



Copyright © 2022 Criminal Productions. All rights reserved. This text may not be published online or distributed without written permission. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Episode 199: Ghostwatch
Air Date: October 21, 2022

[eerie, dramatic orchestral music] [archival audio]

Host: The program you're about to watch is a unique live investigation of the supernatural. It contains material which some viewers may find to be disturbing. No creaking gates, no gothic towers, no shutter windows. Yet for the past 10 months, this house has been the of an astonishing barrage of supernatural activity.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: On Halloween night in 1992 at 9:25 p.m. an unusual television show aired on the BBC.

[archival audio] [eerie music]

Host: So welcome live this Halloween night to the first ever TV *Ghostwatch*. We're going to investigate one of the most baffling and fascinating areas of human experience — the supernatural. Tonight, television is going ghost hunting in an unprecedented scientific experiment where we hope to show you for the first time irrefutable proof that ghosts really do exist.

[dramatic, eerie organ music]

Phoebe Judge: The host, a longtime BBC talk show host and journalist named Michael Parkinson told viewers how the live investigation would work. The BBC's Sarah Greene would be spending the night at a house whatever happened at the house. During the show people at home could call a phone number broadcast on the screen and share their own experiences with ghosts, and also to comment on whatever they were seeing on the show. This style of live broadcast was popular at the time. There was a show called *Crimewatch* that also had a call-in element, and one called *Hospital Watch*. This one on Halloween night was called *Ghostwatch*. The host Michael Parkinson introduced a woman in the studio with him as an expert on the paranormal who would help explain what was going on during the show. She said she had been investigating the haunted house, which was in London, on a street called Fox Hill Drive for months.

[archival audio from *Ghostwatch*]

Paranormal Expert: We ran a computer program of all the haunted locations in the UK and then we did a census of all the various investigators, and they were all unanimous that Fox Hill had more tangible phenomena on record than...well, I was gonna say, any place in the world, but certainly any place in the UK.

Michael Parkinson: What's the chance, do you think, of us seeing anything tonight?

Paranormal Expert: I don't honestly know. Sometimes we saw nothing for weeks and then other times things were coming through thick and fast. I mean, so much so that we had difficulty logging it all. Some nights it was like being in a circus or a war zone.

Michael Parkinson: A war zone?

Paranormal Expert: Yeah. It was that bad.

Michael Parkinson: Well, what about Halloween? Will that make any difference, do you think?

Paranormal Expert: Yeah, I think it will. Certainly there are more reports on Halloween than almost any other night of the year, but maybe that's because people expect to see things.

[curious, suspenseful music]

Stephen Volk: I've always been interested in ghost stories.

Phoebe Judge: This is Stephen Volk. By 1992 when *Ghostwatch* aired, he'd written a few horror movies. One of them was directed by the same person who directed *The Exorcist*. Another was a reimagining of the vacation to Switzerland that inspired Mary Shelley to write *Frankenstein*. He'd been interested in the ways novels like *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are constructed. Both novels are presented as non-fiction, a series of letters and journal entries.

Stephen Volk: And it struck me that many, many literary ghost stories that you read begin, *I'm gonna tell you something that's quite unbelievable, but I really want you to know this really happened to me. I know you're not gonna believe me, but it really did happen to me.* And being a television writer, I always thought what is the television equivalent of telling that kind of ghost story with that kind of authenticity? And it struck me, well, what they would do in TV if they told the ghost story is just put a camera in someone's face and the person would tell you, this really happened to me. This is what nonfiction TV is all about. You interview people straight to their face and they tell you the story.

Phoebe Judge: So Stephen decided to do just that. He wrote a ghost story and pitched the idea to the BBC. It would be a ghost story presented as an actual live documentary investigation. Everything was designed to look as real as possible. But it only aired once.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[eerie music intensifies]

Stephen Volk was used to writing movies. But writing what was supposed to look like live television was something else altogether. Live TV was full of mistakes and

interruptions, and you never knew what would happen. He studied telethons and roving reporter pieces and shows in front of live audiences.

