SEARCHING FOR CLIVE

Clive Myrie is *everywhere*. Do we know him any better for it?

Tom Flanagan and Kiran Duggal find out

Clive Myrie doesn't have any enemies. At least none that he's aware of. He smiles affably, surveying the view of London from the fifth floor of the BBC Broadcasting House. "Hopefully," chuckles the veteran BBC correspondent and host of *Mastermind*. After almost an hour spent with him, there's little reason to believe otherwise. For a man who has covered the invasion of Ukraine and spent much of the past year reporting from a nation under siege, he's remarkably buoyant.

That could be experience talking. The 58-year old is a familiar face to anyone who has consumed BBC news in the past decade. Relied on for his clarity and unflappable calm, Myrie has reported on most major world events of the 21st century. He's seen presidents impeached, regimes crumble and reigns topple, all while keeping his distinct sheen of professionalism. He's graced primetime TV and moonlighted as celebrity; few of his contemporaries pivot between reporting on the invasion of Ukraine to being a guest on *The Graham Norton Show* alongside Daniel Craig. But after 30 years on the job, for one of Britain's most recognisable journalistic voices and the poster child of the BBC, the question remains: who really is Clive Myrie?

Google his name and it's a question that comes up in headlines over and over again. In fact, a quick search for the most-asked questions relating to Myrie are ones of the most basic kind: Where is Clive Myrie? Does Clive Myrie have a family? Why does Clive Myrie wear a scarf? He's everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Everyone knows his face, but they don't know him much better for it, possibly a result of the impartiality mandated by his BBC career.

But on a bright winter's day at the BBC Broadcasting House, he's preparing to answer at least some of those questions; his family background, his ascendancy to chief correspondent at the BBC, racism and classism over the years and even his almost celebrity persona, though the scarf remains a mystery.

Myrie is dressed down, sporting a grey sweater and his signature chequered blue and green scarf; in a kind of disarming informality that belies his importance. Nicola Sturgeon has just resigned as First Minister of Scotland and he's about to jet off to Edinburgh right after this conversation. Later this week, there's a trip to Ukraine for the first anniversary of the invasion. And only last week he announced his memoir as well as putting the final touches on a documentary travelogue series dubbed *Clive Myrie's Italian Road Trip*. "The year's only a month in but it feels like a hell

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of a lot has happened," says Myrie.

For somebody so associated with the heavyweights of political journalism and war correspondency, an Italian travelogue series feels surprising. Perhaps that's in part because of the perceived seriousness of the BBC; a sort of impenetrable veneer that leaves little space for a personality to foster. Yet Myrie says this work of travel journalism is as much a reflection of who he is beyond the newsreader as it is a celebration of his journalistic career so far.

"I'm revisiting a lot of places I've worked in and it's fantastic," says Myrie. "I love opera and I go to the opera festival in Verona every year. But I'm also going to places I've reported from. Like Catania where I covered the migrant boat crisis in 2015-16. And Rome obviously, where I did a lot of reporting on the political machinations while as a Europe correspondent." Myrie lists the destinations he's reported from with the BBC – Rome, Brussels, DC, Tokyo, Kyiv – which he joined back in 1987 as a trainee reporter for local radio. He's been everywhere.

Once upon a time though, he was just a boy from Bolton. One of five children, he was born to a Jamaican mother who worked as a seamstress for Mary Quant after immigrating to the UK as part of the Windrush Generation. Beyond remembering his mother's work, one of Myrie's earliest memories is feeling so sick with nerves about going to primary school that he ended up throwing up. But he managed. He later went to grammar school before heading to the University of Sussex to study law. Yet exams weren't on his mind. Instead it was conflict – specifically the Falklands War in 1982- ironic for a man who would later end up reporting from nations under siege. "I had this fear that I'd be sent over and lots of young men my age, which was 17, would be sent because of conscription," he says. There was no conscription in the end but it's one of the memories that stayed with Myrie ahead of university. "All I remember was just being at school and being really worried that we were going to get dragged to the other side of the world."

And dragged he was. Call it clairvoyance, call it fate, Myrie's life has been one defined by conflict – war and peace, the personal and the professional, being Black and the face of the BBC. His rise through the ranks as a young Black journalist – from BBC's graduate scheme to radio in Bristol to foreign correspondent – is exactly the kind of fairytale story any workplace would want publicised.

