

# Son Wilfred pays homage to father David Frost with podcast dynamite

Fifty years ago, legendary television host David Frost interviewed the most influential thinkers, politicians, and cultural icons of their time. Most of those tapes were lost for a generation. Until now. [Wilfred Frost](#) explains why he made The Frost Tapes



My dad died on 31 August 2013. I cannot believe he has been gone for seven years. It's a depressing thought to dwell on. He was 74 when he died but had been in good health. His death was sudden and unexpected, and came as a devastating shock to mum, my brothers, Miles and George, and I.

He was a titan of broadcasting – and the outpouring of love in the press in the UK and around the world after he died was truly amazing to see – but more than that he was an incredible father and husband. I had lost my dad many years too soon, and to this day that still hurts.

At that time I was planning a transition from finance to media to pursue a dream of being in front of the camera, something I had been working on behind the scenes for almost a year, and my brothers and I agreed it would make sense for me to take on dad's production company, David Paradine Productions, which he had founded in the 1960s when he was in his twenties.

In the early months, and even years, after dad died there were many personal things to deal with, and our first focus was a book on him, which came out in 2015. However, all aspects of our lives were interrupted – no, blown apart – when Miles died in July 2015, totally unexpectedly and, as it turns out, avoidably, from an inherited heart condition he got from dad. We set up the Miles Frost Fund in partnership with the British Heart Foundation as a result.

Mum, Miles, George and I had always wanted to celebrate dad's legacy, and do it justice, and essentially that is what The Frost Tapes podcast is. The series has taken more than seven years – an insane amount of time, work and luck – to get to this point.

Back in 2013, the Kensington offices for Paradine still had about a year or so to run on the lease, so Miles, George and I made the most of it. George moved his rum company, The Duppy Share, into the largest room; Miles took up one of the offices for his investment business, Frost Brooks Capital; and I parked myself in dad's office with piles and piles of documents to go through.



Frost huddles with guest Coretta Scott King, wife of Martin Luther King

The photographs on the walls were a constant reminder of the epic life he had led, and also the mammoth task that lay ahead. The offices were a large cost – the other expense was the storage units. There were four on the books that I knew about: London, New Jersey and two in Los Angeles. There was a lot on the agenda in those early months, and I didn't get out to check what was in the US storage depots until the summer of 2014.

I remember visiting the two large rooms at one of the LA storage sites with John Florescu, dad's great friend, who had also run his US operation between 1980 and the 2000s. We both got ill from the amount of dust we inhaled. Taking up the most space in this unit was lots of garish furniture from his former LA home – but it also contained stuff of amazing value, such as letters from J Edgar Hoover, Vice-President Agnew and [Martin Luther King](#)'s widow Coretta Scott King.

There were some tapes in there too, but most of the LA-based tapes were in the other depot, Pacific Title Archive, including hours of tapes from dad's interviews with the Shah of Iran and his titanic Persian project, Crossroads of

Civilisation, and his Guinness World Records' series. My trip to that second depot also led to a chance meeting with David Peck of Reelin In The Years Productions, who would become my archive partner and friend. His contribution to the process of rediscovery has been invaluable. As has the work of brilliant people who worked with dad such as John Florescu, Michael Rosenberg and Trevor Poots, and with me, like Richard Bedser and Nigel Sinclair.

Nine months after dad died, Trevor was contacted by a company in Cleveland, Ohio, called Classic Strategic Media. They had many more tapes of dad I was unaware of. For some reason dad had not been paying storage costs for a period of time just before his death. Anyway, Jerry Patton and his team at Classic Strategic Media were wonderfully helpful but said we had to collect the tapes immediately or they would throw them out; Peck excitedly arranged for collection of these tapes.

