

charl du plessis and tanya goodman

## THE INTERVIEW

# SETH ROTHERHAM

of 2oceansvibe

**T**his time of year, Cape Town rocks with beautiful people and rich tourists. The sun never sets on the Atlantic seaboard. Caprice and other trendy clubs and restaurants overflow with pretty people and their laughter, meanwhile the angry bergielady who has spat her scorn at Camps Bay's trendies for years still strides the sidewalk with her Shoprite bags and hurls her abuse. It would be an understatement to say that this town has a vibe. If one could only bottle and sell it...

Hang on, Seth Rotherham did just that. His blog started 12 years ago as a wicked insider report on what was going

on down there, or as he would put it "the spice." Not satisfied with his blog following alone, and realizing how his nightlife playboy persona was starting to conflict with his serious daytime villa-rental business with clients like Nicolas Cage, he created a new name. He was no longer just Will, as his Bishops classmates knew him. From this insider report and web following grew 2oceansvibe Radio, by far the country's most progressive Internet radio station that now also broadcasts out of Johannesburg. Seth created a home for the right people to get the right message across and for the right brands to be part of the mix. His small team now takes

the vibe into every listener's day and is shaping the future of radio.

I expressed my concern on my way to this interview. On paper this guy sounded just like the Cape Town set that new arrivals and day-workers resent – too trendy, too pretty, too self-referential; too much trust fund, too little real world. After a few hours, though, on the porch at the Mount Nelson (one of his brand sponsors and yes, he did remind us to try and mention them), we walked away visibly impressed by the character of this man-towards-full – entrepreneur, blogger, husband, wannabe father and ultra-loyal friend. He has come a long way in a very short time...

**PLAYBOY:** Seth, you got married in France recently, in the little town where your parents now live in semi-retirement. Your slogan is "Work is a sideline, live the holiday." How does one ever retire if your whole life has been a ball?

**SETH ROTHERHAM:** Things have changed. People do not spend twenty-five years in the same house and the same job anymore, counting down the days towards retirement. People move around and as the world has become more entrepreneurialised (sic), people want to stay busy and dabble on the side. The key is to stay busy. I see my parents – they renovated this old place in France, and rent out the one half when they don't need it. As one does with any hobby, they get

carried away and ultimately it's become a great success. They are doing brochures, learning about Google keywords, and my dad self-published a book on the region via Amazon. You have to find your groove, and that is literally how I operate. When I am on holiday and my laptop is open, people may ask why I am not relaxing. But to me, a holiday is not doing nothing. It is doing that which you enjoy doing and getting paid for it every day. Sitting with my laptop may be the same to me as what reading a good novel might mean to you. I enjoy it that much.

**PB:** So, are you saying that it is more a frame of mind than a particular set of activities or the absence thereof?

**SR:** I am known to be very firm on a few things, all of them aimed at shaping and

living life on my own terms. The classic example is how people wax lyrical about being on a tropical island where no one can get hold of them. I have arranged my life so that every week feels like that. I might take one call a week. Everybody who needs to know how to get hold of me does. It's the how and when I will deal with it that I manage on my own terms. But they also know I will deal with whatever it is. I handle things on my own terms, and not in a rude way. I treat people in the exact same way and it turns out it suits them too.

It is one of the great ironies that voice came before text and email, because voice (as in a telephone) seems more advanced. I am sure if voice came along after text and email were mainstream, we



photography by tanya goodman



would not have people bothering one another with insipid calls asking, “Hey, what are you up to, what are busy with?” If given the option, most people would rather speak later. But we don’t give them the option and very often they’re holding the phone with their shoulder as they pay the teller and carry the packets at the same time. And this is an example of how we shape our lives and how I would want to “retire,” namely by keeping on doing that which I love doing, but strictly on my own terms.