As one of their first Black broadcasters, Myrie has seen the BBC address its lack of diversity. He recalls how things have changed since his early days at work: "My development as a journalist, from being a student at University and getting into the business, has really coincided with a complete transformation of not just British society, but global society, in terms of the idea of diversity and what it means.

"There's no question that when I joined the BBC, there were very few Black people and very few people of colour that represented and were reflective of the times. Having a Black British foreign correspondent was never part of anyone's plan. But as I've developed through this organisation, there has been this realisation not just within the BBC, but in wider society that that's just not right."

Things may have changed but journalism is still a whitewashed industry. According to the most recent poll of the industry, published by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), only about one in ten journalists are non-white. The numbers are higher for journalists in junior roles, however at an editorship level, there is less representation from non-white backgrounds. The BBC, Myrie explains, has higher than average numbers. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) make up 15 per cent of the workforce compared to approximately 18 per cent of the population of England and Wales; something he says people are often surprised to hear. Yet the BBC still has work to do.

"The BBC is funded by the licence fee that everyone pays, which means you've got to look as if you're representing everyone and you have to substantively represent everyone," says Myrie. "The idea that you're only going to have white males broadcasting is just dumb. And the BBC finally understands this – and that it represents an existential threat."

While the BBC gets a rap for its perceived whiteness, Myrie is swift in coming to its defence. "I've been to universities to talk to students on journalism courses and a lot of them will say 'Oh, no, I'm not joining the BBC. It's white, it's male and it's stale, I'm going to *Channel Four*.' What was interesting was that an audit of ethnic minority pay and representation at Channel Four showed it was way worse than the BBC.

"But there's a perception that the BBC is not diverse. So, a lot of work is overcoming that perception. In order to do that you need to see the evidence of that on screen."

That doesn't mean it's perfect. "We don't have enough senior leaders in positions who are Black," he explains. "So the BBC understands it's got a long, long way to go. Because if people aren't paying the licence fee, that means no BBC.

"But for people of colour and queer people, we're getting a foot in the door now. There's this idea that if you are white, male and straight it's going to be interesting for you moving forward within a big organisation. There's a sense that the privileges that you had, are now not going to be in your favour. People like us are finally being heard."

It's not a case of virtue signalling and rewarding people based on ethnicity or identity though. "No person who's queer, or Asian or Black should ever believe that they deserve to get something when they shouldn't – you've got to be able to do the job. All your ideas, thoughts and abilities should be taken into account on the same level as everybody else. And it's simply about levelling the playing field. That's all it is."

The friendly face of the BBC, Myrie is a product of what happens when you actively seek to represent the diversity of the nation in journalism. His reach extends beyond just writing and broadcasting. Some might even consider him a celebrity. He doesn't see himself as a star, just a regular guy. "I actually go to Waitrose and Sainsbury's to shop," he says. "People come up to me saying 'I don't recognise you without the suit'. Well, why would I be buying avocados in Waitrose in a suit?" He makes a good point and the image of Myrie in Waitrose reaching for avocados is a glimpse into his off-air persona, even if he's quick to move onto more serious topics. So is this the real Myrie?

He laughs, shifts in his chair and folds his hands across his lap, a cloud of rectitude descending once more. It's easy to get swept

"I was in Ukraine when the hotel was shaking from the explosions. It was scary"

up in Myrie's natural gravitas even when there are glimmers of the person behind it. Especially when he speaks of the BBC. He exudes confidence and belief, notably in journalism as a honourable career, citing Ukraine as an example of that. Myrie after all, was the BBC's on-the-ground reporter; providing audiences with unrivalled closeness to the action and a more personal portrait of his reporting style than his usual evening news slots.

"I was in Ukraine when the hotel was shaking from the explosions," he says. "The sirens were going off and it was scary. But I felt it was important given the age of disinformation that we live in to try to be there, to give an objective idea of what the truth is."

This, he says, is especially true when facing people like Putin. With journalists being targeted in Russia and elsewhere- 67 were killed last year according to the International Federation of Journalists- there is more duty on journalists to be the voice that can always be heard.

The BBC have traditonally faced criticism for their lack of stance on news but there are some

moments which Myrie believes warrant it. "Look at Putin's nonsense of grievance over Poland joining the EU or Lithuania, or Latvia or Estonia," he says animatedly. "He didn't give a monkey's about any of them. It's Ukraine. Why? Because Ukraine, in his head, is part of Mother Russia. Ukraine is completely different. And that is how we have to report the story."