Stephen Volk: It was a bit of guesswork. For instance, in a movie, when you're writing a movie, you never put exposition on the screen. You never have someone saying, oh, I moved into this house and it was haunted and my kids were scared. You just don't do it like that. And of course, that's the complete reverse of what you do on television. You always thrust a microphone into someone's face and have them tell you a story or interview them and ask them questions straight. So, I had to construct these kind of interview situations and question and answer sessions rather than the way I'd normally do it in a movie.

[to Stephen]

Phoebe Judge: And what was the reaction from the BBC when you first brought them this idea?

Stephen Volk: I don't think they quite got what it was trying to be, which was basically something that looked like something else. So when the BBC saw what we were up to, it was a bit kind of taken aback and kind of bemused. I remember the executive producer, Richard Brooke, when he saw the first cut that Leslie, the director, presented to him, he was quite amazed that there was a shot where one of the technicians kind of moved in the front of the camera and the camera kind of wobbled. And he said, "Why in earth have you left that in?!" [moody jazzy music]

Leslie Manning: One of the things that I love about live TV or what I did love as a child watching live TV are the mistakes.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: This is Leslie Manning, the director of *Ghostwatch*.

Leslie Manning: To do credit to the story as written, I wanted to present it as close to live TV as I possibly could.

Phoebe Judge: Like Stephen, Leslie says she watched a lot of live TV to prepare. She says she also watched a lot of documentaries to see how she could direct the actors. She remembers telling them to dial back their performances. In addition to the actors, she included real people on camera talking about their own ghost stories. The

Ghostwatch team also decided to use very well-known and respected BBC hosts on the show, people viewers would be used to seeing doing interviews or documentary programs.

Stephen Volk: It was a gamble because we were casting people like Michael Parkinson, who was like a Larry King kind of character, I guess you would say in terms of America, to be an actor. And there was no guarantee that he was gonna be able to do any of it really.

Phoebe Judge: Leslie says they also didn't want actors playing the camera crew.

Leslie Manning: So we asked around the BBC if there's anybody, any of the studio camera guys who actually were happy to be on camera. And we got two people back, one sound, one camera, and they got the job.

Stephen Volk: There was a lot of handheld camera. Leslie tended to work out quite long takes so that the camera would be moving around the whole time—upstairs, downstairs, you know, around the corner and this kind of thing—which is not normally how you'd work on a movie, for instance. You'd have hundreds of angles, and hundreds of shifts of lighting in order to do one sequence or one scene. And it was lower quality. It was a video camera. I mean, I think that's what outraged the higher up people at the drama department because they were used to something that was kind of well-lit and in a way well-acted and well-presented. And the composition of every shot was considered. But because of the nature of this, none of those things really mattered. The only thing that mattered was it had to look like it was happening before your eyes. [pensive music] And if it's happening before your eyes, all those other considerations don't really matter.

Leslie Manning: The point of it was, really, do you believe everything you see on television?

Phoebe Judge: On the first page of the *Ghostwatch* script, Stephen wrote, "I won't believe it until I see it on TV." On Halloween night, on the BBC's drama time slot when they usually showed movies, a short introduction indicated that what viewers were about to see was fictional. But it was vague. It described *Ghostwatch* as a film and the real BBC hosts and *Ghostwatch* as starring in it.

Stephen Volk: If you miss that, then goodness knows what you were expecting.

Phoebe Judge: According to the BBC, around 11 million people were watching on Halloween night. The program began with what looks like timestamped research footage from a few months earlier. It shows two girls sleeping in their bedroom. Then in the middle of the night, there's a loud banging sound and they start screaming at one point, the light bulb and the bedside lamp burst. Soon after that, the camera goes to what looks like a live feed of the reporter at the house, Sarah Greene, interviewing the two girls, Kim and Suzanne and their mother Pam—all played by actresses—about the problems they've been having at the house over the last 10 months.