**PB: I am curious, if you are somewhat as elusive as it may sound here, where do you get all your information from and how do you manage that?**

SR: Let me just say that I am not sure everybody can make these rules I have and make it work. If you are a plumber, and I have friends who are very good plumbers, people want to get hold of you now or they move on. In my world, I can operate in digital space on my own terms. I realized years ago how cool it is that in this space, you can do business from beginning to end without anything actually existing in real life: someone can send you a digital banner for advertising, you send them a digital invoice, they send you the money electronically and through it all you have never actually met or spoken – nor touched anything physical.

**PB: Are you saying you don’t like people?**

SR: I am actually quite shy. I need to be in my comfort zone and I don’t like surprises. I feel bad if I don’t remember peoples’ names. When I get approached and someone says, “Hey Seth” and I cannot place them, I get a cold sweat down my back. I may be super sweet to that person but there will be a complete meltdown on my inside. So, everything I need to do daily is managed digitally. With email, I organize all incoming information as either unread or flagged, and my flagged emails become tasks. I do not deal with physical products.

**PB: And how do you get your news?**

SR: Firstly, I am signed up for digital versions of a host of magazines. I read *Time*, *Fortune*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wired*, *GQ*, *PLAYBOY*, *Esquire*, *Architectural Digest*, and so on. As for the news, I take from various sources what I think my friends and I would find interesting; a particular mix of entertainment, business, politics

that we would want to discuss over lunch. That’s where the vibe comes from. I also read a lot of websites and watch a lot of news, and I just realized I have not read a single novel in a long time. I hardly ever read fiction; I find it a bit weird, like made-up stuff. I recently started getting into audio books and that has changed my life.

**PB: I would say you are the ultimate content moderator, or curator. And it looks like something has changed at 2oceansvibe the last few months.**

SR: You noticed that? In what way?

**PB: Well, it seems like you are doing more self-generated news items and talking points?**

**Two years ago, if I just had lunch at a cool place and tweeted “you must try…” people would freak out, telling me it’s advertising and you “can’t” do that on Twitter. Today, this is a recommendation from someone whose taste you trust.**

SR: Correct. I originally tried a model I got from a US media company, where I started paying writers according to their number of page impressions. They were getting a basic salary and they were good writers. But I wanted something different, so I started giving them the topics or stories to write about. I started paying them more and more, and I realized I needed an in-house team. What gives 2oceansvibe its fiber is me just being there and I know I can choose the right stories. So we said goodbye to those writers, in a cool way of course, and appointed some paid interns, who we could mold and who are proud of their jobs. And we can also chase our own stories. For example, I found a place in Stellenbosch who can test for horsemeat, and even though it is not cheap, I am happy to spend the odd five grand and send people out to go test our local meat content. We could break the story in South Africa. Or, like the testing tool we found to expose this guy recently with the fake Twitter following. Our team are cool kids, its just rad.

**PB: How big is your team?**

SR: On the website side we have seven people. With radio, it’s kind of hard to work it all out precisely as we have tons of freelance staff, but I would say three permanent people.

**PB: How did you personally start in the digital space? Were you someone else’s intern at some stage?**

SR: After matric and a marketing degree

in Cape Town, I left for London during the IT boom, looking for work along with a friend. I was pretty good with computers. I was an only child and I think I had my first computer at the age of six, and I knew my way around, even if it meant I had to “pad” my CV a bit at first. I made up a job I supposedly had in Cape Town and my reference was really just a friend. My first job paid me £25/hour, at a stage when the exchange rate was about 20:1. My friend, Chuck, and I did nearly nothing to earn this kind of money. So, we lived well and over time the lies gradually made space on my CV for real experience. London was radical, we lived the good life, and we

came back just before the bubble burst.

