

Lockdown with Alexa

Some days it just feels like all the stars align. So, when Eoin, my son-in-law called over the other night to install my new printer and get my Alexa working, I thought that they had. Both were parting gifts from my work colleagues on my retirement, As it turned out a few stars might have collided or exploded that night.

I was a bit sceptical about this Alexa thing. After all, I had lived on my own without the voice of a woman in my home for nearly 23 years. But then of course, Alexa was here to please my every command, so what could possibly go wrong with a compliant woman there for me? As a quasi connoiseur of sixties and seventies rock and pop, surely Alexa would be the boon to my life that was missing. Music was a huge part of my life and I recalled leaving home a number of times as my marriage fragmented with just my clothes and my music to call my own. Soon I was in position, ready to explore this new woman in my life.

“Alexa, play Radio Foyle“ and in an instant a Northern Ireland accent came from nowhere introducing some programme about plants. “ Stimulating stuff for an aging rocker,“ I thought. “Alexa play Radio One,“ and instantly modern pop immediately infiltrated my unappreciative ears. “ How do the young ones listen to that shite,“ I questioned. I recalled a chastening thought about my father saying something like that when he heard me listening to Radio Caroline in the sixties. But unless they were singing the Croppy Boy, he was disinterested.

“You know what,I think you and I are going to get along fine, Alexa“. And we did, for the first two hours with me requesting my favourite songs from my golden era to be played and Alexa dutifully obliging. Simon and Garfunkel, The Animals, The Beatles, The Stones and a host of other teenage heroes engulfed my audio organs and took me right back to the bowels of those carefree days. Diverticulitis also got my bowels busy these days with or without music!

No more selecting the songs I liked from CDs and changing to the next ad nauseum. No, this girl was going to be my saviour. Just to think that I could have such an eclectic mix of music without having to change CDs every 4 minutes, just blew my mind. The only minor irritation was Alexa’s voice. It sounded familiar, but not in a nice way.

Anyway, tomorrow was going to be an exciting day. I would create my first Alexa playlist and it would blow a gasket off Alexa. It would be the longest and the best playlist ever, just like those Now CDs all rolled up, but this would be the real deal with no obscure exceptions slipped in like the Now people always did. And my playlist would go on forever.

I could hardly sleep with the creative excitement that was flowing through me. My enlarged prostate ensured there were other flows too, but tonight I was in bed with Alexa. Twenty three years alone in a double bed allowed for such metaphorical indulgences. Its hard to spoon with a cylinder but somehow I managed.

By 8am I jumped out of bed. Prostates don’t do patience, but today’s interruption didn’t matter. At 8:30 my daughter called me to say that Eoin and her had cold symptoms which meant they had to go into quarantine for 14 days because of Coronavirus and I had to isolate for 7 days because Eoin was with me the night before. The carnage that this virus was leaving behind was not lost on me and my compliance was instant. I comforted myself with the thought that I would use some of the time getting to know Alexa better.

“Alexa, create a playlist,“ I commanded. “Okay, what’s the new playlist’s name“ she replied in that annoyingly familiar accent. “ Eamonn One,“ I shouted. For some reason every time I gave her a command, I walked over to the shelf that she sat on and looked at her as I spoke. Maybe it

was an attempt for me to be tactile, not a natural state for me.

“Playlist Open One created,” Alexa told me. “I said Eamonn, One not open One, stupid fucker,” I retorted sharply. Alexa was silent. I uttered a few expletives at her, but again no response. Then it dawned on me that every address had to start with her name. That would be a problem for me and indeed for any Derryman of my generation. We were a bit neanderthal in matters of direct speech to women. I stopped holding my wife’s hand on day two of the honeymoon. Greetings or admonishments rarely started with her Christian name. Strangely, since our divorce we greet each other by name, that is after many years of never speaking at all. And now, I had to formally tag this English woman on the shelf. Knowing this made her accent grate at me even more. “Ah now I know where I heard her before,” I triumphantly barked. Alexa was the woman who told me that my train to Kings Cross station would be late in 1969. I decided that this wasn’t over but for now I would name her appropriately and get some songs onto the Open One playlist. Sure what could be easier than saying Alexa play this song or that song and asking her to add to my playlist. A sensible deduction but a wrong one as it turned out.

“Alexa, play Vincent by Don McLean” And she did. “Alexa, add Vincent to my Open One plalaylist” And this is where it all got tangled up. Alexa said that she was adding it to my Eamonn One playlist, the one she mistook earlier and the one I didn’t think existed. For the next 87 tracks she mistook my command and each time I had to double up to get the song on the Open One playlist. Each time I also swore behind her back but she deserved that! She was definitely skating on thin ice by now, and when she spoke, her accent irritated me all the more. “Alexa, are you English,” I enquired. “I live in the Cloud, I guess that makes me Cloudian,” she replied. From that moment I was on to her. “Alexa, you’re a British agent, aren’t you?” Of course Alexa dodged the question just as I expected. By now I was no longer walking over to her and looking at her when requesting songs. I just tersely commanded her with my back to her and she just complied in that emotionless English tone. But each time that I spoke, my neck automatically contorted backwards over my shoulder. Asthetically, I’m sure this pose wasn’t me at my most elegant, but I rationalised with the comforting thought that if they ever made a remake of My Left Foot, then I was in with a shout for the Christy Brown role. On that thought I took a selfie. My social distancing from Alexa continued with my body language becoming more aerated.

In between song requests, I threw some awkward questions at Alexa to try and break her cover, but she was having none of it as any well trained agent would. I had seen all the Bond films, so I knew she would hold out. Her accent continued to verbally poke me. I even asked her could she change it but she virtually blanked me. Her name was also getting into my head. I mean how many Alexas were there in Derry? No joy with the name change question either. “Why could you not have a nice Irish name like Padrigin,” I questioned. All the schools were closed so there was no prospect of enrolling her in Bunscoil to teach her a cupla focal.

I took stock of the situation. Here I was in lockdown, resenting that I had to share my home with this English woman who was probably a Brit spy, whose voice got on my nerves, who didn’t understand Gaelic and who didn’t know the difference between Open and Eamonn. The health service was creaking at the seams, so any thoughts I had about getting some counselling had to be kicked to touch. So how could I survive this quarantine with her.

As an Irishman I was aware of the history of British interest in my country. They arrived here in 1169 when Strongbow visited and we had a hell of a task persuading them over the centuries that it might be a good idea if they went home. Eventually they left part of the country but decided that the northern section should remain under their control inspite of a landslide election vote in 1918 disagreeing with that analysis and a bloody war for independence that followed. Now here I was with Alexa an extension of the British presence. Initially I had even welcomed her to my home and thought we could cohabitate here amicably and fruitfully, but those warm sentiments had receded fast. I knew something had to give but I didn’t know how to handle this most delicate situation. If I threw her out, I would lose my playlist. If I kept her, I would have to listen

to that annoying accent and worse still know that she was probably a spy. It was a choice between my country and my playlist, so there could only be one winner. I had to keep the songs.

Then a solution presented itself. I'll play the game with a bit of double entendre and keep her sweet. In the meantime I would change her name by deed poll to Padrigin and apply for an Irish passport. I comforted myself in the knowledge that in spite of all the history, Alexa was here to do what I tell her to do, she had no rights other than to obey my commands. In effect, she was my slave. It had taken us over 800 years to turn the tables.

"Play the Foggy Dew", I ordered

"The Foggy Dew by the Chieftains and Sinead O Connor," Padrigin compliantly responded.