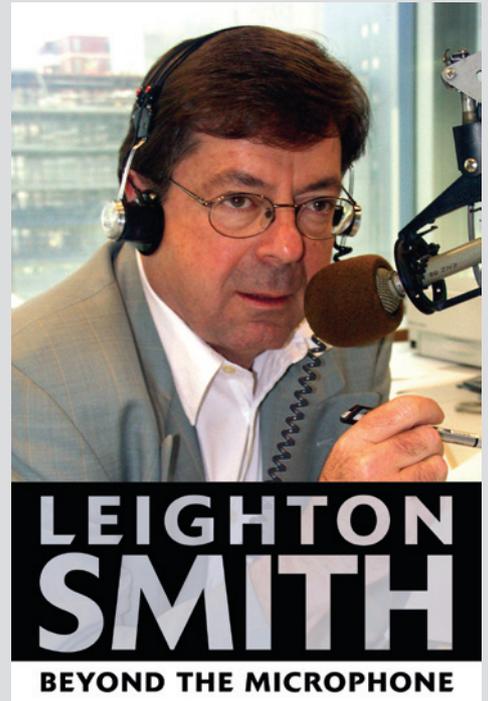


# On Air

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

“I have this terrible fear,” says Leighton Smith of his autobiography, *Beyond the Microphone*, “that it will sit on the shelves and not be bought.” The talk show host makes for a fascinating lunch companion and love him or loathe him, he sure has some stories to tell. In a career spanning nearly three decades this polarising personality has battled some of the brightest minds, made broadcasting history and beaten cancer. He probably won’t have to worry too much about his tome gathering dust.



“I used to be quite aggressive and I still can be,” he says, as he slices through his steak. “People have told me I’ve mellowed and if I have, it certainly wasn’t deliberate.” He still doesn’t tolerate “idiots” and appreciates those “who at least try to understand.” Combating Leighton Smith live on air is a daunting task. He says his listeners have changed. They’ve become more informed thanks to the internet and it has made it harder for him to stay ahead of the game. When he was told Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley had wed, Smith thought it so absurd, was so sure the caller had erred, that he offered his resignation if proven correct. The following day Smith quit as a “matter of honour.” The resignation was not accepted. I ask if politicians have also changed over his career.

“They’ve adapted like the rest of us,” he says. “They reflect the times. Though, we’ve all become more casual in the way we speak to and about them.” He’s been approached a couple of times about going into politics, but it’s not where his ambition lies. Smith has far too much fun on air.

Smith labels himself a conservative libertarian. He laments that being right wing is now highly unfashionable but believes in cycles and hopes such views will once again be in vogue. Even more unfashionable is Leighton Smith’s denial of manmade global warming. If he were Prime Minister for a day, he’d eliminate the Emissions Trading Scheme and dismantle the position of the P.M.’s chief scientific advisor. If he was dictator, it

would be a whole different story: “It would take more than a day to re-arrange the welfare system.” He’d like to see national service re-introduced.

I ask Smith if cares what people think of him and a resounding “no” escapes his lips. He immediately snatches it back. What he does care about are the misconceptions, when people don’t attempt to understand his views. Politics aside, Smith has been “savaged” for his belief in God. “There is no-one more intolerant than a hard-core atheist,” he says. “I’m comfortable with it, so why can’t they be? I’m not ramming it down their throats.”

*Is the broadcasting Leighton Smith the same man your friends and family witness?*

“You’d have to ask them that, but I think so. You can’t have a false façade for as long as I’ve been doing it. You have to be honest.”

He wed his long-term producer, Carolyn, last year. It was his fourth marriage. It was she who was approached with the suggestion of an autobiography. Smith was reluctant. He wrote the entire book in longhand over a 20 month period. “I didn’t want to do it, but once I got started, it came in waves,” he says. “It was bloody painful.”

*Were there tears?*

“It certainly caused a lot more personal revision than I thought it would. There’s stuff in there that I’ve never

talked about. There are no untruths or misrepresentations.”

One of Smith’s fondest memories was discovering his favourite author, Daniel Silva, had written him into a book. It was a thank you for championing the writer on the radio. “It was only a line or two,” says Smith, “but it was a total surprise.” Margaret Thatcher, he tells me, was extremely polite and Prince Phillip, “stiff.” Smith crossed swords with Prince Charles over Diana on their first Kiwi visit (“you’ll have to read the book for details”) and the Queen impressed upon him that she wasn’t too keen on weekend visits from the grandkids. Smith still gets a rush from interviews, but nothing fazes him. There’s not one current potential interviewee that excites him. If Smith could go back in time, he’d choose to quiz Thomas Jefferson.

*And as for the future?*

“My contract expires in a year and that’s me done,” he reveals. “I’ll enjoy spending more time in Italy.” No doubt he’ll also further his wine knowledge. Smith’s 40 acre vineyard, Clevedon Hills Estate, has garnered rave reviews in the Michael Cooper annual. “It took me a while to get it right,” he says. “But I’m now making some very good wine.” His only remaining goal is to enjoy himself. I ask if he’s excited about retirement. He is. “Though, I know I’ll miss what I do.”