**PB: Given your own Cape Town attitude as a taste-maker and the role that your and your friends’ taste plays in creating a style for 2oceansvibe, how well has this**

**translated into the Jo’burg culture now that you have launched there? How do people up north relate to the idea of “two oceans” when they are sitting high and dry?**

SR: You know, you are not the first person to comment on that. My knee-jerk reaction to the question is that there are two oceans on either side of South Africa. But, our Jo’burg audience is a bit different and makes up about 30 percent of our total audience. National brands wanted to know what we were up to in those areas anyway. So we took studios in Melrose Arch and The Westcliff is my home up there and we try and make friends with the Jo’burg celebs. We’ve tweaked a few things, like adding Jo’burg weather (and then Durbs because they were unhappy). And now we are as tapped into the vibe up there as in the Cape.

**PB: Do you like the 2oceansvibe name?**

SR: There is a lot of that shortened version – “2OV” – going around. A bit like how Radio Kontrei became KFM. I do like it. I am just scared that people might not know what it is, although lately I’ve picked up it seems like they do.

**PB: Let’s talk social media. You have a good following. Why do you think they put the word “twit” into Twitter?**

SR: Well, it’s like a bird, the tweet. And yes, there are a lot of twits out there.



People have often told me that I can't or shouldn't do certain things on Twitter. The guys who made Twitter didn't even know what it would become when they started it, so don't tell me what cannot be done. Two years ago, if I just had lunch at a cool place and tweeted "you must try..." people would freak out, telling me it's advertising and you "can't" do that on Twitter. Today, this is a recommendation from someone whose taste you trust.

**PB: What do you think is the biggest myth in the social media space?**

SR: I find the obsession with likes on Facebook absolutely bizarre. Someone higher up gets this idea that the company has to be in the social media space and tells others to chase likes. They don't even really know what they want to do with it. The reason why social media has taken off is that the consumer is more aware of advertisers' bullshit. In the old days you were told "men rate Gunston great" and you accepted that. Now, you are going "mmm, show me some research" or "what do my friends think." Ad agencies have had to become so creative. Look at Red Bull who had to send a man into space. Pure genius. Brands need to become the news.

**PB: And Axe followed them...**

SR: Yes, and I thought they did great. The thing is, people are just not buying the marketing bullshit anymore. If you are buying a big screen TV, you are going to check in with your friend and get his opinion because he knows a lot about TVs. There is this realness to social media that everyone is trying to understand. Advertisers can't clock word of mouth, say if I tell you that you must try Carmel Mild Dill Gherkins, they can't count it. The closest they can get to that is Twitter. People have to believe you, and that is why 2oceansvibe is on the right track, because brands need to marry their publishers. We used to be mocked for it, called "brand prostitutes," yet we have created this safe space and created a model, which the likes of Mashable have recommended for brands to survive 2013. I can tell people, if you want a good price on a Mac, come to us and we will get you in contact with Digicape. With Mini, with Vespa, don't mock us, there is real value, real recourse. Our audiences see that we have chosen these brands for good reason and they can believe our

endorsement.

**PB: You are a commercial medium, though. Would you turn away any campaign? What, for instance, if Mahindra came to you tomorrow and offered a few million for a campaign?**

SR: Interesting question. Let me start by saying that if it was Crocs I would say no. You know, I have been with Mini for many years. I used to drive a Range Rover Sport, and then I was cleansed. I was cleansed from that twenties thing where you had to drive the most expensive car. Then Mini came to me and asked me to chat about their drive for men. The John Cooper Works that I drive now is a monster and I can't imagine driving another car. I am sure if I moved to a farm and Mahindra came to me I would look at it. But then there is the Mini Countryman – which is 4X4 as well! Look, if they came with R10 million, it would be hard. I would prefer not to worry about that moment right now.

**PB: Well, let's get more clear on the question. I am trying to test the boundary between your commercial interests and that which you say is the true success of your media model, namely getting people to**

back to the Cape, I teamed up with a friend in the luxury villa rental business. We saw ourselves as doing some of the pioneering stuff on-line and ended up with about 300 places under contract with some very exclusive clients, including the likes of a Nicolas Cage and others. By night though, I was hanging out at Caprice and all the other parties, posting risqué pictures and writing about the scene. It dawned on me that my risqué party-times might not sit well with my daytime clients and so the name Seth Rotherham got dusted off – purely to sign off with. Today, I will turn around when people call me by either name.