[archival audio from *Ghostwatch*]

Pam: These terrible noises likely coming from the walls, like a thudding.

Sarah Greene: All around you?

Pam: Yes. Like, the whole room was going to come apart.

[footsteps as Pam shows Sarah around the room]

Sarah Greene: Did anybody else hear it?

Pam: Yes, Suze and Kim heard it.

Sarah Greene: Kimmy, if you heard it too, what sort of a noise was it?

[someone hits the wall imitating the noise, making a dull, thudding sound]

Kim: I was screaming, I was shouting, "What is it? What is it?"

Mother: Well, I didn't know what to say. They were that terrified. So I said it was pipes, you know, it's central heating. So afterwards whenever Kim heard something, she'd say it's pipes, "Pipes is here."

Phoebe Judge: In the studio, someone had called into the phone line. The caller said they saw something in the earlier footage of the girl's bedroom.

[archival audio from *Ghostwatch*]

[over the phone]

Caller: You know at the beginning when you showed the real footage of that haunted bedroom? [host affirms] Well, I know it was dark, but I was sure I could see a figure standing behind against the wall just by the curtain. Very, very vague, but definitely a figure there. [eerie music]

Phoebe Judge: Michael Parkinson asked to have the tape rewind so everyone could see it again. And then you could make out a figure standing by the curtains.

Stephen Volk: But the presenter Michael Parkinson says, "I don't see anything. Do you?" Whereas it has been on screen, so I imagined everyone at home going, 'But I did see something!' He's saying he didn't see anything. [chuckles] And I love that idea. It's an idea that's purely television. You couldn't do it in a movie, you couldn't do it in a book. It's purely the relationship between the presenter and the audience making that moment work.

Phoebe Judge: As the program continued, more calls came in about the figure.

[archival audio from *Ghostwatch*]

Michael Parkinson: Well, the strange thing is that we're still getting calls about that shadowy figure that we've seen in the haunted bedroom, or people think they've seen in the haunted bedroom. What's really weird is these are all tallying with the description. These are all different phone calls. They're generally all saying that it's an old man or a woman, bald with a skull-like head, dark eyes, or some are just saying holes for eyes, and wearing a black robe or a dress, which is buttoned up to the neck.

Phoebe Judge: Things got stranger and stranger at the house. There are cat sounds coming from the walls.

[archival audio from *Ghostwatch*]

[sound of cat meowing]

Mother: Do you hear it?

Phoebe Judge: And one of the girls suddenly has scratches all over her face.

Kim: What's wrong with Suzy?

Mother: What do you mean what's wrong with Suzy?

Phoebe Judge: At that point, about an hour into the program, Michael Parkinson tells viewers that they're extending coverage beyond the scheduled window.

Michael Parkinson: I should tell you who joined to see the next program that in fact we're staying with what we have here from Fox Hill Drive because the events are so remarkable and dramatical that we'll be staying with them for as long as we have to.

Phoebe Judge: Things continue to escalate in the house. It seems as if at one point of the girls becomes possessed.

[demonic murmuring]

Mother: Stop it! Stop it, Suzy. [demonic murmuring continues]

Phoebe Judge: Then the connection with the studio is lost. [piercing scream from one of the girls] And after it comes back, the reporter Sarah Greene gets trapped in the small closet under the stairs with whatever is haunting the house.

Michael Parkinson: Sarah! Sarah! [demonic screeching, loud crashing sounds and general chaos in the background]

Stephen Volk: Yeah, at that point, Ruth, the producer always said, everyone's gonna realize it's a drama now, so we can do what we like. [chuckles] So, we kind of went a bit crazy in the last five minutes. [loud crashing and eerie squeaking sound]

Phoebe Judge: Back at the studio, unmanned cameras start rolling across the stage. Studio lights are exploding, and Michael Parkinson seems totally confused. [panicked voices chattering and someone says "I'm not going" in the background]

Michael Parkinson: Studio's completely dark, just blackness now. All the lights have failed, the power's gone off. [long pause] We've got some, some lights in the studio. I don't know...There's cameras, but I dunno which one's working. [chuckling nervously] I mean, there are no cameramen. I mean, it's difficult to know even if anybody's still with us. But if they are, [creepy high-pitched screeching] this is the scene in this studio, this totally deserted studio.

