



In hindsight, it wasn't a great idea to kick off an interview with David Duchovny by suggesting he was a musical dilettante.

Duchovny, a New Yorker living in Los Angeles, is less known for music, although he's been making rather decent folk rock for a decade – songwriting, playing guitar and singing in a honeyed drawl. His 2015 song, *Hell or Highwater*, has been streamed more than a million times, while his *Layin' on the Tracks*, from 2020, has pointed lyrics about a certain politician ("It's a killing joke that no one laughs at / A stupid orange man in a cheap red hat").

He has released three albums, with a fourth due next year, and this month plays a festival in England and is booked to perform at London's 2000-seat *Shepherds Bush Empire*.

You're most likely to know Duchovny, of course, as Fox Mulder, the conspiracy theory-guzzling FBI agent in *The X Files*, one of the biggest shows of the '90s, watched at its peak by 30 million in America alone. Perhaps you saw him as womanising writer Hank Moody in *Californication* or 1960s detective Sam Hodiak in *Aquarius*. You may even have read some of his five books.

So does the 63-year-old feel he should no longer be seen as just a musical dabbler?

"That's part of a lazy person's perception," Duchovny says, bristling slightly. "It's a lens through which people want to see me. I think music is an innocent art form – you listen to it and you have a response. To bring any kind of baggage to bear on it in the beginning seems to me to be dishonest, but that's the way things go."

YouTube clips of recent shows suggest people were having a lovely time, I say. This doesn't have the soothing effect intended.

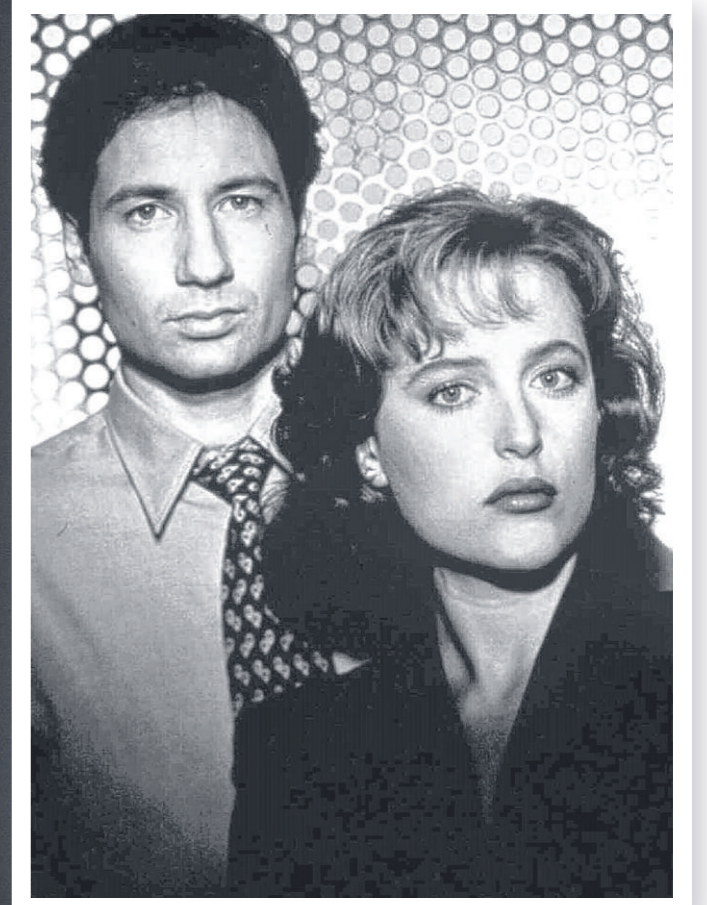
YouTube footage lingers "because of the horror of the cell phone", Duchovny says. "It's a pet peeve of mine." Is he tempted to ban them at his shows, as artists from Prince to Bob Dylan have? "I don't know that I can enforce that view on anybody."

For Duchovny, it's as much about phones limiting his performance as it is about the audience not living in the moment. "To do something unique or for the first time, to reach for a note or play a different melody – all these are chances you might take if you weren't inhibited by the fact that somebody is (recording) it," he says. "You've got to be able to fail and the ubiquity of cell phones makes failure scarier than it needs to be."

Failure is the key to another of his jobs: podcasting. In his series, *Fail Better*, he adroitly interviews guests including Bette Midler, Ben Stiller and Sean Penn about their failures. "I feel like I've been failing my entire life," Duchovny said on launching it in May. That may sound strange from a man with English degrees from Princeton and Yale, who has won a Golden Globe for *The X Files* and another for *Californication*.

Is he familiar with Elizabeth Day, the British journalist who has hosted a successful podcast called *How to Fail since 2018*?

When Duchovny announced *Fail Better*, Day tweeted: "I might



David Duchovny arrives at the 76th Directors Guild of America awards at the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, California, in February and, above, with Gillian Anderson in *The X Files*

From folk songs to failure, a cultural icon opens his X File

The highly educated star of one of the biggest TV series of the 1990s discusses mobile phones, lazy thinking, social media and the personal value of humility

ED POTTON

invite David Duchovny on @howtofail to discuss his failure to be original."