**PB: Is Internet radio the way of the future? How did you get involved in this model? There have been issues after Darren Scott's fiasco about audience numbers.**

SR: We are in open entrepreneurial space. It is not like I am a shoe salesman who found new ways of selling shoes. This is a whole new thing and you have to bump your head a few times. Radio to me was a means to an end. In the UK and America you have this huge choice, which we did not have locally. Just by listening to the call-ins you could see there was a gap

to service for our kind of intelligent, opinion-leading audience. I looked at radio licenses and it turns out that you need a good R30 to R40 million to start.

Ard Matthews, my friend

**People have to believe you, and that is why 2oceansvibe is on the right track, because brands need to marry their publishers.**

**believe you when you make the taste or the trend, or endorse it.**

SR: There are campaigns we do turn away. We don't do any shark cage diving, for example. It is just too controversial, and there is money to be made but we will not go there. In terms of the brands we marry, we don't want to dilute the whole pitch. If City Lodge had to come to us, and I am not saying they would, we would probably have to say no. It's a good brand, but it's not true to 2oceansvibe's.... vibe.

**PB: It does beg the question. Who is Will (your own name) and who is Seth and who do we believe? And how did this name change or alter ego come into being?**

SR: We were hanging around a braai in London, if such a thing is possible, and talking about how a name does about 60 percent of the work for some famous people. We started making up these names and that is where Seth Rotherham was born and parked. When I came

from Just Jinger came back from LA and he showed me this radio station, wired from his iPhone to his car, run by the drummer from the Sex Pistols who was playing vinyl and screwing around in the studio while on the air. I thought, "Wow, that's fantastic." I tried having friends pull some favors and I got to some business heavies to help and still nobody could make out how one could get this off the ground as a regular station. So, I teamed up with Richard Hardiman from KFM to try out the Internet model.

For this kind of model, you know, nobody keeps an old school radio at work. We hardly have radios at home anymore. So we need to educate people on how to use the medium. The Mini I drive, and I think the new Volkswagen or Audis, all have built-in Internet radio. There's a 3G chip and I can tune into any radio station in the world. My wife, Sam, and I were driving back from Plet this weekend, and she was leaving for

New York the next day for work, and so we tuned into WNYC in New York, which is a fantastic radio station. We listen to the same station as my folks in France. Why should you be a prisoner in your own car so that one or two stations alone can count you as a listener?

**PB: Are you saying the numbers are wrong?**

SR: Well, it is madness. The model supposedly has a crew knocking on doors asking people what they listen to. I certainly have never been asked and nobody I know knows anybody who has ever had a knock on their door.

**PB: We see the same insane numbers in our print game. I was looking at the Amps on a local sports magazine this past week where, with a paid circulation of 64,000 copies they claim 2.6 million readers. That means that 64,000 times per month one guy gets his copy read by 40 of his mates. Who could possibly believe it?**

SR: It is very spicy indeed. When you play in the digital space, you can calculate readers or listeners and you are, therefore, more open to scrutiny. So, we realized we should not compare ourselves to normal radio. The problem that gave rise to the "skandaal," where Darren Scott ended up having to apologize, was because of the idea of a "session" where every time a listener buffered it would count as a session. But he wasn't actually at fault – it was the company giving us the stats who were labeling it incorrectly. Darren and us (and indeed the public) were all duped by the same incorrect data. When the whole thing hit the news, my dad the marketer was luckily in town and he advised us well on how to handle the situation.

