

## **THE BIG INTERVIEW:**

### **TIM LOVEJOY SPEAKS TO BENJAMIN LAMY ABOUT FOOTBALL, MUSIC, HIS NEW BOOK AND WHY HE LEFT SOCCER AM.**

Tim Lovejoy – formerly of Soccer AM. It has a certain ring to it, a bit like The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, but of the sporting arena. Lovejoy, as he is known and revered by thousands of football-mad, beer-swilling folk, is more than just a well-known television presenter, but is a football icon in his own right that gave the people what they wanted: three hours of unadulterated goals, skills, jokes, interviews, music and laughs on a Saturday morning like no other show has ever been able to match – and, what is more, watched by football fans and footballers alike – the ultimate accolade.

Our interview got off to a slightly inauspicious start: “You must be pleased to speak to a high-class newspaper for a change?”

“Exactly. You’re a tax-dodger aren’t you? A parasite on society”.

Looks like he has got me sussed already. In fact, one of the great achievements of the Lovejoy era was the emergence of a number of catchphrases which for some reason got embedded into our common language. The aforementioned ‘tax-dodger’ is one, there is also the word ‘bouncebackability’ which made it into the Oxford English dictionary, although my MS Word spellchecker disagrees. Amateurs.

“So I went on your Myspace page the other day to do a bit of research. I didn’t realise you had 80,000 friends”. I was quickly corrected. “85,000”

“Well what happens if they all want to borrow your car at the same time?”

“You know what I did? One day I did an experiment and I invited 64,000 friends out for a drink”.

“How many turned up?”

“50. So they’re not really my friends, so it’s a bit of a sham. That was good fun, I’m going to do it again. No one believed I would actually turn up and I just turned up and had a bit of a laugh”.

Lovejoy at his best – it is a rare thing for international television personalities to mix so freely with the people, but then I get the impression that he would be happy talking to anyone about his twin passions of football and music.

As for his new job as the host of David Beckham’s Soccer USA on Channel 5, the ratings have clearly not been able to match those of his Soccer AM heyday, but then for a half hour programme on the American MLS league, it is hardly surprising. Still, things are not all bad: “Do you know what we’re planning on doing, it’s really bizarre, but in America people are watching it on the internet and we’re planning on making it next year for the Americans. We’re in negotiations at the moment and then we’ll turn it into an hour show”.

When our discussion turns towards the internet Lovejoy seems to be in his element: “Online’s brilliant isn’t it! These days people just, once a show finishes, we don’t know who, but someone just sticks it straight up on the internet. People (in America) are watching it for the MLS because we’re talking about them. Bizarrely the right people are watching it and now we’re in negotiations to make it for them”.

As for the MLS itself, Lovejoy thinks the main difference between it and the Premiership comes down mainly to organisation “What it’s lacking is, you know, like the standard’s not as

good, we all know that, but the thing they're lacking mainly is good management. Twenty seven goals a week from a few matches – it's madness. If they get some good managers they'll be able to increase the standard".

"So the World Cup's been on – the Women's World Cup – have you been watching that?"

"Yeah. I have..." there's a slight pause and I prepare myself, sensing a bit of banter.

"What did you think?"

"I think...um...it's unfair that all the women goalies have to play with lead in their boots, they don't seem to be able to get off the ground any of them. The other thing is you know I don't want to be sexist, but I feel sorry for them – why do they have to play with women's referees? If they're not good enough for men's football why do women have to put up with them?" There's a pause as we check on the respective sides of our phone line whether any women might have overheard us. "But you know I'm kind of impressed by the standard, but it's so, like in international football with men it's not so one-sided. That German (women's) team looked unbelievable. The problem with women's football in this country is that they ally themselves with football clubs and football clubs aren't interested. If they were called Clapham FC and not allying themselves to Arsenal or Chelsea they would have done a lot better". Possible backlash averted.

