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The *quite* Big Interview:

Action woman Pamela on

PAMELA Ballantine was born in Belfast, started her career as a secretary in local radio station Downtown Radio, and was soon filling in as a newsreader and programme presenter while still doing her day job in the office. She then joined BBC Radio Ulster as a full-time presenter for five months before joining UTV as a continuity announcer. In the late 1980s, she became UTV's agricultural correspondent, reporting for Farming Ulster for four years. She also presented Six Tonight as a stand-in for Kate Smith, and in January 1993 became one of the main presenters on UTV Live at Six, as well as presenting programmes such as Telethon, The Ulster Schools Quiz and Hot Pursuits. By 1999, Pamela switched from the UTV Live newsdesk to the sofa of UTV Life, the daytime magazine programme which covers all aspects of life, the universe and everything, from movies and concerts to health and legal issues, not to mention the fact that you never know who is going to pop in for a chat on the yellow sofa. A well-known fan of speed on wheels, in 1993 she became one of the regular reporters and presenters for UTV's rallying series, RPM, where she has reported on races across Ireland and throughout the world. Since that wasn't close enough to the action, in her spare time, she has acted as a co-driver in competitive car rallies across Ireland.

Pamela was formerly married to Downtown Radio presenter John Paul Ballantine. More astonishingly than all that, though, she's the only person outside my mates at university who's heard of Pavlov's Dog.

What's your earliest memory of childhood, and what sort of childhood did you have?

Being in bed with measles and missing the big snow of 1963, when I was about four or five. I never got small sicknesses. When other people got food poisoning, I got dysentery, so when I got measles, I went blind. Mum was a nurse before she got married, and Dad was MD of C&C. So I grew up surrounded by drink, although it was soft. Big brother Peter lives in Hong Kong with wife and four kids, and wee sister Susie is married and living in Comber. I was a bit shy, but a bit of a tomboy.

What are your best and worst memories of childhood?

Dad built a bungalow in Ballyhalbert with two acres of wild garden, and we were down there every weekend and summer. I remember doing that kids' thing of going out in the morning, and only coming in when you were hungry or it was time for bed. My wee sister would probably disagree, because when I was 10 she was five, and a complete pain because she wanted to go everywhere with us, so I apologise now for locking her in the coal shed on a regular basis. I remember packing up and going down with Susie in a carrycot in the back of Mum's mini, and me crammed into the front with Pete surrounded



HAPPY TIMES: Pamela and her dad, with her mum behind

by bags. It was only 30 miles away, but it was like an expedition to Outer Mongolia. When we moved house in Belfast, Dad had to sell the bungalow, but I was out with a friend cycling down there a while back, and discovered that her mate lived in our bungalow. It was a bit rude to call and ask for a look around, but I must do some time. The two acres now have four houses on them, and the turquoise tiles have gone, but apart from that it looks much the same. I remember setting off on bicycles with Pete and one of his mates to Portaferry. Then we thought: "That didn't take long, let's take the ferry and go on to Castle Audley." Then we thought we may as well go on to Downpatrick, and before we knew it, we'd cycled all the way around Strangford Lough. Of course, by the time we got home, Dad had been on the wind-up telephone, number Ballyhalbert 321, and the search parties were out. So all good memories. Worst one was for Dad, when he leaped off the end of the harbour straight into a shoal of jellyfish.

Which school subjects were you top and bottom of the class in?

Well, I was at Richmond Lodge from four to 17. I was an average pupil to the extent that if I wasn't doing the job I'm doing today, nobody would remember me. Failed my 11-plus, and was gutted, because I'd done really well in the tests. I got nine O-levels, then went for a year to Evendine Court College of Home Economics for Young Ladies in Worcestershire, which if it had been in the Swiss mountains would have been a finishing school: child care, home maintenance, cooking, public speaking, typing, dressmaking, self-defence, car maintenance, woodwork, flower arranging. And that was just before breakfast. It was set in the Malvern Hills, so you could see Morgan sports cars going out for test drives in the mornings, and was a fantastic place which gave me the confidence to overcome my shyness and

might be filming a fashion feature instead. I love motorsports and doing RPM. There aren't many downsides, apart from standing on a cold, rainswept corner filming for hours just to get one shot.