"This is the first I've heard of it," he says. "If she wants to be rigorous in her thinking, she would investigate what my approach to failure is. I don't know what her approach to it is. My sense, since failure is universal, is that there's room out there for more than one discussion."

This is a rather po-faced response to what seemed like a playful comment from Day, and surprising because Duchovny has a wicked sense of humour. He can also afford to be more magnanimous, given that his podcast is at No.12 in the chart and hers at 54.

Gillian Anderson, his *X Files* co-star, certainly likes his podcast, writing last week on Instagram that she had listened to all of the episodes and found them "inti-

mate and vulnerable ... very smart questions, although I wouldn't expect anything else from you (David)".

"It's very sweet," Duchovny says. "I will email her and thank her. I'm sure somebody running my social media is ... I don't really like to be on social media." Later that day his Instagram account replies to Anderson's post: "Thank you for listening, you have an open invite (to appear on his podcast)!"

That encounter would be worth hearing because his relationship with Anderson is fascinating. Despite their chemistry in

The X Files there were rumours of friction – although they looked to be getting on swimmingly when they appeared on Jimmy Kimmel's talk show in 2016 to publicise the return of the show for two more seasons.

When asked by Kimmel about frostiness between her and Duchovny in the '90s, Anderson collapsed into giggles, laid her head in Duchovny's lap and put any reserve down to the dampness of Vancouver, where the series was shot. Her hair kept going frizzy, she explained, and "for every single take we'd have to stand there

and blow-dry my hair again". "And I got pissed at that?" Duchovny asked.

"Well, I think it added to the tension," Anderson said. "It kinda makes me sound like an asshole," he responded.

Anderson had nothing to do with him leaving *The X Files* in 2002, he says now. "That was just me wanting to have a family, but also to try other things. It had kind of taken up my life. There was no animosity with the show and the people I worked with."

"I am proud of the show – it was culturally central in a way that is

very hard to do these days in a fragmented landscape. There's so many lightning-strike aspects to it that I can't help but think of it as some kind of miracle."

The X Files gave conspiracy theories a kind of nobility – "the truth is out there", as its tagline ran. Now they are more widespread and pernicious. "Mulder's way of looking at the world was through conspiracy and that was the fringe at that point," Duchovny says.

"It doesn't seem to be so fringe any more. It's really the world that (*The X Files* creator) Chris Carter

foresaw happening almost 30 years ago. He's almost clairvoyant."

Is Duchovny more evidence-based than Mulder? "Not at all. I'm an artist – I am associative-based and I see poetry as science and science as poetry." So are there some conspiracy theories he buys into? "No, I'm talking about art. I think conspiracies are mostly just lazy thinking."

One failure that has shaped Duchovny is that of his marriage to actor Tea Leoni, who starred in *Bad Boys* and *Deep Impact*. They married in 1997 and have a daughter, West, 25, and a son, Kyd, 22, but divorced in 2014.

"That darkness does deepen you. It makes you more empathetic and humble," Duchovny says. One of the themes of his podcast is "the difference between humiliating and humbling. Often we focus

on humiliation in our culture. I don't see any positives coming from humiliation, but I see a lot of them coming from humility."

One wonders if the reference to humiliation has something to do with Duchovny checking into rehab for sex addiction in 2008. Could him playing the bed-hopping Hank in *Californication* be a case of art imitating life? "People never tire of trying to figure that out," he says with a sigh. "But to me, that's not what acting is about. I don't look for things that are mirroring my life in any way."

Well, there are parallels in *Reverse the Curse*, the 2023 film Duchovny directed, starred in and adapted from his book, *Bucky F. King Dent*. He plays a would-be novelist who has "sacrificed his artistic dream to put food on the table". His father, a publicist, did the same, publishing his debut at 75, the year before he died.

The film boasts some funny scenes, including one where Marty and his son have a farting competition in a motel room that ends up smelling like "an aquarium that fed a sock".

That may have come from a line in *Aquarius*, where someone says something similar about a police station. "I might have ripped it off, I'm not sure," Duchovny says. "You can ask Elizabeth Day about that."

THE TIMES

Business's biggest hearts save lives of littlest hearts

Aussie philanthropy helps fund children's heart hospital

ALAN HOWE

Days after the attacks on southern Israel by the depraved young fighters from Gaza last October, Hamas terrorists trained in hate and rocketry by Iran aimed their missiles haphazardly at central Israel. Some of these fell on the city of Holon, south of Tel Aviv.

They hoped for as much death and destruction as possible.

Ironically, those rockets detonated near the Wolfson Medical Centre, established by the Wolfson family – Poles who migrated to the toughest parts of Britain, Glasgow's Gorbals district. Isaac Wolfson made his fortune in mail-order shopping and established the Wolfson Foundation in 1955 to give away his fortune. It has given away almost \$4bn and still does so at the rate of \$61m annually.

And there is a firm Australian connection to the Wolfson Centre; based there is the Sylvan Adams Children's Hospital. Doctors work

and train there in pediatric coronary surgery in a project underwritten by the goodwill and funds arranged by Melbourne businessman Alex Waislitz, former vice-president of the Collingwood Football Club. Waislitz's parents were also migrants from Poland.