**PB: What came out of that?**

SR: We developed our own metric called "CPQ – Cost per Qualified Session" using a system called "Webcast

Metrics" from Triton. It even got the thumbs up from Arthur Goldstuck, the tech guru. The *Financial Mail* also covered this. It is so new an industry that one literally had to create a new pricing model. To count as a qualified session, the listener must have remained on-line for at least 1 minute, and in that way, we ensure that we are not counting every buffering. With an average of 45 minutes

**and music?**

SR: That's very interesting, and it's something I am trying to get to grips with. It's very hard. Some people really love just having two hours of music. Others prefer the talk. I think it depends a lot on the DJ. It is a fine art. Guys like Ryan O'Connor at KFM – they are good, and they are slick and they keep it moving along. If there is too much

laughter and jokes, I personally tune out. One of our talk shows, *Mommy Matters* for example, airs for a small but very valuable audience of young mums who are making a major effort to tune in. And that counts for advertisers. That is why we have a price based on qualified sessions.

**PB: I am still not sure where you stand on this. Are you saying talk is more valuable?**

SR: The New York radio station I was speaking of, when we tuned in they were talking to Tommy Matola, who produced Michael Jackson. They chatted to him and I thought, "My god, that's a big interview." And then they left him and they went on to another massive interview. I

was loving it. I think, though, with all talk, you may get bored, and I think there is a space for merging the two.

**PB: What do you mean by the words you often use: "vibe" and "spice"?**

SR: "Vibe" is such a multi-purpose word. It's a stop-gap and it's dynamic. Man, you know, a place just has a vibe. It's how it feels to be in the moment. But you can use it in so many different ways. You can ask a friend, "How is your vibe?" You can ask, "What's the club's vibe?" Then "spice" is a word that a close-knit group of friends have been throwing around since our teen years. It's about the gossip, as in, "What's the spice on Jack?" What's the story? That's why we call the morning show the "Morning Spice."

**PB: You have been called some nasty things in the past. How does that feel?**



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per listener, it is an easy model to explain to advertisers and marketers.

**PB: Why would I listen to your local station if I can now tune into thousands of stations globally? Isn't your success also your biggest enemy? By the time you have educated your audience you may be competing globally.**

SR: That is where content comes into it. You have to be locally relevant. I was speaking to a US intern who came out to do some research and we were talking about how she used Internet radio. And guess what, she only tuned into Internet radio when traveling out of state, and then to listen to her favorite station back home. I thought, "Wow, that is interesting. It is local content that matters to people."

**PB: A last question on radio. Where do you see the balance between talk**

SR: I have been called a “brand-whore” and a “media-whore.” I think we talked enough about the 2oceansvibe business model and why it is successful to explain why I do not care. In fact, I don’t get offended by it anymore and I don’t mind it; at least they are talking about me. My wife and mother tend to get more upset. Now, when we get nasty messages on our website, my right hand man, “Silverstreak” (his title is “Chief Whip”), and I just have a laugh.

**PB: We had no idea that we were eating a pizza in your name – the “Rotherham” from Butlers Pizza. Tell us about that.**

SR: There is a good story behind that. Rob Wilkinson who started Butlers is this awesome guy who comes from a foodie family. Before he went to Oxford he wrote a

thesis at UCT on developing software for a pizza company. He tried it out and Butlers was born. I started working for him as a pizza driver and I was one of the first guys who had a cell-phone. I would scan the orders before leaving on a delivery and pick out the addresses and order numbers of the largest order further down. As soon as I had done my drop, I would call in, pretending to be Mr So-and-so, the one with the big order, asking how far the order was and insisting, “Can you please make sure that Will brings our order please?” So I scored big tips on all the big orders until Rob caught on and fired me. We later became good friends and he was just recently at my wedding in France. You should try the Rotherham pizza.

