

The JO WHILEY EFFECT

She's been a lifeline for many in lockdown and a valiant crusader for vaccines. But, for the Radio 2 DJ, it's gardening that really rocks

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

“I’ve always had a background role in life,” Jo Whiley says, with a wry smile. “It suits my personality.” That’s a background role in the lives of 1.7 million BBC Radio 2 listeners a week and millions more who have watched her present Glastonbury Festival or the RHS Chelsea Flower Show on TV. But it’s genuine. As Jo sees it, she’s not the focus. She’s not the attention-seeking type. This year, Jo’s reach has extended even further. She has continued to air her show from Broadcasting House, providing a lifeline for many during lockdown. And in February, her successful campaign to prioritise vaccinations for people with disabilities brought relief to thousands (see overleaf). Yet for Jo, home is always where the heart is – and never more so than during the pandemic.

Jo lives in a converted barn in Northamptonshire with her husband, Steve Morton, their four children (aged 12 to 28), two cats (a Bengal and a ragdoll) and two dogs (a retriever and a spoodle). “I’ve been lucky, so lucky,” Jo says, with quiet assuredness. “This year has been really precious bonding time. We’ve gone back to basics with boardgames and walks. I’m dreading the kids going out into the world again.”

The slower pace over the past year has been valued: “It’s been good for me because I used to be exhausted a lot. The kids used to complain that I had to be doing something all the time. I’d be off for a run or, when I was training for a triathlon last year, I’d be off for a swim. I felt under so much pressure to do stuff. It’s been very good to calm down a bit.”

Jo still runs – another triathlon is planned for this month – but she has recently started yoga, following Yoga with Adriene on YouTube. “I’ve always been manic about the exercise I do. I like to

work hard and sweat, but I’ve hurt my shoulder and it’s been unbelievably painful. I’m getting older and I’m stiff in the morning, so I thought I’d give it a go. I feel quite good.”

FOR THE LOVE OF POTTERING

Jo enjoys the usual energy at home. Everyone’s schedules might have calmed down, but there are still deliveries from Etsy and buzzing phones to attend to. Last night, Jo and Steve, a music executive, were outside at midnight enticing the dogs back under the fence to avoid a clash with nearby horses. Jo also likes to escape: “I do like peace and quiet and that’s what I get in the garden. I like my own company and I’m happy to potter. It’s my favourite thing: pottering around in the garden.”

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show, now postponed until September, is a fixture in her diary. Jo designed a scent garden with Jo Malone, Kate Saville and Tamara Bridge in 2017 and co-presented coverage of the festival for the BBC a couple of years later. She has loved gardening for years, recalling days spent as a child on her grandparents’ allotment and hours picking dahlias from the garden to sell at the village shop, run by her mum. Earwigs always fell out of the pots.

Jo’s garden, which Instagram followers can glimpse on her posts, is largely her design, with the exception of Steve’s Buddha and windchimes on the patio. Towards the bottom of the garden is a treehouse, used by her youngest child, Coco. Another area is full of vegetables, appreciated by the eldest child, India, a chef and food stylist. “Last year, she really pushed me to plant things. We had raspberries, strawberries, herbs, kale, chard, beans, peas and pumpkins.” And carrots that no one wanted to eat. “This ▶

“I LIKE MY OWN COMPANY AND I’M HAPPY TO POTTER AROUND. IT’S MY FAVOURITE THING: POTTERING AROUND IN THE GARDEN”

year I won’t be doing carrots.” When the family moved into the house 12 years ago, the garden was a field: “It wasn’t very pretty – the grass was in terrible condition.” Jo set to work, planting and extending the borders. She loves colour, and a crowd of tulips, dug in last year, has just had its moment. In May, alliums, in all their cheerleader showiness, will be in full swing and rosebuds will be about to open. This year’s highlight will be the rose ‘The Lark Ascending’, which Jo planted just before Christmas after seeing an Instagram post by the garden designer Jo Thompson. “I’m beside myself with excitement about how it’s going to look. It’s a very luminous flower,” she says.

A young *Amelanchier* tree is also just about to blossom: “I’m looking forward to that because it feels like it was a baby and now it’s growing into a toddler. It makes me so happy to see the buds coming up.” Jo feels as if she has “a relationship” with her plants. “They’re my babies. I feel responsible for them. I’ve been nursing them. I want them to be as fit and strong as possible. It’s lovely seeing their personalities.” She laughs. “I sound like a nutter... It’s lovely seeing what they contribute to your life and your family home.”