Phoebe Judge: He slowly walks towards the camera

Michael Parkinson: Are the cues working?

Phoebe Judge: And it becomes clear that he's become possessed by something as the camera fades to black.

Michael Parkinson: Round and round the garden like a teddy bear. [yowling and screeching continues and then a low eerie voice murmurs Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum as yowling intensifies into viscous cat fight]

Phoebe Judge: The night *Ghostwatch* aired, everyone who worked on it got together to have a party and to watch the show, in part so that no one would see Sarah Greene at a restaurant when she was supposed to be trapped in a haunted house. The producer, Ruth Baumgarten was at the BBC studios to make sure everything was going well. She wanted to keep an eye on the phone lines. They'd posted the normal BBC number on the screen during *Ghostwatch*, both to give the illusion that the calls on the show were really coming in live, and to allow viewers at home to call in and react. Towards the end of the night, Ruth joined the rest of the crew at the party.

Stephen Volk: She said that as she was leaving, the technicians were looking up at the big screen in the lobby saying to each other, "My God, what's going on in Studio One?" [curious music] And that was the first time she thought, oh my God, even the technicians watching the thing go out are starting to worry about what's happening. And by the time she got to us, she said the phone system at the BBC was jammed. There were hundreds of complaints logged. And it all went a bit crazy.

Phoebe Judge: Ruth and director Leslie Manning had prepared for some worried callers during the show. They had operators ready to tell anyone who called that the whole thing was fake, just a Halloween special. But there were too many calls and not enough operators. The BBC estimated that 20,000 people called that night.

Stephen Volk: The people that complained, there's quite a wide range of different reactions. Some people were genuinely scared. Some people were outraged because they feel they were made a mug, like someone had played a trick on them, like a candid camera. And also, there was this additional level of the trust that's invested in the BBC to tell the truth, and to be the nation's protector in a way. BBC was the first television station, and for decades the only television station. So all the way through the second World War, both in radio and TV the BBC was relied on for national news. So that's why colloquially, it's known as "Auntie" because the BBC is relied on as kind of one of the family, if you like, for reliability and trust, which I think added to their sense of outrage.

Leslie Manning: The phrase that sort of stuck was that Auntie had broken faith with the nation.

Phoebe Judge: Director Leslie Manning.

Leslie Manning: I was totally surprised by the whole reaction. The BBC show *Points of View* read letters from viewers after *Ghostwatch* aired. One person said the BBC should be locked up. Someone else said the show was brilliant and that it wasn't the BBC's fault that people didn't understand that it was fiction. Another BBC show called *Bite Back* also responded.

[archival audio from *Bite Back*]

[audience claps]

Host: Hello and welcome to *Bite Back*, the program in which you, the viewer, take the program makers to task. And there are hundreds of you who want to do exactly that following Halloween night when the BBC pretended to investigate the supernatural in *Ghostwatch*. The switchboard was jammed with complaints. Children were terrified. Pregnant women had gone into labor, and intelligent people felt duped. Conversely, many of the 11 million who watched it thought it was a brilliant piece of television. Well, what was it? A treat or a dangerous trick?

Phoebe Judge: This wasn't the first time the BBC had aired a hoax. 35 years earlier on April Fool's Day in 1957, the BBC aired a very short segment on a current affairs program about farmers in Switzerland who grew spaghetti.