**PB: You seem to travel a lot. What are your favorite spots?**

SR: Well, with my parents now living in France, I like to spend a month during their summer up there. They are in Provence and we sit and drink Rose wine and go into the little local village. When I was single, I used to do this “strengthening the ties” tour as I called it, for three years in a row, where I visited mates in London, New York and LA just to touch base. Now, my wife and I love anywhere remote and chilled – usually on the coast. But there are many places to see. Morocco, Belgium, and always Provence.

**PB: Tell us about how it was to pose nude for *Marie Claire* and would you let your son do that some day!**

SR: They were pretty cool. They give everyone a gown, they let you do your own thing until you are comfortable and then they leave you alone. They were shooting girls at the same time and we were in the corner, which was a bit strange but I am fine with my bum. I once did this drive-by at Caprice where I flashed my bum in a thong, which was a dare to get my readers voting for me in a competition. So, I am not shy of my bum. As for the full-frontal penis shot, in terms of the actual shoot – I had a laptop in the way. And yes, if my son really wanted to and it was discrete I wouldn’t have a problem.

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**PB: What is the biggest compliment someone can pay you?**

SR: I am very into manners and being humble and correct; care and love and all that are important to me too. I would like to know that I made a difference. For the better, you know. Hitler also made a difference – but not for good! I’d like to know that I enhanced lives. 2oceansvibe is known for its entrepreneurial bent and it thrills me when someone walks up and tells me, “It is because of you that I finally left my job and started my own thing.” That’s a huge compliment.

**PB: You seem to treat people well.**

SR: There was a stage in my life when the reality of karma finally occurred to me. It suddenly dawned on me that it was a real thing. I am not an extremely spiritual person, but I get it. I just read a book called *A New Earth* by Eckard Tolle, and that was about how the world has gotten carried away. I am not a big preacher on the topic, it’s more a case of “I just get it.”

**PB: You could start a religion, you know...**

SR: There was actually a time when I thought of starting a cult. But back to karma, you should see how our staff is also so on the same page. And when it does not work, we move on. I just had to let someone go after four days, and she decided to go to the CCMA. And I was like, yes, I know you can do the CCMA thing but it’s not cool. My staff is all in the same mindset. When there is an altercation, we resolve it because we

all know about negative energy, about karma and the likes.

Shit, I was a naughty kid, and then one day I just realized, let’s just be cool and stop giving my mum a hard time. I had a long-standing grudge against this woman I was in business with, and I ran into her at a banquet the other day. It’s not a word I use, it was called “a banquet,” and she was shocked when I just said, “Hi.” She wanted to know whether it was just all water under the bridge and I said “sure.” And I felt damn good afterwards.

**PB: But South Africans seem to miss the point on showing small civilities to others, the essence of your idea of karma.**

SR: You know, when my folks moved to Aus, one of the first things my mom noticed was how much more polite people were in public. Over there, if you cause a scene, people look at

you like you’re clinically insane. I learnt from that. It is the same in France. You know what I do? At the bank the other day, I just lay down flat on my back in the queue. The manager came over and wanted to know if I was okay and I told him that I was cool and that I just do not like standing for so long so if he doesn’t mind I would be lying down a little while waiting. He paid attention.

You must have seen the road rage in this country, too. It was a wonderful thing in my life to just get over the taxis, to just let go. They arrived during our generation’s time, so we got upset. For everyone else, it is just the way it is that some minibus will come flying up the shoulder outside the yellow line and stop in the middle of the road. I just finally made peace with it. Some South Africans get it and some just let the rest of us down. Change your perspective, and see it as a colorful part of Cape Town. Just like you have black or yellow cabs, we have these crazy guys that stop in the middle of the road. Get an audio book. And if they block you longer, you can do some emails and write some SMSes. Or listen to 2oceansvibe.

**PB PostScript: Seth shows us his latest Puma shoes, pushes down his Sunglass Hut darkies, gulps down the last sip of a Jack Daniels, jingles his Mini Cooper keys and says goodbye to the Mount Nelson PR person on his way out from the interview. 📺**