LIFE ON AIR

Jo has continued to broadcast her show through all the various lockdowns of the past 12 months. During the first one, listeners would call in to tell her how sad and lonely they felt. Her playlist reflected the mood because callers requested downbeat songs. Jo began to feel exhausted: “It was really tiring because I felt the weight of everyone’s misery and distress, and you take it on.” One woman emailed to say she had lost her husband six weeks before and hadn’t spoken to anyone since: “I read that out one night and just started crying. It caught me... I was overwhelmed by the sadness of the situation... It got to a point where my producer and I thought we couldn’t carry on like this. We needed to cheer up. Everyone needed a shot of joy in their lives.”

It took effort: “I’m quite a melancholy person... My natural inclination is to play wistful tunes and miserable songs – Tom Waits and Nick Cave. That’s what I’m known for at home. It’s quite a stretch for me to play anything really upbeat.” Yet, out came

Bruno Mars and Dolly Parton. The “shot of joy” was administered – and has been welcomed.

Jo has been performing her way through. “There are days when I have gone in and felt sad, but I’ve just had to put that aside... Sometimes, with the radio, if I’m feeling a little bit melancholy, I think, ‘I have to put on a different version of myself with added Michelle Obama or Beyoncé or Julie Walters in *Mary Poppins*.’” Michelle Obama and Mary Poppins, however, can stay at work, allowing Jo to be herself when she gets home: “After a show sometimes, I don’t want to talk to anyone. I just need to decompress.”

PERFECT HARMONY

Radio and gardening “combine really well”. Their slow pace attracts “contemplative” types, while the studio, like the garden, is “solitary and intimate”. Even listening to music has parallels with gardening: “When you listen to music, you soak it in, just as you do when you tend to your plants.” Radio has also given Jo the chance to interview one of her biggest heroes: Monty Don. She follows all his advice on *Gardeners’ World*, making notes from YouTube. They bonded over melancholy songs: “I learnt more about music from Monty than I did about gardening.”

Years ago, Jo thought she might be an occupational or speech therapist, helping people like her sister Frances (see below). She got into radio by accident, working at BBC Radio Sussex while she was studying Applied Languages in Brighton. Even in this role, background or otherwise, she’s looking after people. “I definitely feel a concern for my listeners now more than ever,” she says. “I’ve realised what an absolute lifeline radio can be for people. Playlists are great, but there’s nothing like having someone there, talking to you while you’re going through the hell you are. You can get real comfort from a friendly, reassuring voice.”

LISTEN TO JO on BBC Radio 2, Monday to Thursday, from 7.30-9pm.

JO’S CAMPAIGN FOR JABS

In February 2021, Jo revealed that her sister, Frances, had yet to be vaccinated against Covid. Frances has Cri du Chat syndrome, a rare genetic condition. “It’s driving me absolutely crazy,” Jo told *Country Living* at the time. “It’s so frustrating. So many emails have gone backwards and forwards to the surgery. We’re just unlucky.” Unlucky doesn’t cover what came next. Days later, Frances tested positive. Her breathing deteriorated. It was, Jo said, “the worst week of our lives”. By the end of the month, the worst was over. Frances had returned home from hospital and Jo had attracted so much attention by highlighting the vulnerability of people with disabilities that the NHS prioritised their jabs. The BBC dubbed it “The Jo Whiley Effect”.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAMY (OPPOSITE); WILLIAM PENNICE (THIS PAGE); HAIR AND MAKE-UP (MAIN PHOTOGRAPHS) BY LIZ BECKETT



Jo’s JOURNEY

Born 1965 Grows up in Northamptonshire. Jo will have a younger sister, Frances, who has severe learning disabilities

1983-1986 Studies Applied Languages at Brighton Polytechnic, where she works at BBC Radio Sussex

1986-1991 Works on *WPFM*, a BBC Radio 4 youth culture show, before booking bands for Channel 4’s *The Word*

1991 Marries Steve Morton, a music executive. They now have four children

1993-2011 Joins BBC Radio 1, co-hosting *The Evening Session*

1998-2001 Hosts *The Jo Whiley Show*, a music discussion programme on Channel 4

1994-current Presents Glastonbury on Channel 4 and then the BBC

2009 Brings out her autobiography, *My World in Motion*

2011-today Gets her own evening show on BBC Radio 2, Mondays to Thursdays

2017 Co-creates The Jo Whiley Scent Garden (left) at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Two years later, she presents a segment on Chelsea on the BBC

2020 Takes part in Dare2Tri for Sport Relief, completing three triathlons in three days (shown above, with her daughters)

2021 Spearheads a Covid vaccine campaign on behalf of her sister. Jo trains for another triathlon in May, fundraising for the Brain Tumour Charity