"One of the best bits about being an international T.V. personality must be the perks that come with the job – but could you ever share a box with Roman Abramovich?" My attempted Lovejoy-esque gag is spotted straight away. "Can I share one? You mean would I like to sit in one with him? Apparently he used to watch Soccer AM when I was on". I wasn't expecting that. "Yeah so I've been told. I like Roman because he's given loads of money to Chelsea" said with a chuckle, though actually Lovejoy is genuinely in favour of top dollar investment in the Premiership: "Whether the right people are investing or not I'm not sure, but what I do know is they want to invest in our product which means we've got the best cheese on the cheeseboard...we're the best league.

"So what's going to happen to Chelsea this season then?"

"Um...I think we'll probably win the league...um...Champions' League...maybe the FA Cup and Carling Cup".

"So you're quite pessimistic then for this season...?"

"You know I just think Jose's a great manager, I think we've got great playing staff...we're just a good team. There's no point in being pessimistic, so you might as well go into the season and be an optimist, but I think the Premiership is just brilliant at the moment".

Two days after our interview Mourinho left Chelsea. Still, if anything, that makes the resemblance between them even stronger: neither played football to a high level, both brought their own unique style to their work, both have become successful because of it and both love a bit of controversy. "I like all the bad stuff in football, you can't have it all good, if you could try and clean the sport up too much it becomes like tennis became...it became a little bit dull. You need the good stuff and the bad stuff to make it great".

"How would you describe your fashion sense?"

"Super cool (laughs) I like my clothes. Here's a little something for you – I do sometimes wear clothes that I think will get a reaction: things like white jeans or I've got a silver shirt knocking around in my wardrobe which I'm going to dig out for one of my shows. When you feel the show needs a bit of a boost put something weird on, get people talking about it, it livens the show up a bit".

"What about changing your hair colour?"

“Yeah, (chuckles) well I learnt that off people like David Beckham over the years, keep changing your hair and it distracts from what you’re doing as a job (laughs)”.

You’re also quite into your music aren’t you?” At one stage Lovejoy was a VJ on MTV and has previously presented his own radio show on XFM and Virgin Radio.

“Yeah, well, I think I’m like every man, I’m into my football and into my music. I’m not an expert in either but I have a passion for them both”.

“What bands should we be listening out for at the moment?”

“Well the album that has gone under everybody’s radar this year is The Aliens. It’s called Astronomy of Dogs I think. It’s absolutely brilliant. There’s a good Japanese band - Polysics - their videos are great”.

We then tacked briefly to discuss music on his shows. Franz Ferdinand, for instance, were one band whose career was aided significantly by Soccer AM’s combination of football goals set to music. Kaiser Chiefs were also played: “It’s really funny, one of my mates had signed Kaiser Chiefs to publishing, but didn’t know he had them, Kaiser Chiefs used to have another name and he’s bought them under that name on sort of a four year licence and he was watching my show one day and he’s going ‘we’ve got to get the Kaiser Chiefs – they’re really good’ so he phoned up his publishing minions and said ‘look, got to try and sign Kaiser Chiefs’ and they said ‘we’ve already got them’ and he was like ‘good, brilliant’.

“Besides yourself if you could choose a 5-aside football team who would you pick?”

“Right well, definitely my friend Paul Gascoigne, Zola, Dennis wise for a bit of steel. Who shall I have in goal...I’ll go for Maradona in goal, because he’s fat and he’s good with his hands. Low centre of gravity, he’ll get down well, and I’ll go for Zizou (Zinedine Zidane) because he’s the best player of all time”.

“If you could change one thing about football what would it be?”

There’s not a lot broken with it. I would possibly fast-track referees that have played the game and potentially give the linesman more power to take all the pressure away from the main man. I think you need people that have played football. You know if some player beats you and it’s because he’s better than you and you trip him up, not because you intentionally tried to hurt him, you get a yellow card it’s not fair. Someone who’s played the game would realise it was just a clumsy tackle”.