Waislitz is the Australian patron of Save A Children's Heart, an organisation that raises funds for the children's hospital, which does not discriminate in the lives it saves: kids are taken there from Iraq, Morocco, Syria, Jordan and, until, October 7, more from Gaza than anywhere else. Even the children of senior Hamas officials were treated there.

But it is the young doctors trained there and who then return to their communities across the Middle East and northern Africa that make the biggest difference – those countries are where coronary heart problems remain poorly addressed in the very young who go on to develop life-threatening cardiac complications.

Recently, Dr Stella Mongella was in Australia to take part in a fundraising event arranged by Waislitz – in a room of a few hundred Australian businessmen and



Pediatric coronary surgeon Stella Mongella in Tanzania; and with Alex Waislitz

women the night gathered a further \$700,000 for the cause – and she told the story of how she and her husband, also a pediatric cardiac surgeon, were saving children's lives: two hearts a day, every day.

Mongella spent two years in Israel gaining advanced training in the tricky surgery to repair little hearts in her home country. But her journey started well before that. Growing up in Dar es Salaam, her first language was Swahili; at secondary school she was taught in English. Her public service parents also spoke English. She met her husband, Godwin Sharau, at a hospital when she was a medical student and he was an intern.

Dealing with children's hearts is more complex than adult hearts. Pediatric cardiology is the work of

specialists – all of whom are fully qualified pediatricians. The occurrence of often congenital heart disease in newborns is the same the

'Working in the country's only heart centre you have to push through any crisis of confidence'

DR STELLA MONGELLA
PEDIATRIC HEART SURGEON

world over – about one in every 100 births. "But with more limited resources in Africa, it takes us longer to identify these children."

There is no comprehensive system of fetal screening across Africa

and the Middle East, and even today some tribes are semi-nomadic in rural Tanzania. These people have limited access to health professionals and their children's heart defects can remain undiagnosed for years.

In Tanzania there is one pediatric heart centre. Mongella works there. Sharau is its lead surgeon. By the time children arrive, they have been sick their whole lives. The World Health Organisation recommends one such centre for every five million people. This subjects doctors to the testing challenge of adjudicating which children are most ill and most in need of treatment – "to pick and choose", as Mongella puts it.

Meanwhile, piling on pressure is the trend for acquired heart disease in poorer countries. Rheu-

matic heart disease can stem from untreated throat infection. It is disproportionately common among Indigenous Australians. In Tanzania there may be 300,000 children with the condition. Australia is home to about 10,500 cases.

The so-called "hole-in-the-heart" is most common. This might be where the walls of the heart chambers are defective. Mongella makes the treatment sound simple enough: "We close them up."

The symptoms are a giveaway for trained medical professionals: fast breathing, persistent cough and susceptibility to infections. Commonly, such children don't gain adequate weight and miss other developmental milestones, like the age at which they can sit, crawl and walk.

Mongella can repair two hearts a day. Every two months the team tries to blitz through five cases a day. That still leaves a waiting list many lifetimes long.

It is routine for her these days, but Mongella remembers clearly the first time she operated to save a child: "It is a very daunting task. But we have no choice but to take it on. When you are working in the country's only heart centre you have to push through any crisis of confidence you may have."

She was taken on for further training by Save A Child's Heart, part of its second generation of pediatric surgeons. Not only does SACH offer and pay for training, it spends its funds to supply the expensive equipment needed for the work done by the likes of Mongella.

The organisation also hosts children in Israel for tricky surgery, paying their fares and accommodation, while providing treatment free along with ongoing medication. "All they (unwell children) have to do is bring their passports," says Mongella. SACH has saved more than 7500 young lives across 65 countries so far.

She has three children, two of whom want to become doctors. They'll lead busy lives.

About 15 years ago, Waislitz began to concentrate more on philanthropy and he asked friends which were the most effective health projects – impactful, scalable and with international reach – in which he might become involved. "They came up with Save A Child's Heart, so I visited them,

and my involvement with them has been all the way since." He said he was hugely impressed with the staff and what they were trying to achieve – and also attracted to the idea that it was not political, nor religious; just a focus on saving children, no matter who they were nor where they came from.

To deal with the backlog of young patients, and the increasing demand, Waislitz decided to focus on training doctors and other members of the cardiac units. For this he designed and supports a scholarship system.

"I thought it best to train these doctors and the teams in the cardiac units in Israel at the centre of excellence," he said. They would return to their home countries, form cardiac units and continue to save lives while training others – partly funded by SACH, which sends regular missions of support.

"I thought that would be the most impactful approach. And now it is starting to happen. There is a centre in Dar es Salaam, a centre in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, last year we opened in Kigali in Rwanda and this year we'll open in Zambia."

Waislitz spoke to Sabin Nsanziimana, Rwanda's Health Minister, himself a Swiss-trained specialist in epidemiology, who has ambitions for his country to use the SACH program to become the regional centre for saving the lives of children with heart defects.

(To make a tax-deductible donation to SACH go to saveachildsheart.org)