

# I went to hell on the way

by **Antonia Hoyle**

**W**HEN Robin Banks pitched for an investment in his business on BBC2's *Dragons' Den* last week, it was his personality as much as his money-spinning idea that clinched the deal. 'We're not investing so much in the company,' multi-millionaires Peter Jones and Theo Paphitis told him. 'We're investing in you.'

As if to prove it, they signed a cheque for £60,000 – an unprecedented £7,000 more than he had asked for.

For any entrepreneur, winning the endorsement of the *Dragons* in front of 3.4 million viewers is a moment of pride. But for Banks – whose range

Last week, he charmed TV's notoriously tough *Dragons* into handing over £60k. But a year ago, blitzed on drink and drugs, DJ Robin Banks was on the brink of death

of recycled gift boxes is the first of its kind in Britain – it was particularly poignant.

Just 12 months ago, drug and alcohol addiction had led to him being written off by everybody who knew him personally – and millions who didn't.

Once Britain's youngest national radio DJ, he spent almost two decades broadcasting on

stations such as Virgin, Kiss and Galaxy. He made his name as a risk-taking rogue for whom nothing – and no one – was off limits. Pranks included declaring his former Virgin boss Chris Evans dead, breaking up listeners' relationships and even hijacking a colleague's show.

Off air, he enjoyed a celebrity-studded social whirl that spiralled out of control. By last summer, he was an alcoholic spending £50,000 a year on cocaine. Such was the scale of his addiction that he was sacked from three jobs – losing the last at Galaxy radio in Manchester after blacking out on air.

Dumped by his girlfriend Debbie – who flew to Australia to get away from him – and rendered too paranoid to leave his house, he checked into a Spanish rehab clinic in a desperate attempt to salvage something from the wreckage of his life. He emerged, six weeks later, sober and contrite.

He flew halfway around the world to win back Debbie and then built up the rapidly expanding business he took into the *Den* last week. And now, at 37, he is also on air again.

'I was an idiot,' he admits. 'It was fun at first but I couldn't stop. My brain couldn't register the hurt I was causing. I ruined my relationship with the woman I wanted to marry. I was thousands of pounds in debt.'

Banks says that taking drugs was normal in the radio industry but concedes: 'I am responsible for what happened to me. In my line of work, behaving badly was encouraged – but it could have killed me.'

Sitting in the kitchen of the detached Leicester home he and Debbie rented when he landed his breakfast show at Leicester Sound radio two months ago – and without so much as caffeinated coffee to clutter his system – he is still a mass of nervous energy.

Debbie, a 26-year-old personal assistant, is significantly calmer but also scarred by their ordeal. 'When we broke up I couldn't stop thinking about him,' she says. 'His addiction has been very painful for me but I'm so proud he's sober again.'

Banks was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, where his father was a furniture repairer and his mother a newspaper reporter. They split up when he was 12 – the same year he landed an unpaid Friday-night DJ slot at his local pirate radio station and had his first drink.

'I was already cheeky,' he recalls. 'I sneaked whisky from Mum's drinks cabinet and distilled alcohol from potatoes in the kitchen. It was a small town and there was nothing else to do.'

**A**T 17, after several stints on local radio, he was offered a job at the now defunct commercial station Atlantic 252. He changed his name to Robin Banks from his birth name of Christian Richardson because 'it was easy to say' and broadcast to 6.3 million listeners for four-and-a-half years before being headhunted by Virgin radio to do its late-night show.

Renting a flat in Primrose Hill, North London, he immersed himself in his new life. 'Back then, Virgin kept beer in their kitchen,' he recalls. 'Everyone drank at work. I expect there are still marks on the ceiling of one of the boardrooms where people headbutted it after dancing on the tables.'

He took cocaine for the first time in the Virgin headquarters in Central London. 'I got this incredible rush,' he says. 'I stayed up all night.'

That evening set a precedent for his



social life. 'I was introduced to drug dealers. A couple would come to the building. Management knew it went on. At first it was just on Friday nights. A gram would last me the weekend.'