[archival audio from BBC program] [sweet, light-hearted orchestration]

Narrator: After picking, the spaghetti is laid out to dry in the warm alpine sun. Many people are often puzzled by the fact that spaghetti is produced at such uniform length, but this is the result of many years of patient endeavor by plant breeders who've succeeded in producing the perfect spaghetti.

Phoebe Judge: A lot of people believed it. [curious music] In part because not many people cooked spaghetti at home in England in the 1950s, but also because the fake documentary looks real. Even the director general of the BBC tried to look up spaghetti in the Encyclopedia Britannica after he watched the segment, but the encyclopedia didn't even have an entry for spaghetti at the time. Some viewers called in to ask where

they could get a spaghetti tree for themselves and whether it would grow in English weather. BBC operators had been coached to stick with the joke and say, “Place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best.” One viewer said he thought the program had used trick photography because, quote, “Spaghetti grows horizontally, not vertical.” But the BBC reported that most of the callers, quote, “Did not quite grasp what was going on, but somehow felt spaghetti does not grow on trees”, and that most of the people who called in took the joke well. The viewers of *Ghostwatch* were much more upset. Even though the show ran after 9 p.m.—the publicized time when the BBC transitioned to content that might not be appropriate for children—many children did watch it. And many of them were scared. One viewer on the *Bite Back* program said she knew it was a spoof, but her son didn't.

[archival audio from *Bite Back*]

Guest 1: He reacted instantly. He was very distressed instantly to something very sinister in the presentation and nothing had actually happened. And I think you mentioned that you were anxious to put it against—the ghost story—against a contemporary background, I think it's that actually that made it most sinister.

Host: Martin Plum, you want to make a point?

Guest 2: I didn't know it was a drama. I've got three children of 14, 12, and 10, and I just thought it was gonna be a very safe...

Host: And were they frightened?

Guest 2: Well, yes. I mean to the degree that my youngest child, who was 10, rushed out of the room, vomited in the hall, was absolutely ashen faced, wouldn't even talk about the thing for two or three hours. And it was at one o'clock in the morning that I got her to talk about it, and she wouldn't sleep in her own bed for two nights.

Phoebe Judge: Five days after *Ghostwatch* aired in 1992, a teenager with intellectual disabilities died by suicide. His parents said the show caused their son's death. They said he had seemed hypnotized by the show and that when the pipes in their house made the same banging sound as the ghost in *Ghostwatch*, he became upset. He asked to move bedrooms and spoke to his parents often about ghosts. The note he left read, “Please don't worry. If there are ghosts, I will be a ghost and I will be with you always as a ghost.” His stepfather told reporters, “In my own mind I hold the BBC completely responsible for his death.” His parents sent in a formal complaint to the

Broadcasting Standards Council, which eventually concluded that the BBC had, quote, “a duty to do more than simply hint at the deception it was practicing on the audience”.

Stephen Volk: The BBC reaction was really to batten down the hatches and pretend the program never happened. I think a memo went round that nobody should ever mention it again. [minimal piano music]

Phoebe Judge: Seven years later, the movie *The Blair Witch Project* used a similar documentary style approach. The movie was presented as found footage that had been shot by three film students who had decided to take recording equipment into the woods to investigate a series of murders rumored to have been committed by a witch. The students never make it out of the woods, but what they recorded eventually does. The way the movie was marketed made it hard to tell if it was real or not. It was 1999, and the marketing team used the relatively new internet to create confusion. They posted missing persons photos in chat rooms, and even the movie's IMDB page made it seem like the cast was missing. Three years later, the British Film Institute released a 10-year anniversary DVD of *Ghostwatch*, and many people were finally able to see it for the first time. Since then, the documentary style format has become popular in horror movies like *Paranormal Activity*. But Stephen says that when *Ghostwatch* came out, this kind of style wasn't so well known, and even people close to him who knew exactly what he was trying to make were still confused by the show.