But nobody is infallible. Not him and not the BBC, something he is quick to acknowledge. The BBC's prestige as a neutral broadcaster has been tested in the past with its coverage of climate change where it fell into the trap of false equivalence by inviting climate crisis deniers alongside climate scientists. But it survived and better yet learned from accusations that its coverage was uncritical – or not critical enough. Something he hoped to reflect in his coverage of Ukraine.

"The BBC was hauled over the coals for its climate coverage in the past and quite rightly," says Myrie. "Those people who point to fault sequences in the BBC, sometimes they get it right. Sometimes they just don't like hearing the opposing point of view, which is, I think, another point to make. But fundamentally, you try to give each argument in a debate the weight it deserves, and that's called due impartiality.

"Ukraine is a classic example. False equivalence would be – Putin is worried about NATO moving closer to his border and that the Ukrainians might attack. Due impartiality is – he has illegally invaded a peaceful neighbour for no good reason. That is how we report this war. That is how the war should be covered. That is why I'm proud because we've been reporting the story on those terms."

Myrie pauses and studies the BBC office. There's a lot of pride in his work, but he acknowledges that the BBC's reporting has some way to go in other areas like class barriers in journalism. As the working class Bolton-bred boy, what does he think knowing that 80 per cent of journalists come from upper-class backgrounds? And possibly just as pressing, the statistic uncovered by social mobility charity the Sutton Trust, that a third of the UK's top journalists hail from Oxbridge?

It's a problem and a question he navigates deftly. "We may have improved diversity, when it comes to race, ethnicity, gender, but we still don't have many working-class people getting into this trade, at the highest levels," explains Myrie. "That class divide is present across all industries but it's particularly visible in journalism. It's worse in some areas like print which are private entities who are not beholden to the public in the same way public service broadcasters like the BBC and ITV are. The papers are too busy looking at the Petronellas and Luciens."

He laughs and flicks a knowing glance, "Not that there's anything wrong with those names of course." The kind of reflexive diplomacy you'd expect from a BBC-trained journalist but a glimpse of more unvarnished opinions. Getting those isn't easy. He's both deeply personal as an interviewee and simultaneously a bit unknowable, like a colleague you see every day but don't know anything about. He's married but we only know that from sparse coverage of his life – he met his wife Catherine, who works as a furniture upholsterer, at a book launch on Swiss cheese – and because he says his most treasured possession is his wedding ring. Kids aren't mentioned, not that they need to be, nor is anything like how his mental health fared while reporting from Ukraine.

Get him on the big issues, like class in journalism and he starts talking, even if he doesn't always have the answer. He might be the voice of reason for news but he acknowledges that broadening the socio-economic status of journalists can't be solved quickly. It is something we have to keep talking about – increasingly and loudly. "Nine times out of 10, if you sit down and explain to someone why diversity is important, they get it. But taking the time to talk to people, regardless of your viewpoints, and explaining to people what a situation is, well that's revelatory."

He leans forward and clasps his hands, like a storyteller well aware of their power and rapt audience, as he flits to anecdotes of him on the bus and the conversations he's overheard on the state of journalism today. Myrie might report on news at the most macro level but he's always observing what's around him and what's being talked about on the ground. "I had this amazing experience the other day when I was sitting on the bus and listening to these boys talk about a Czech footballer who'd just come out as gay," he explains, a massive Manchester City fan, his interest was piqued. "One boy didn't understand why the man still had to come out in this day and age and I wanted to turn around to him and say: 'It would be so great if everyone thought the way you did, but they don't.' And that's why we need to talk about things, especially to Gen Z who believe everybody is born equal."

Myrie takes a breath. The gusto and conviction still lingering. Even when he says all this, he does it carefully, sensitively and always with clarity. This is possibly why, when he's not reporting from conflict zones, he makes such a good game show host. He's always guiding, always polished and always comfortable. How many journalists can say the same thing?

He is ever-present. Perhaps that's why we trust him. Myrie is on the ground, in our living rooms and on our phone screens. Do we know him any better because of that?

"The thing about being a news presenter is people think they know you because they see you everywhere. On the six o'clock news, the ten o'clock news, *Mastermind*. In many ways it's wonderful," says Myrie. "But it's only a sliver of who I am. History will look back on these programmes and I'm happy for them to see me as just a guy, reading out loud. And what's different about me than any other guy doing the same? Well, everything."

BBC/William Cherry/Press Eye