How did you end up doing Farming Ulster, since you're not quite a ruddy-cheeked daughter of the soil?

I was just in the right place at the right time. Jackie Berkeley used to present it with Eamonn Holmes, and she was pregnant, so she went into the boss to see about maternity leave, and I literally walked past the door at that moment. So I went straight from continuity to presenting that. Luckily I came under the wing of a fantastic man called John Johnston, who was the Mr Agriculture of broadcasting. Walking through Balmoral Show with John was like being in the presence of royalty. He would just chat to you on the way to the story, and by the time you'd got there you'd be completely briefed, without knowing it. It was still completely terrifying, but in those days you had camera, sound, producer, director, PA and lighting electrician. These days it's quite often just me and a cameraman and in some broadcasts it's just a reporter and a camera. Please God let that never happen here.

What do you think you'd be doing if you weren't doing what you do?

I haven't a bald-eyed notion. Maybe Alan Sugar's PA, sending apprentices through the door. I feel very guilty when I'm asked to address careers conferences because I just snuck into what I'm doing.

Favourite book?

Anything with serial killers and gratuitous violence in it. Anything by Val McDermid, who looks like everyone's favourite granny, but dreams up some of the most horrifically graphic choices of murder weapon. It's the quiet ones you have to watch, you see.

Film?

The Quiet Man. I adore John Wayne, and it's so beautifully done, especially the fight scene. And Scarface, which was so ahead of its time.

First record?

I had a voucher for Harrison's Records, so I bought two together, the Number One and Number Two of the Day; My Sweet Lord by George Harrison and The Pushbike Song by The Mixtures. How embarrassing. My brother was the music lover, so through him I was into all the weird and wonderful stuff: early Horslips, early Genesis with Peter Gabriel, Frupp, Pavlov's Dog.

Pavlov's Dog? You mean the Missouri group who released the brilliant Pampered Menial and At the Sound of the Bell, then disappeared without trace?

Absolutely. I still have both LPs. Not to mention the Coke can I lifted off the stage at one of those, great Horslips gigs in the Whitla Hall at Queen's. No, wait, I think I finally threw that out when it grew its own variety of penicillin.

You've said that your three desert island discs would be Living on a Prayer by Bon Jovi, Layla by Eric Clapton and the Horslips' Greatest Hits. Why's that, now?

Horslips I've mentioned. Bon Jovi are classic pop rock, not to mention as cute as get out. Living on



Geoff Hill talks to Pamela Ballantine

life, love and fast cars

a Prayer is to be played when I'm coming in at my funeral, and everyone has to sing along, and I'm going out to Greatest Gig in the Sky. And Layla is such a classic track, but you've got to play it all the way through, including the instrumental.

Heroes and villains?

My Dad's a hero. He started at 14 as a tea boy at C&C, had great mentors, and retired as chairman. But he believed in neither a borrower or a lender being. I remember all my friends at 17 passing their driving test and being given cars, and I threw a complete teenage strop because my Daddy wouldn't buy me a car. "When you can afford to buy and run a car, then you can have one," he said. He was diagnosed with cancer 11 years ago, and died two weeks later. That was very hard. Villains? The only one I can think of is someone I worked for at the BBC, when I had my own radio programme for five months. I came in so excited on my first day, to be greeted with the words: "I didn't want to employ you, so you'll have to prove yourself, right?" My life was hell for the next five months, then I was called in on my day off and sacked. But if I hadn't been booted out, I wouldn't have ended up here.

Best Bond?

I have Daniel Craig as my screensaver, and it's got nothing to do with him coming out of the sea in those trunks. I liked Timothy Dalton as well. I do like the darker side of Bond, so there's obviously something strange about me, that I like serial killers and dark things. I am really quite a jolly girl, honestly.

Dream car? Is that what you drive?

At the moment I covet an Audi R8. I got to drive one around a car park, and I spent most of the time blipping the engine just to hear the sound. And Lamborghiniis, just because I like posing, really. I saw one in Puerto Banus last year, and the registration was 1PB. If that's not a sign, nothing is. I've had a Nissan 350Z for three-and-a-half years, and it's hilarious driving it tail out and sideways on slippery roads and going: "Oops, a woman of my generation shouldn't be doing this". Loved my Toyota MR2 Mark Two as well, but first one of all was a Mini Clubman, DIW 1239, called Stanley, because it was the colour of tomato soup, as in Baxter. Exhaust fell off the first day I drove into work, and like all Minis, when it rained, it stopped working.