He frequented the members-only clubs Soho House and the Groucho Club with media colleagues and celebrities whom he is, perhaps understandably, reluctant to name lest he implicate them in his drug use.

In 1997, Chris Evans – sacked by Radio 1 for his own misbehaviour – bought Virgin radio. A fan of Banks's anarchic style, Evans doubled his salary to a six-figure sum and gave him the prized drive-time slot and a two-year contract.

Yet after just two shows, Banks was sacked for proclaiming his boss dead while on air. 'Chris was on holiday and a listener called to ask why he wasn't presenting his show,' he says. 'I said, "Mr Evans has passed away." It was a joke, but Chris didn't like it.'

Virgin, however, was contractually obliged to carry on paying his salary. He was effectively paid to party and his drug consumption soared.

'I drank beer, whisky and black vodka,' he says. 'I made up a cocktail called Banks's Blaster that is still served in some London bars. I flew first-class around the world, bought two cars and a four-bedroom cottage in Surrey. When I saw Chris Evans in the Groucho Club, I sent him a bottle of champagne. I told him he'd paid for it with the wages I was still getting.'

After nine months, Banks was back in

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# to winning Dragons' Den



**SECOND CHANCE:** Robin Banks and his girlfriend Debbie last week. Above: With business partner Rachel Watkyn and their recycled gift packaging in the Dragons' Den

was and I didn't listen to his radio show,' she says. 'But I was instantly attracted to him. After two weeks I told my mum he was the man I wanted to marry.'

Banks told her he had a problem with alcohol. 'He said he was getting help for it and he didn't drink around me,' she says. It wasn't until a year later that he confessed his cocaine addiction, by which time he was snorting up to four grams – costing £200 – a day.

'Looking back, it was obvious,' she says, 'and I feel stupid I didn't realise. But I was naive – I've never taken a drug in my life.'

'I was shocked. He'd disappear for days on end and turn his phone off. I'd have to turn on the radio to make sure he was alive. I tried to make him get help but he didn't want it. I fell apart.'

By March 2007, Debbie had had enough. 'I quit my job, sold my car and bought a ticket to Australia,' she says. 'But as the months passed I found I couldn't get over him.'

Banks, for his part, descended even further into drug-fuelled despair. 'I couldn't believe I'd lost this beautiful woman I wanted to marry,' he says. 'I never wanted to hurt her.'

In May last year, he was sacked from Kiss, where he had 1.5 million listeners, with his bosses reeling off a string of drug and alcohol-related incidents. Three weeks later, he was offered a three-hour slot on a Sunday afternoon at Galaxy radio in Manchester.

Driving up on a Friday, via his dealer, he stayed awake by taking seven grams of cocaine until he went on air on Sunday.

Arriving at his new employers, he garbled for a few minutes before going on air. He can't remember what he did next but a member of the radio staff brought him his belongings. He was out.

'I drove back home and lay on the floor in the foetal position, crying,' he says. 'My teeth were loose and I'd lost three stone in weight. I'd ruined my career and lost the woman I loved. In a moment of clarity I logged on to the internet and Googled drugs, alcohol and rehab. A place in Andalusia, Spain, called New Life Addiction came up [www.newlifeaddiction.com].'

For six weeks he underwent therapy. He was allowed one five-minute phone call a week, which he used to call his mother. 'She was worried and supportive,' he says. 'I began to regret the way I had behaved. I changed the way I thought and I knew I'd stay sober.'

past behind him, he reverted to his birth name, which he used on Dragons' Den. Shortly afterwards he met 33-year-old Rachel Watkyn, who became his business partner. 'We clicked immediately and I joined her to set up the Tiny Box Company,' he says. 'It's the only company in Britain that sells solely recycled gift packaging. It felt great to be doing something ethical.' Last November, he called Debbie in Australia. 'I said if he wanted to apologise he had to do it to my face,' she says. 'He flew out. I picked him up from Sydney Airport and we stayed up all night talking.' Banks adds: 'I didn't – and haven't – missed alcohol. In our Australian hotel, the only thing I was tempted by in the mini-bar was chocolate.'

