - from America and England, and actually, at that time, the nightclubs owned the music. So the music belonged to the nightclub and the DJs played it. Somewhere around the time that I took over it started happening just before I took over, the DJs owned their own music and brought their own music in.

CF: So they didn't own the music as such? They just owned their - -

TB: Well, they would come in and play our music.

CF: Right.

TB: But those DJs were only working Connections really.

CF: Okay. Yes.

TB: Around the '90s things opened up, dance music exploded, our music crossed over far more than it ever had before, but at the same time, we were still buying vinyl, and you would go in and there were a couple of key record stores in town, principally DaDa's and Central Station in Perth, and Mills in Fremantle that dealt in dance music. They sold those 12 inch vinyls. And when they got a shipment in all the DJs would go rushing down there to get them, because you would get things, you know, records are pressed, particularly things like 12 inchers are pressed in limited numbers so they might only get three of a record, and if you were the one that heard it first and went this is a winner, you grabbed it, and then everybody else in town wanted it, particularly at that time, that's also when digital editing exploded. People were remixing and re-editing things in their bedrooms or you know, privately, they weren't under the record labels, so they were released as what was called white labels, and they were just that. They were often just a white label. They didn't have anything on them, so you had to listen to it to hear what it was, but it might have been somebody had taken a pop hit or something old, and re-edited and reworked it for the dance floor.

CF: And is that - - does that cross any copyright laws?

TB: Completely and utterly. Which is why they were white labels.

CF: Right.

TB: Yes. But there was a great trade in them. And in fact the record companies realised that and they had A&R people out and about listening for them, because if something was really good, they then approached, they'd find out where it came from, and they'd license it. So through the '90s there was this wonderful cross-fertilisation of all of that, but as DJs, we hung on to those and the DJs in Connections - - well, actually by

then, dance music had exploded, the DJs all over town and all over the world where hanging on to those, and you know, you were known for having those tracks.

CF: Yes.

TB: The thing that's changed is every kid's got access to everything. There's way too much. So all of those kids that are only playing one hour sets, there might be an amazing re-edit of such and such, but as soon as it's released, every two bit kids got a copy of it, so you're not special anymore. You know, DJs actually once really pulled crowds. People would follow DJs.

CF: Yes. So that's changed.

TB: Completely, yes. Yes. I mean, the big - - the big-league, the worldwide A League, still pull a crowd, but you'd be hard pressed to find a DJ that really pulled a crowd in this town. Again, those young ones would say we pulled the - - yes, we pull a crowd, but it would be six guys that have got an Instagram following that are - -

CF: Influencers?

TB: Yes. All of that stuff.

CF: Are the record shops still going?

TB: Not really. No. And the other thing, is we were buying it in as well. You know, I had three, four, five different record shops all over the world that I bought stuff from, a couple in London, one in Amsterdam, and yet, you know, in my spare time sit on the Internet trawling through records, listening to things, driving my partner wild. Do you have to play 30 seconds of every single thing? Yes, I do actually.

CF: So what's changed now? What do you think's going to happen now? Is Connections still out there?

TB: Very much so. We still push very hard to be at the forefront of music. We are

certainly not the edgiest of music, but we are known for - - we are still known for our music and our good time.

CF: Yes.

TB: We are known for - - we are known generally for our laid-back you know, everybody's having fun attitude, but we are also known for our having a really good party music. You know, look, I think it's probably closer to the mainstream now than it's ever been.

CF: But so is being gay.

TB: Yes. And the mainstream actually got closer to us rather than vice versa. I don't think - - I mean others might say otherwise, I don't think we ever sold out, I just think everybody caught on to - -

CF: What was good.

TB: What was good. Yes.

CF: Yes.

TB: You know, and I think that's - - that's very much the story of - - of dance music. You know, I think it's the same, it wasn't really ours to start with either. It was black music to start with, let's be honest, in the same way that rock 'n' roll was and jazz and the blues were, you know. This idea of cultural appropriation it's like, you know, was - - did this belong to gay culture, did this belong to black culture, well, yes it did in many ways. But again if we go back to that pop will eat itself, this idea of grabbing bits from all over, dance music now is largely constructed, it's not - - it's not a narrative form. The narrative is formed by the DJs mixing them together. The narrative occurs over the course of the night. It's less about a song. I think - - I'm not sure where the quote came from, ...(indistinct)... loved it, if rock 'n' roll is poetry, dance music is architecture, without the coolness of that. I think that idea of its constructedness - -

CF: Constructed, yes.

TB: It's not necessarily about a linear narrative, boy meets girl, boy meets boy, they meet, they do this, they live happily ever after. Then they break up. Then they don't live happily ever after.

CF: It's probably got different planks.

TB: It has lots of planks. But they are - - much of the music itself is much more broken up than that, and it's about the textures and forms and the vocals become used often as textures and as sounds rather than as a story being told. The story is told through the journey of the music.

CF: And the DJs - -

TB: Yes.

CF: - - writing of that journey or - -

TB: Yes. Very much so.

CF: - - Structuring that journey.

TB: Yes.

CF: Would you call the music - - I mean the music isn't gay music anymore, or is the club still - -

TB: Yes, look - -

CF: - - seen for excellence of music but - -

TB: Yes. It's certainly - - you know you're in a gay club. It has a certain something. You know, there's music we play that other people don't. There are musics that work with our audience that wouldn't work with other audiences. Still - - I think that's probably going to be the case.

CF: And what is that something?

TB: Couldn't tell you. Even I couldn't tell you. But it is the magic of what we do. You know, I do think it's part of that balancing act, and that we go back to that cool and camp thing, trying to do that. There are a lot of places that are very cool, and there are a lot of places that just play radio songs, because you can now just play radio songs and mix them all, because they are all - - they are all dance music now too, and actually all of them, and the other thing that we haven't gone into is electronic drums. The other thing happens from disco into the '80s is the drums become electronic, so that idea of mixing the beats together becomes very easy. So you think about a live drummer, he pushes and pulls with the speed of the music. If you're then trying to match up drummer A and drummer B, it's hellish. But if there is electronic drums, or a click track, which is a drum being fed to the drummer in his headphones - -

CF: Yes.

TB: ... Then the beats are kept on beat, and are perfect, so it's easy to mix in and out, and most music does that now. Not most music, there are a lot of musicians who would hate me for that, but large amount - - almost everything that gets played in the nightclub, certainly in the main room, and large amounts of what you hear on the radio is - - is recorded in that way, so it can be used in this way.

CF: Fantastic. Yes.

TB ...indistinct.....

CF: Thanks Tim.

END OF INTERVIEW