What's the most fun you've had in a car?

I'm lucky enough to have sat with some top rally drivers, and their skill is fantastic. You're heading towards a tree flat out and thinking: "I'm going to die", and then you're past it saying: "How did that happen?"

And I was with Robert Dunlop in a great charity day at Kirkistown called Rally of a Thousand Entries. Every driver and co-driver who entered paid £100 and £60. Now, obviously you couldn't have 1,000 entries, but Plum Tyndall turned up in the RPM people carrier with six co-drivers dressed as cardinals and vicars to keep the Revs up, and a double-decker bus entered with 60 co-drivers. I was in a Mark II Escort with Robert, who'd never driven a rally car before, and got in wearing a boiler suit and his motorbike helmet and said: "How the **** do you start this thing?" We ended up heading flat out in fifth into a gravel hairpin, and doing doughnuts the whole way around the circuit. Great driver, and a genuinely nice guy. Only thing he was ever scared of was



CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: in dad's Jag with Pete and mum

being on one of his wife's horses. It was amazing being at the North West for the minute of silence for him. Even the seagulls were quiet.

Any unrealised motoring ambitions?

To go around a track in a Formula One car, or to be velcroed, superglued and welded on the back of a racing bike and go around a circuit.

Are you still on good terms with your ex?

Very much so. And with Tina, his wife, who works here. We were married for nearly 10 years, but just thought no in the end, and I upped and left one day. I'm with a chap called Alan at the minute, and it's all going very well, but I'll be 50 this October, and I don't know quite what to call him. Boyfriend? Partner? Significant Other? Ideas on a postcard, please.

Vices and virtues?

I'm obsessively tidy. Can't cope with mess. Lack of patience. Don't suffer fools gladly. I'll do anything to avoid a row. Very competitive. I had a great sense of failure when my marriage failed. Virtues: loyalty, and like to do things to the best of my ability.

Regrets: have you had a few?

Only actions that may have hurt people at the time. I shouldn't have done the Northern Bank raid, in retrospect.

Who would play you in the film version of your life?

It would have to be somebody who didn't take life too seriously. Maybe Sandra Bullock, or Kathy Bates. Judi Dench for the older version. Actually, Helen Mirren's hair could play me; that would do it.

Dog or cat?

Dog. Cats make me sneeze. They are devils, and they go straight to the person in the room who hates them.

Morning or evening?

Evening, vegging out in front of the TV. I'm a very

lazy person.

Favourite time of year?

Cold, crisp autumn mornings, when everything is earthy and mossy, you can smell the leaves and grass and the colours are so vibrant. Great hacking days. I love proper seasons, and definite weather.

Pet hates?

Politicians. Hypocrisy. Lies. People who put other people down.

If you had a time machine, what year would you go back to?

When I could have been a lady in a manor, with a big frock and servants, but with today's mod cons. I was really happy at Evendine, which was a life-changing experience, and when I made a lot of friends. Mind you, we had a reunion last year, and they were all wearing Hush Puppies and A-line skirts. How did that happen?

If you were a colour, what would it be?

Pink. A bright, warm pink.

Tell us something no one knows about you.

There's a family buried under the patio. Don't mention them, because it cost me a fortune relaying the tiles.

Sum up your lesson for life in a sentence.

To thine own self be true. I like to think I've lived like that. Apart from the times when I was a bitch, a monster and a stuck-up wee madam, but I was only acting out what I thought I should be, rather than what I really was.



PAMELA'S NEW RELEASE OF LIFE

After 26 years with UTV, the ever popular presenter has never been in a better place.

By **Audrey Watson**

Pamela Ballantine is popping up all over the place these days. As well as continuity presenting and reading the news, the UTV woman is out and about around the province fulfilling her new role as the station's ambassador.

"It's a loose job title that covers a lot of things," says Pamela. "I'm still appearing on screen regularly, but also attend and organise events on behalf of the company and travel around meeting viewers and getting UTV out into the community, which is great fun."