Stephen Volk: A couple of weeks before it aired on Halloween, I spent some time with a friend of mine and said as I was leaving, “Oh, by the way, I've got this drama going out on Halloween night. Let me know what you think”, as one does. And I spoke to her after the event and she said, “Oh, I thought it was real!” And I said, “What do you mean you thought it was real? I told you I'd written it.” And she said, “Oh yeah. But when I saw Michael Parkinson, I thought you must have got something wrong.” And that maybe is the power of the kind of image of TV that however much you tell people it might not be real. Perceptually it feels real. And that for me was the whole purpose of it — is to actually get the audience to think, what am I looking at? What am I listening to? Do I believe this? Can I believe my eyes? One of the things that happened that was part of our psyche, if you like, when we made *Ghostwatch*, was it was during the time of the first Gulf War. We remember seeing some footage by CNN would it be?—or NBC— news footage of the bombing of Baghdad. And the news station had put music over it. And Ruth, the producer said, “Look at this. They put music over the bombing!” And it's kind of like, that's a drama convention. [curious music] But they've used it on news. And I was seeing shows like *Hill Street Blues* or *NYPD Blue*, where documentary techniques like handheld cameras were being used, and drama to make it look like documentary. And documentaries like *Rescue 999* were using actors to reenact scenes that had

happened to people. So actors were being used in nonfiction, and fiction was starting to look like documentary. So it was a blurring of the edges between these things in the early '90s. And that was very much what we were playing with, you know, what is truth and what is made up.

Phoebe Judge: Many publications have called *Ghostwatch* a descendant of the most famous broadcast hoax, Orson Welles' 1938 radio drama adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. It was broadcast on October 30th, just before Halloween. If you don't know it, *The War of the Worlds* was presented as breaking news about a strange object landing on a farm in New Jersey. And what happened after it opened.

[archival audio from *The War of the Worlds* radio drama]

Character: Ladies, gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I've ever witnessed. [voices chattering and screaming frantically in the background] Wait a minute, someone's crawling out of something...I can see peering out of that black hole two luminous discs of the eyes. It might be a face, might be on... [voices continue chattering frantically] Good heavens, something's wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake. Now it's another one, and another one, and another one. They look like tentacles to me. There I can see the thing's body...

Phoebe Judge: During the rest of the broadcast reports continue to come in about Martians invading New Jersey and New York and possibly the rest of the country. But the broadcast ends with an announcement from Orson Welles.

[archival audio from *The War of the Worlds* radio drama]

Orson Welles: This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen, out of character, to assure you that *The War of the Worlds* has no further significance than as the holiday offering it was intended to be, the Mercury Theater's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying boo! So goodbye everybody, and remember, please, for the next day or so the terrible lesson you learn tonight — that grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch. And if your doorbell rings and nobody's there, that was no Martian, it's Halloween. [grandiose orchestration]

Phoebe Judge: The next day newspapers reported that listeners had really believed that there was a Martian invasion and had panicked. Orson Welles told papers that he didn't expect most people to believe the broadcast was real, but said that, "We can only suppose that the special nature of radio, which is often heard in fragments or in parts

disconnected from the whole, has led to this misunderstanding.” The FCC received more than 600 letters, telegrams and petitions in response to War of the Worlds. Many of them asking it to do something to punish the people who'd made it or something to prevent this from happening again. But many of the letters the FCC received also praised The War of the Worlds and warned against any move that might promote censorship. One letter from North Carolina read, “If you take them to task over this, won't you also have to stop fairy tales and stories about Santa Claus to keep a gullible public from becoming excited?” [moody, jazzy music] The FCC conducted a formal investigation, and in the end, they decided not to take any action, and broadcast hoaxes continued.

Kevin Ryder: This is Kevin Ryder. I work at KLOS in the afternoon, and I was part of the Kevin and Bean morning radio show in Los Angeles at KROQ.

Phoebe Judge: 33 years ago in 1989, Kevin Ryder got his dream job as a radio DJ at KROQ in Los Angeles. He had DJ'ed before, but this would be his first morning drive time call-in show.