“There aren’t many international television personalities that have a Simpsons character named after them”.

“Yeah and he had a wife who was called Helen which was pointed out a lot to me when I was on Soccer AM...I’m just waiting for the royalty cheques to come in. It’s kind of weird isn’t it, that’s he called the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy – there aren’t many Lovejoys around. The problem is if I break America, they’ll think I’m named after the Vicar”.

Then it came to the more serious matters. Why did Lovejoy leave the show that made his reputation and had reached cult status for so many sports fans? “It sort of became easy in the end if I’m honest with you. What happened was one day last Christmas I just suddenly thought I need to leave Soccer AM and I’ve got an opportunity to set up this company which I’m doing now and is really exciting. I can’t talk much about it (it is an internet television project), and what I found was that Soccer AM had started getting slightly stale and what I thought would be a hard decision became an easier one. I’d kept it buoyant for like ten or eleven years and I started thinking that what I need to do is drastically change the show, it needed a complete overhaul from top to bottom. Just after Christmas the boys had to convince me to keep doing

the catwalk because I was like I'm bored of it now so the viewers must be bored of it, and I didn't have enough time to do that and dedicate all my time into my new business which really excites me and I want to be in on it – it's a new way of watching television, a new way of entertainment. So, bizarrely, even though I loved Soccer AM and I did give it eleven years of my life and it's really brilliant and everything about it is great, it wasn't a hard decision in the end because I knew I couldn't do both things and I had to dedicate my time to what I really wanted to do in the future”.

What he looks back on with pride though is the fact that many of his inventions have stood the test of time: The showboat, the combination of football with music rather than with the commentary, showing ten of the best goals rather than showing all the goals to make it more entertaining. “It's the bits around it which are hard and where they (the new writing team) will have to find their feet: the comedy and the sketches and the gags. We used to bust our bollocks for days, for hours, writing that stuff, but they'll get there”.

“You've written a book (Lovejoy on Football) how was that?”

“It was therapeutic, very therapeutic, because in both football and music there's a lot of snobbery about who's the better fan, that sort of mentality and it was very therapeutic because sometimes you feel a bit phoney as a football fan”.

“How come?”

“Because I have my own T.V. show, I don't go home and away with Chelsea, I can't remember who won against Everton in '93, so I always question myself as a football fan and when I put it all down in a book suddenly I realised I had football in my life *all* my life. It's other people's problems if they want to question my football credentials. I hope people will read it and can look at themselves and say yeah I'm a football fan no matter what I do”.

As it turns out, a reporter from an unnamed tabloid decided to spend column inches deriding Lovejoy as not being a true football fan, something which I find hard to stomach on the basis of our interview. For instance, both of us claim to follow Real Madrid for little more reason than we like how they play, as well as the arrival of several English players such as Steve McManaman and David Beckham. Football is about enjoying a match between two teams, not criticising someone else for supporting Clough's Forest, or Ferguson's United during their glory years. Not only that, but Lovejoy has literally breathed football since his younger days when he supported Watford FC (read the book to find out more) and has played, watched and been involved in football for most of his life.

It was at this point that I felt I had finally reached beneath the veneer of television's Tim Lovejoy and reached the core of what he is really about as a human being. A man who enjoys the simple pleasures of life: having a drink with his mates, talking about controversial moments in football and listening to his favourite bands, whilst bringing entertainment to the millions of people who have the same passions as he does. So there we have it: Tim Lovejoy – formerly of Soccer AM – a true legend of his time.

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*Lovejoy on Football – The Good, The Bad and The Ugly Sides of Soccer is out on the 4<sup>th</sup> October priced 16 English Pounds and 99 English Pence. It is available in all good bookshops and some rubbish ones as well.*

*“Packed with hilarious anecdotes, bustling with great football stories, Lovejoy on Football is the most unique, insightful and must-have book of 2007”.*