Classic Strategic Media had been dad's partners for *Talking With [David Frost](#)*, which aired on PBS for 12 years from the late 1980s and into the early 2000s, and included interviews with President George HW Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela, Prince Charles and Robin Williams. In addition, there were tapes for *The Next President with David Frost*, filmed in 1988, where dad interviewed all 12 of that election's presidential candidates – including Michael Dukakis, Bob Dole, Al Gore, and Jesse Jackson. But only 11 of those 12 interviews were broadcast. Then-senator [Joe Biden](#) would drop out of the race a few weeks after dad's two-hour conversation with him was recorded. Since that interview was not broadcast, the master tape was the only copy of the interview – and it was very nearly destroyed. The Frost/Biden interview was Episode 6 of the podcast, and dropped last week.





Frost and his wife Carina holding their newborn son Wilfred

But the biggest moment of rediscovery was *The David Frost Show*, which aired from 1969-72 in the US. It was a show made with Westinghouse that was syndicated across the US as opposed to being on one of the three national networks, NBC, ABC or [CBS](#). There were 750 episodes in total across three years. Dad was working fantastically hard during those years, not just delivering five shows per week in [New York](#), but also three per week in London. Astonishing! The show was a big success with the critics – it won two Emmy’s in fact – but had not been a massive ratings success, and so ran for only three years.

Westinghouse would later be bought by CBS and I managed to strike a deal with CBS to reclaim the control of those interviews. Those negotiations took a while but the deal was ultimately struck in late 2015. To be clear – many of those interviews had been used in the decades that followed – but it tended to be high-profile celebrities such as John Lennon and Yoko Ono, The Rolling Stones, and Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, rather than civil rights activist and politicians. Perhaps that was because the celebrity interviews were thought to have a higher financial value – I don’t know. But a huge

portion of those 750 episodes had been overlooked for decades, and the master two-inch tapes had sat gathering dust in their protective canisters in CBS's storage unit in Pennsylvania.

After executing the deal David went to collect the tapes – again with enormous enthusiasm. Only 380 of the 750 tapes remained. David and I worked out that it would cost more than \$200k if we tried to restore and digitise them all immediately. That meant we prioritised the big names first. Some – particularly those in unmarked canisters – we only got to this year once the podcast with iHeartRadio was in full swing. [America](#)'s first black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm, (in Episode 3 Women's Liberation) and Martin Luther King JR's widow, Coretta Scott King, (in Episode 2 Panthers and Police) I only heard for the first time a few months ago.



David Frost celebrates his birthday with his family

And then – in 2016 – David discovered 50 copies of the lost tapes in the most unlikely of places – The [Richard Nixon](#) Presidential Library. It turns out that the Nixon administration used to make recordings of certain guests appearing on TV shows during his time in office. His administration had recorded 70

episodes of *The David Frost Show*, 50 of which we did not have, and would not have today if not for his administration's recordings. And the list of guests on those episodes – names like Huey Newton, Eugene McCarthy, Jane Fonda, George McGovern, Jesse Jackson – suggests it was keeping tabs on opponents rather than admiring allies – though of course we cannot know for sure.

Either way, there is a certain irony that Nixon was drawn to dad's shows a few years before their famous 1977 interview. Nixon was well aware of dad and his abilities before that interview, slightly contrary to the way the fabulous *Frost/Nixon* movie portrays things. In fact, on that note, I loved coming across this line towards the end of his marathon 28 ¾ hours with dad:

**Nixon:** “I can only say that as we conclude I think your researchers, to whom we've referred sometimes with a little, shall we say, critical note, have done a very workmanlike and competent job and in preparing questions that you have done yourself. I know an enormous amount of work on this because you just you can't just sit there and read those questions, you got to think them through. You can't have a follow up question until you know what the answer is. So I congratulate your researchers on that. As far as I'm concerned I want to say to that you've outgunned us in that respect.”

That candid comment from Nixon, which has never aired, was spot on. I cannot wait for our final episode to drop, which focuses on the famous apology dad drew out of Nixon in 1977. It was dad at his very best – an extraordinarily brilliant displaying of interviewing. And – I would argue – the real thing is even more compelling and dramatic than the movie.