Currently Pamela is co-ordinating the Ulster section of the People's Millions — ITV's annual charity giveaway in association with The Big Lottery Fund.

Over the course of five nights, starting on November 23, local community groups will compete to win £50,000 each.

Pamela explains: "Each evening, two projects will be championed by me and another presenter and go head-to-head in a public vote to win the money. We've received a phenomenal amount of applications this year and I was involved whittling the entries down to the last eight."

"On the final night, there will also be a bonus £50,000 which will be awarded to the group that received the most votes during the week, but lost out in the head-to-head vote."

"In total £250,000 will be given away."

One of Northern Ireland's best loved media personalities, Pamela is probably best-known for UTV Life, the popular lifestyle programme which was axed earlier this year and, although she does admit to missing sharing the sofa with Frank Mitchell, says her current role isn't that far removed from what she was doing before.

"We are still getting calls from people who miss UTV Life," she says. "But The Seven Thirty Show is keeping the flag flying for lifestyle and with news not being quite as heavy as it used to be, there are a lot more lighter type features in the main news programmes and I've been able to do quite a few of those."

The major changes at the station earlier this year and departure of quite a few household names (including Ivan Little, Adrian Logan, plus Pamela's UTV Life colleagues, Jeannie Johnston and Siobhan McGarry), attracted plenty of negative media coverage and even Pamela herself was rumoured to be facing the chop at one stage, so was she not tempted to take the money and run?

"It has been a great period of upheaval," she admits. "But it's home — it's where I've been for 26 years. They made me an offer to stay on and fulfil this role and it's been huge fun, especially as it's the station's 50th birth-



THROUGH THE YEARS: Pamela is a very familiar face



NATIONAL TREASURE: Pamela says she's glad to be grey



SO IN LOVE: With her partner, businessman Alan Graham

day this year and there are lots of events and things going on that I'm involved with."

Born and bred in Belfast, Pamela began her career as a secretary with Downtown Radio, before finding herself in the right place at the right time one day when no one was available to read a news bulletin.

"In those days, they didn't have news-readers," she recalls. "Instead reporters read the news, but one day they were all out on stories."

"Someone said, 'That secretary can speak a bit, stick her on', so I read the bulletin."

Soon Pamela was working alongside presenters Lynda-Jane Campbell and Candy Devine, before landing an early morning programme of her own.

Considering her friendly and down-to-earth manner, it comes as a bit of a surprise to learn that she attended 'finishing' school in England.

"That's a bit of a tongue-in-cheek description," she laughs. "If it had been in Switzerland it would have been a finishing school, but its full title was Evendine Court College of Home Economics for Young Ladies."

"It was an unusual move, but at that stage, I hadn't much of a clue what I was going to do with my life."

"I had attended one school (Richmond Lodge, now Victoria College) from the age of four until 17 and was handless when it came to cooking and looking after myself."

"My mum heard about Evendine and so off I went. It was a great all-rounder and taught everything from cooking, cleaning, dress-making and public speaking to car maintenance, self-defence and first aid."

"It was actually great fun."

"I never had any desire to go to university, so when I came back to Belfast, I completed a private secretaries course at the then College of Business Studies, which led to the job at Downtown."

A brief and unhappy spell as a presenter with BBC Radio Ulster followed her time at Downtown, and then Pamela found her home at UTV in 1983.

"It wasn't the happiest of experiences," she says of her time at the BBC.

"There was a personality clash between me and the then head of department who didn't want to employ me at the start, but it worked out very well because whenever I left, UTV had just advertised a job in their continuity department and I've never looked back."

Over the years, as well as UTV Life, Pamela has presented the game show, Ulster Schools Quiz, Hot Pursuits and the rally programme, RPM. And it was her love of cars that introduced her to her partner, businessman Alan Graham.

"We had known each other for years through motor sport," says Pamela. "He was into his rallying and we had mutual friends and had always got on really well."

"About two and a half years ago, we thought, 'What are we doing?' And we've been together ever since."

Married before to former Cool FM boss, John Paul Ballantine (who is now the husband of Pamela's UTV colleague, Tina Campbell), Pamela isn't ruling out walking up