



# Brand name

Comedian Russell Brand's boundary-defying style of humor has gained him notoriety, fortune and Hollywood success. But a recent edition of his BBC radio show, in which Brand left obscene messages for one of Britain's best-loved comic actors, has led to controversy that not even he was prepared for

BY MIRANDA SAWYER  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

I interviewed Russell Brand in mid-October. Afterwards I trotted home thinking, "That was good fun: entertaining, a bit bizarre, a stimulating way to spend an hour." A few days later, the row about Andrew Sachs blew up. Within a week, Russell had resigned from Radio 2, as had the station's head, Lesley Douglas, Jonathan Ross had been suspended, and the BBC was dissolving — yet again — into hopeless self-flagellation. And my cozy chat with Russell about his new book and DVD seemed as relevant as rabies.

Now Russell has fled to Los Angeles; over there for a couple of film roles and to record a stand-up show. He isn't giving interviews, but he calls me from his hotel to explain himself, sounding understandably quieter than when we first talked. "I don't want to appear in any way cavalier," he says, which is funny coming from someone with his hairdo.

So, what happened?  
"Well, it wasn't that we went: 'Let's ring Andrew Sachs and boast about having sex with his granddaughter,'" he says.

"It was: 'Oh, he's not there, let's just leave a message' and then: 'Oh, look what we've done now.' There was no malicious intent — it was like an evolving, rolling thing. If you listen, I say sorry more than I say anything offensive — the message is mostly an apology. In fact, it's the acknowledgment of how wrong it was that is the source of the comedy. What's difficult is that it was completely devoid of malice, and there's been a retrospective application of cruelty and intention to cause offense."

Russell spoke about the sequence of events that led to the prerecorded show being edited but still being broadcast, saying it was his responsibility. "I don't think this is a situation where I'd go: 'Oh my god, why didn't you protect me from myself, Nic Philips [his producer]?' He acknowledged that big egos like his and Ross's can be hard to keep under control and that part of the fuss was because Ross earns so much money. He expressed regret over Douglas and Sachs (though he said nothing about Georgina Baillie, Sachs' granddaughter). What he wouldn't take responsibility for was the furor.

"I think what I do appeals to lots of people, younger and older, and certainly what it is, is unrestrained, unbridled and authentic. And on this occasion it offended Andrew Sachs and I feel bad about that and he's accepted my apology. But how that has been subsequently conveyed, which is as a vindictive act, then I didn't do the vindictive act. I did the daft thing, and that I take responsibility for. How it's been repackaged... I'm not at all responsible for that."

Will you change because of this?  
"I can't let it change what I do. If you're asking me to inhibit what is spontaneous and good about my performance, then I can't do that. I don't think anyone who loves what I do, who will have listened to the actual thing and not complained... I don't think they'll be affected by it. And then the people who don't like me will just think: 'Well, this is what we expected.' So despite how huge the fuss is, essentially it's meaningless."

I wonder. Meaningless, probably, for Russell. He has plenty of other projects on the go: including movies (with Judd Apatow and Oliver Stone), his *Guardian* newspaper football columns, now collected into a book, and his Channel 4 *Ponderland* show. In February, Comedy Central will screen an hour of his stand-up, to coincide with the US launch of his autobiography. Russell's immediate plan is to conquer America — and not having a BBC radio program won't hinder that.

But Ross' reputation has definitely suffered — he was so pathetically excited about Russell's sex life — and Douglas has lost her job, leaving Radio 2 to retreat back into golf-club-and-cardigan-land. The BBC will have to do something about how much it pays its



Paris Hilton, left, appears on stage with host Russell Brand at the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards held in Los Angeles on Sept. 7.

big stars. And if Sachs held any illusions about his granddaughter (and most grandparents do), then they've been well and truly shattered.

Still. Now that the fuss has begun to die down, perhaps we Russell Brand fans will be allowed to speak up. My name is Miranda Sawyer and I think Russell Brand is funny. I loved his spontaneous, anarchic radio show. I enjoy his filthy, off-the-hook stand-up. His autobiography, *My Booky Wook*, was impossible to read without laughing out loud. Naturally, I don't think he should spend his time leaving rude messages on people's answer machines, but that is not all he does.

