

The Microscopists

A podcast from Bitesize Bio and ZEISS Microscopy

The Microscopists: Have you checked out the 'Godfather' of all podcasts?

With a raft of ground-breaking discoveries, publications and high-profile conference appearances, today's leading scientific figures might be familiar faces across the microscopy community. But what makes these great minds tick? What pearls of wisdom might they be able to offer the rest of us? And – perhaps most revealingly - what do these characters get up to in their spare time? While pondering these questions with colleagues, RMS Vice President Peter O'Toole hit upon an idea for a podcast featuring some of the world's most celebrated names at the forefront of microscopy. With a little help from his friends, and a cheeky nod to Francis Ford Coppola's famous *Godfather* movies, *The Microscopists* was born.

"The podcast idea was about many things", Pete explains. "We wanted to inspire younger scientists, but also to capture the true nature and character of the great scientists of our time. I wish we could go back in time and meet and learn about some of the great pioneers, but this is simply not possible. Hopefully this series will last through time and people can see what today's pioneers are really like."

Hosted by Bitesize Bio and Zeiss Microscopy, and with Pete in the interviewer's chair, *The Microscopists* is a set of candid, fun, and engaging interviews which shine a light – or perhaps focus a lens – on what drives and inspires these individuals, as well as what they enjoy most in life.

With the style, if not necessarily the menace of Marlon Brando's legendary *Godfather* character,

Pete has now quizzed a seriously impressive cast of interviewees, with a complete series of 12 episodes available online. Early instalments included chats with Oxford University's Tony Wilson and Jennifer Lippincott Schwartz of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. Others to have featured include a lively joint appearance from Alison North and Kurt Anderson, respectively of The Rockefeller University and Francis Crick Institute; and a hugely entertaining exchange with Ricardo Henriques of the Instituto Gulbenkian de Ciência, in which the trailblazing biophysicist reveals a penchant for dressing up as Batman – yes, really!

New interviews have been released biweekly since August, reaching a growing audience of scientists on lunch breaks, between Zoom meetings, or those just seeking a bit of entertainment during long scan times. But you don't have to be a microscopist to enjoy the content; the nature of the discussions means they are accessible to all.

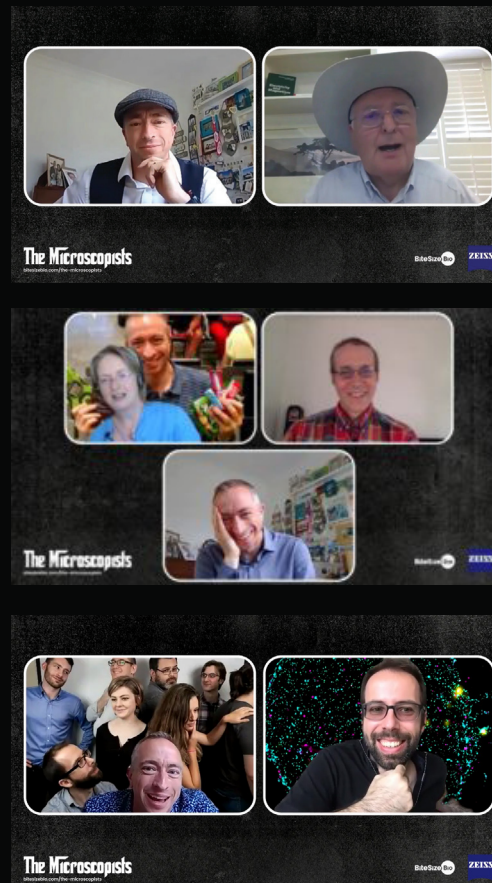
"The idea came up over coffee with Scott Fraser [University of Southern California], and then another with Ernst Stelzer [EMBL-Heidelberg, Germany]", says Pete. "I like to present, but get oddly nervous when introducing plenary or keynote speakers. At ELMI 2018 I had to introduce a fair few people, including Lucy Collinson [Francis Crick Institute], who now features in *The Microscopists*."

"I had previously introduced Lucy at mmc2017, and because I know her really well, I decided to make it a little different and introduce her using more personal information that you wouldn't get in the programme biography - something fun that gives the audience a true feel for how dynamic the speaker really is. I found this far easier to deliver personally and the audience were really engaged with a few laughs, which also kick-started the talk off on a high and a more relaxed atmosphere, which I thought was also good for the speaker."

"As such, I decided to try the same at ELMI and sat down for coffee with those that I had to introduce

and gleaned some fun information off each. They were all really obliging and revealed some fun facts that were great to kick them off with. At the same time, it also revealed how these megastars were not all work, work, work, but had fun and varied outside interests that I thought would be great for younger scientists to hear about and appreciate. It shows that you should follow your strengths and balance your career with at least some fun and passion outside of work."

Applying this concept to an extended podcast format, Pete began drawing up a "massive list" of potential interviewees from across the world. "I tried to mix it up, with both firmly established scientists and some of the fast rising stars, and from facility managers to those that have spin-outs - all to help add diversity and demonstrate different career paths and the challenges that they can bring. Some



of my choices were also people who I knew would be really engaging in person.”

With the global scientific community still in the thick of its readjustment to the post-Covid-19 environment, *The Microscopists* was unleashed. Given the explosion in demand for scientific content online, and the shift to virtual interactions – as well as, of course, the need for some light relief at a pretty miserable time – the stage was set, to say the least.

“Although it wasn’t really our aim, it may well be that the podcast has reached a wider audience as a result of the impact of Covid-19. I’d also like to think that perhaps it has played some small role in lifting the mood of people across our community. Throughout it, we’ve really just focused on trying to put together some fun, personal and engaging content - that actually talks very little about the science being done by the interviewees. This really is about them. How they started out, what shaped their careers, and what they find difficult. What they do outside of work and how they balance their work and home lives.

“The content can be very diverse and jumps about a little to engage the audience at different levels. There are so many useful tips and tricks given throughout the talks, that when I listen back a second or third time, I still pick up useful information - although I

only skip through them as I can’t stand watching or listening to myself!”

Among the many revealing insights into these scientists, are the little nuggets of information about their lives outside the lab. Who knew, for example, that the University of Dundee’s Jason Swedlow is a former competitive cyclist? Or that Tony Wilson is a prize cattle owner with his own ranch?

“Each interview reveals something completely different and off-the-wall”, says Pete. “Petra Schwiller blew me away with the sheer number of musical instruments it turns out that she can play to a high level. Then there’s Lucy Collinson, the surfing, Eurovision song contest fan! I’d better not say too much more - for anyone who has yet to tune in.”

Could a second series be on the cards? - or perhaps even a *Godfather*-style trilogy? Well, “watch this space”, says Pete.

“There are many more speakers that I would really like to involve in the future, and I’m itching to send out the invites. I certainly hope to develop the podcast and have further opportunities to meet with some more fascinating characters.”

So, if you haven’t already checked out the ‘Godfather’ of all podcasts, what are you waiting for? Watch and listen at <https://bitesizebio.com/the-microscopists/>

Owen Morton