Frost, with cigarette in hand, speaks with George Harrison and John Lennon, also smoking on 'The Frost Programme' in 1967

Back to *The David Frost Show* tapes. *The New York Times* wrote about Nixon becoming an accidental archivist a few weeks ago, and since then someone has come forward to say they have two master tapes containing interviews with Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby. I doubt we will ever find the rest of the missing 300 tapes, but maybe a handful more. That so many remain missing highlights to me the great value in what we do have.

Regardless of whether these tapes are new to today's generation or not – the content is extraordinary. As I watched tape after tape my jaw would repeatedly drop to the floor. These were conversations that could be happening in 2020. From racial injustice, to women's liberation, to the battle for a free press, to the politics of hope and fear – I just couldn't believe the parallels to today. And that is very much what we decided to focus on for this series of the podcast: the focus is hearing the incredible list of cultural icons, civil rights activist and political leaders of 1960s and 1970s America that have lessons for us today.

I had a couple of failed attempts to get different versions of this project off the ground in 2018 and 2019 – something I now see as a stroke of luck – because 2020 is the right moment to revisit these tapes. It also meant I got to



work with the outstanding team at iHeartRadio, which has done a spectacular job pulling this altogether with me.



Like father, like son: Wilfred Frost of CNBC interviews Pence in February in the vice-president's West Wing office at the White House

While the focus is on what was said on these tapes by dad's guests, if people also observe that all of their quotes were elicited by one man, and how masterfully he got these people to open up, then that would be a wonderful conclusion too.

It is hard to pick a favourite episode, and I hope people have enjoyed the six episodes that have dropped so far. As a broadcast journalist, I do adore Episode 7 on the Power of the Media. It contains some amazing and often overlooked portions of dad's 28 ¾ hours with Richard Nixon from 1977. Those interviews were rightly remembered for the Watergate sessions, but there is so much other great material, which we sprinkle through different episodes of the whole series. But the media stuff stands out.

**Frost:** "Well maybe you should have been president of a network or chairman of the *Washington Post*. Do you feel you've had more power?"

**Nixon:** "Oh yes. Let's talk about power a moment. I think it's very significant. It's significant in your country and it's very significant in America. The greatest concentration of power in the United States today is not in the White House. It isn't in the Congress and it isn't in the Supreme

Court. It's in the media, and it's too much because it is too concentrated in too small a circle.



Frost interviews legendary boxer Muhammad Ali in 1974

"Let me say particularly in the television area, in the networks, it's too much. It's too much power and it's power that the Founding Fathers would have been very concerned about.

"Now I understand I am not advocating censorship, but I would advocate, for example proliferation. I would advocate cable television. I would advocate and I do stand for, the right of a president, a vice-president, or a member of Congress instead of taking an unmerciful beating and an unfair beating from network commentators, or columnists and newspapers if they are important, to have the right to fight back in the same medium, be given equal time. I think he should. And I think it's nonsense and hypocritical frankly too for those in the media, after they dish it out, to say how he's trying to destroy freedom of the press he's trying to repress us because now and then he says the story isn't accurate, or a story's unfair.

“... believe me, when they take me on or when they take any public figure on, Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, I think the public figure ought to come back and crack them right in the puss.”

In the media episode, we also hear, almost eerily, from Roger Ailes in an interview that has not been heard since it first aired back in 1969. Ailes would go on to advise many Republican presidents, and then create Fox News. In this interview, he was fresh off helping Richard Nixon get elected.

**Frost:** “You're quoted as saying in the book, Roger, 'This is the way they'll all be elected forever more. The next guys up will have to be performers.' Did you say it? And do you feel it?”

**Ailes:** “Well, yeah, I said it, and...the people will not accept a candidate who comes on television and stumbles. If he comes into their living room and falls on the rug, they probably won't vote for him. So he should have the confidence of knowing that when a camera's staring at him, or he's using a microphone, he knows how to do it with confidence and look good. And there's nothing wrong with that.”

“I think the American people have a better shot at electing a president on live television, where they can see and hear him. If they don't like what he's saying...then they can turn against him.”