For a start, he enlivens the world with his ludicrous dress sense. For our original, pre-Sachsgate interview, he arrived dressed entirely in black — jacket, leggings, bover boots and, yes, skirt — accessorized with diamante belts, clunking chains and enormous shades. Much taller, hairier and better-looking than I expected: a young George Best let loose in the Addams Family dressing-up box.

"Do you like my leggings?" he asks archly, turning an ankle. "I think the ruching, strangely, stops them from being too feminine. It's not often you can say that about ruching. Yes, they are ladies' trousers."

We are in a large, tastefully furnished room next to the photo studio. Russell is appreciative. "Now that I know this room is a possibility, then next time I have an interview it will have to be somewhere at least as good. It'll have to be in a ballroom with a Jacuzzi. And a hand maiden! Don't give me anything worse! The privilege has become the standard!"

Though he seemed slightly shy when he first arrived, it doesn't take much for Russell to get boisterous. Show him the smallest twig of a joke and he snatches it like a mad dog, running away with it as far as he can. It's hard to stop him, because what do you say? Russell's confidence comes from knowing himself inside out. There's no point in taking the mickey out of him for being an attention-seeking sex maniac, nor in pointing out he's an ex-junkie, a drama-school flunk who fancies himself despite his

ludicrous hair. He knows all this. He makes jokes about it. Plus, he's been in Narcotics Anonymous since December 2002 and so does that tedious 12 Steps thing of spending hours analyzing himself and his actions.

"I have a propensity for self-involvement. I can be very vain and I can be selfish and I'm totally aware of that," he says, settling himself into the leather sofa. "And I work on it literally on a daily basis, as part of my recovery from drugs and alcohol. I'm like: 'Oh no, that was a selfish thing to say. Oh no, I apologize, let me make amends.' So that is part of my life."

All of which takes on a different weight after he's spent a week saying sorry to one and all. Anyway, this navel-gazing means interviewing Brand is peculiar. Every question you ask him about himself, he's already considered. More, he's deconstructed it, put it back together, located an appropriate intellectual quote and tried to solve whichever trait of his personality made him act like that in the first place. He's very clever and uses language with panache, but his mind is less a steel trap, more a pin-ball machine when all the bonus balls are released at once. Exhilarating, but exhausting.

When I talk to him about his recent hosting of the VMAs (MTV Video Music Awards), for instance, where he drew flak for teasing the Jonas Brothers about their virginity and describing US President George W. Bush as that "retarded cowboy feller," Russell launches into a reply which, when I transcribe it, is more than 1,500 words long. To summarize: at the actual awards, he went down better than he'd expected, no matter what happened afterwards. He realizes the office of president is talismanic to Americans, even to liberal ones; he loves America, and understands it's going through a necessary crisis vis-a-vis race; and he thinks it's cynical to market a teenage boy band as virgins. "There's that Michel Foucault idea of sublimating sexuality, so promoting virginity is another way of putting sexuality at the forefront of popular culture. Like, 'They don't have sex.' What? They don't have sex?" It's hokey balderdash." See? Clever.

However, what's more interesting is how he starts his answer, which is with this funny/serious little speech. "I'm a very sensitive person," he says, "so I don't like to read or hear anything negative about myself, under any circumstances at all. To the point where I'm a difficult actor to direct, because if the director says anything other than, 'That was brilliant, amazing — how do you think of these ideas? Why, you're so clever and you're handsome...' I'm like: 'Oh fine, fuck you!' I'd feel hurt, but I'd also think, 'Leave me alone, I'm trying my hardest!'"

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## TECHNOLOGY REVIEW



Sony Ericsson's W705.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONY ERICSSON



Sony Ericsson's MBS-900 Bluetooth stereo speaker, with the W705 phone.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SONY ERICSSON

In 1979 Sony's Saitama Tech factory north of Tokyo produced the world's first Walkman cassette player. The Walkman revolutionized the way the world listened to music and now, almost 30 years later, the brand is still going strong. The latest and perhaps greatest in the Walkman lineup is the new Sony Ericsson W705, which was unveiled this week.