Once home, Debbie moved in with him, encouraging him in his new-found sobriety and business acumen.

Two months ago, he was offered the breakfast slot at Leicester Sound. Back to being Robin Banks again, he says presenting is easier now he is sober. 'I missed radio and I am so grateful to have another chance.'

And he has a warning for former colleagues and celebrities still using cocaine. 'Certain people I knew are still doing what I did,' he says. 'They are fooling themselves. It will all end messily. They'll probably die. I know I would be dead if I hadn't stopped.'

the radio business – which was last week accused in an academic report of encouraging the young to drink. This time he landed a job at London station XFM, where he stayed for two years. A spell at Scottish station Beat 106 followed, during which time – deranged on drink and drugs – he brawled with a presenter from a rival show. 'It ended up on the front page. It was great publicity,' he says.

By the time he arrived back in London, at Kiss 100, his reputation had preceded him. 'One of the production staff challenged me to a drinking competition,' he says. 'I was notorious.'

His off-air antics grew increasingly raucous. 'Once, after the Brit Awards, I jumped on to a yacht on the Thames and tried to set sail for Amsterdam. I got one mooring line off before I realised it wasn't going to happen.'

'Another time I jumped into a stranger's limousine that took me to a triad bar, where I was surrounded by guns and escaped through the bathroom window.'

'Once I left my friends at midnight and took a train to Wales. I ended up knocking on the door of a bed and breakfast at 4am. At that stage it was funny. My nights out gave me material for my show.'

He befriended DJ Simon Bates, comedian Steve Coogan and, bizarrely, TV presenter Valerie Singleton after meeting her at a

studio where he was recording an advert. 'I didn't know who she was, but she gave me her phone number. We were both interested in clairvoyancy and had some great phone conversations. One day she asked me, "Don't you know who I am?"'

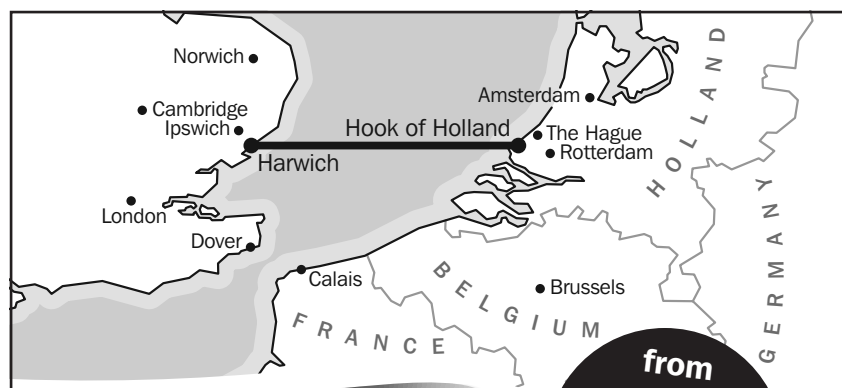
'I hadn't realised she was famous and she liked that. But then someone told the papers I had a crush on her and our friendship stopped, which was a real shame.'

Once, after an evening drinking in London's Soho, he took a pre-recorded show off air and presented his own drunken musings for an hour.

**H**E WAS suspended until the story made the newspapers. 'The Press officer said it was great for the station's profile,' he remembers. 'I felt invincible. I started taking cocaine in the toilets during my show.'

He dated former Radio 5 Live presenter Caroline Feraday for a year but says relationships took a back seat to his substance abuse.

Until, that is, he met Debbie in November 2005. She is endearingly shy and originally from Devon and he is fiercely protective of her. He has asked The Mail on Sunday not to print her surname. She was a 'seat filler' at a Channel 4 awards ceremony when they caught each other's eye. 'I didn't know who he



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