Cesar Chavez being interviewed on 'The David Frost Show' in 1969

The other stand-out interview in the media episode is with “the most trusted man in America”, Walter Cronkite, who was probably America’s most famous newsman. Dad interviewed him in 1969, aged 31, and was very much the apprentice interviewing the legend as they discussed at length the art of broadcast journalism. They discussed the importance of freedom of the press, the impartiality of news in the face of pressure from politicians, keeping advertising pressure off his back, strong sourcing, and much more.

Just a few years before the Watergate scandal would emerge, dad asks Cronkite: “Is it possible for huge things to be concealed?” Cronkite responds: “Yes I think it is, but this is the job of the press, to uncover as much of that as we possibly can, to be sure that these things aren’t concealed. I don’t think they can be concealed forever; I think they will come out, the truth will out.”

I was taking notes as I watched that interview back – there was so much to learn from it. It was odd for me to see dad playing the role of apprentice – he was very much a legend already by the time I was born.

As well as reviewing hundreds of interviews dad conducted, I have also reviewed every recording of interviews he gave so that we could use him as a narrator where possible (and keep my voice to a minimum!) It also allows us to hear from dad reflecting on his craft – and you will see that I have selected some of the quotes that stood out to me of dad, in his own words, talking about what makes for a great interviewer. (These quotes have come from many different sources). Above all, he was genuinely interested in people and that always came across to his guest and the viewer.

The other key factor of his success was time with his guests. He had a remarkable ability not only to secure the most high-profile guests from all walks of life from both sides of an argument – but to secure extended periods of time with them. The dynamic has changed today. Nobody can get 60 or 90 or 120 minutes uninterrupted with a senior politician today (let alone 28 ¾ hours!)



In a recent interview with Mike Pence I was given 12 minutes. I stole an extra four minutes, and the total 16 minutes felt long for today, and also led to ire from the VP's team. The balance of power has shifted away from the media compared with the 1960s and 1970s. There are so many ways politicians can reach people today, most notably by recording their own message and posting it to their fans without filter. President [Trump](#) has 87.2m followers. Dad's interview with Richard Nixon – the most watched political interview of all time – was watched by half that – 45m people. Most daily or weekly news shows can only dream of a couple of million viewers.

However, I believe that the viewer, and the voter is getting frustrated. They are fed up with shouting matches and of unrealistic social media posts that lack credibility. The viewer is being underestimated, and the pendulum will swing back. And I hope to play a small role in trying to deliver the type of interviews that viewers want to see in the decades ahead.

*The Frost Tapes podcast is available on Apple podcasts, or wherever you get your podcast. Six episodes are already available. The Power of Media drops on 20 October and Frost/Nixon Revisited follows on 22 October*

## DAVID FROST ON THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW

### **Be genuine**

Nobody else can write the questions for you. A talk show rests on reality, on seeing that the interviewer is interested or bored by the person he is interviewing. You can't con people in an interview – if you're bored and your eyes glaze over, they will glaze over too. You've got to be born with a sense of curiosity and fascination of what makes people tick.

### **Draw them out**

It's that old Aesop's fable about interviewing. The wind and the sun having a competition to get someone's coat off, and the wind huffs and puffs and the man just draws his coat close around him. Whereas the sun just shines warmly, and the man takes his coat off. Really, you've got to create a context in which people feel like taking their coat off.

## **About them not me**

The most important task for an interviewer is to be a catalyst – that is what he is first and foremost. He is not a principal.

## **Research**

The more preparation you do the more it liberates you to go with whatever happens.

## **Genuinely impartial**

By the time I could vote, which at that point was 21, I was already doing 'That Was The Week That Was', and I realised it could be a real millstone for people to say: 'I happen to know he voted for so and so' – so it was better to stay absolutely independent. I have never found a party I could support 100 per cent, and so, if I voted, I would vote for the man. I know that is doomed. However wonderful your local candidate he cannot buck the system, but I would vote for the quality of the man if I was voting. I am pretty centrist, left of centre on some issues, but I am very much an independent.