Branding its MP3 player phones as Walkmans, while being a stroke of genius, only began very recently. It was in 2005 when the first-ever Walkman mobile phone was released, the W800i. It is particularly ironic that first, the W800i suffered from quality of sound issues, and second that the latest offering bares a model number that suggests it is already out of date.

Fans of Walkman phones need not worry though: the W range of handsets has come a long way in the last three years. In fact, the quality of sound, build and software have been steadily improving, not to mention the aesthetics side, which has really excelled itself this time. This being Sony's last phone of the year should make it a safe and wise purchase. The last of the run is often the best, with fewer bugs, more memory

and a lower price tag. The sound quality has every chance of being impeccable, considering it builds on the audio of the W980, which was particularly praised for high-quality sound.

The W705 is a sleek aluminum slider phone featuring just what you would expect nowadays: high-speed Internet, Wi-Fi ability, Bluetooth, a huge screen, and a tonne of storage space for your music and videos. The geekier among you will be impressed by the HSUPA turbo-3G (marketed as faster than 3G), Stereo Bluetooth for use with new stereo Bluetooth headsets, 240 pixel by 320 pixel-resolution screen and a 4-gigabyte memory stick capable of holding more than 3,000 MP3s.

No modern mobile phone would be complete without a camera. The W705 ships with a decent-enough 3.2-megapixel camera that is, as usual, hampered by

an LED flash. Personally, I find that using an LED flash in low light to take pictures of my friends makes them look like zombies. Compare this to the K800i for example — which has a "real" flash, resulting in more human-like skin tones — and the photographic results are often disappointing. We can only hope that Sony will be able to combine the crystal-clear clarity of sound from the Walkman-based W range with the vivid picture quality of the Cybershot-based K range. Hopefully, next year will see this become a reality.

On the software side the W705 contains some very interesting and useful pieces of software pre-installed, so users don't need to worry about downloading applications themselves. One such program is Google Maps — this would have been really exciting had it not been done so recently by other

phones such as the iPhone and Google's G1. The W705 also boasts the ability to record directly from the camera and upload to YouTube, a relatively time-saving feature that will, however, probably be rarely used, considering that in most cases a video needs some sort of post-production before being uploaded. This application can also be used to view YouTube videos, which I'm sure will be heavily utilized by many.

Recently, Sony started to include sensors in its phones called accelerometers — think Nintendo's Wii — which has led to some interesting features as well as some gimmicky ones. If you turn the W705 around the screen will auto-rotate, which is extremely nice. If you shake your W705 in certain directions, you can get it to skip forward or back a track, which is interesting yet potentially

pointless. Of course, in the war against Nokia's N-series and Apple's iPod, any ammunition will do.

Which brings me to the W705's appearance. The astute among you may be thinking that this phone is a G705 with an aluminum casing. This is virtually true, but just like the G705 the W705 is beautiful in form. The design is sleek, and the keyboard that slides out from underneath the screen begs to be picked up and fiddled with. Just under the screen is a Motorola RAZR-style joystick presumably intended to make skipping through music easier and to make operation more comfortable. (Sony's joysticks have been rather crude in the past.) If, like me, brushed aluminum excites you, then this phone is extremely beautiful: a sleek, slender slider phone with a lot of power under the hood.

Interestingly, since Sony has included the ability to use stereo Bluetooth headsets (before now Bluetooth headsets were mono only, a terrible way to listen to music), it has also announced the MBS-900 Bluetooth stereo speaker, which means you can stream your MP3s from the W705 to a high-quality external stereo speaker. This is an excellent situation because the MBS-900 Bluetooth speaker can be carried around and placed anywhere, and your music can be streamed to it wirelessly over Bluetooth. Powering a party from your W705 can be a reality, so long as you have the external speaker and the battery power.

In conclusion, this is a powerful, attractive and capable mobile phone. Stereo Bluetooth has further improved upon the sound features of the W range. It comes recommended if you are looking for an MP3 player phone, although existing owners of Sony Ericsson Walkman phones may find too few improvements to convince them to upgrade.

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