Kevin Ryder: Which was—it's insanity to think that I got my first morning show in Los Angeles at a station like KROQ.

[to Kevin]

Phoebe Judge: For people who aren't from Los Angeles, what is KROQ? How big of a station is it?

Kevin Ryder: KROQ is a legendary station mainly because it was really kind of a nothing station with a terrible signal, and people that got it started playing interesting music like punk music in the late '70s that no one else in Los Angeles was playing. And then in the '80s came New Wave and you've got Depeche Mode and you've got The Cure. And no other radio station in Los Angeles was playing that either. And the impact that KROQ had through the years is...it's impossible to measure. I mean, we were the first station to play the Ramones, first persons to play Van Halen. And from that standpoint, it was a monstrous station, even though it was run like a five and dime store.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Kevin says he wasn't qualified for the job, but there is no way he was going to say no. He hosted the show each weekday morning with another DJ, Gene

“Bean” Baxter. Kevin says they got up around 4 a.m. every day to start getting ready. The format was they'd play four songs an hour and talk four times an hour. Sometimes it wouldn't be until the songs were fading that they'd come up with what they'd talk about. Kevin says that every day they'd try to find a way to get people to call in, and one day they came up with an idea they called Confess Your Crime.

Kevin Ryder: It started out as just — everybody commits crimes, however small they may be. Maybe you go 56 in a 55 mile per hour, that's committing a crime. So, you know, there's a whole scale of sizes of the crimes that you commit. So we thought it would be funny for people to call in and tell us the crime that they had done and most likely gotten away with. And we thought it would be stupid stuff like I stole a car, and I got caught the next morning because I was sleeping in it alongside the road, or something like—it was a very lighthearted suggestion at first. And it wasn't going incredibly well. You get that feeling when you're in the middle of something that it's not really what you hoped it would be.

Phoebe Judge: Listeners called in to confess that they'd stolen bowling balls, that they'd run over a cat, or that they were sleeping with their girlfriend's mother.

Kevin Ryder: The calls we were getting were really lame. You know, I parked in a no parking zone kind of stuff that's not interesting. And so, we were screening for people, and we were trying to get calls and it was really difficult because sometimes stuff just doesn't work. And then this person calls and says I think I may have killed my girlfriend.

[archival audio from KROQ program]

106.7 KROQ. It's K-R-O-Q. Wednesday morning, 10 'til 9. We're doing Confess Your Crime. We have some more on hold. Let's go to those now.

[to Caller] Hello? Hi. What's your name?

Caller: Um...I'd really rather not say.

Kevin Ryder: You wanna confess a crime this morning?

Caller: Yeah, I heard you guys talking and then I just kinda, you know, I don't know. I just kind of felt like I really needed to tell somebody about this.

Gene Baxter: This guy sounds serious.

Kevin Ryder: Well, what happened? Tell us about it.

[sinister music]

Caller: Uh, well, I had this girlfriend for like about six years, and we were right on the verge of getting married and all this stuff. And I came home, and I caught her with somebody.

Kevin Ryder: You caught your girlfriend?

Caller: Yeah.

Kevin Ryder: With another man?

Caller: Yeah.

Kevin Ryder: Okay.

Caller: And a good friend of mine, as a matter of fact.

Kevin Ryder: Oh, really?

Gene Baxter: All right.

Kevin Ryder: And so, what'd you do?

Caller: And then... you know, honestly, I don't know what happened really... I don't know if she's...

Kevin Ryder: Sir, what are you saying?

Caller: Well, I don't know if she's still...if she made it through, actually.

Kevin Ryder: Sir, is there a chance, seriously, that you might have killed your girlfriend?

Caller: Yeah, I know I did.

Kevin Ryder: Sir, let us try to get you some help. Can you hold on the phone just a minute?

Caller: I think I'd really better go.

Kevin Ryder: I mean, if you want us to get you in contact with...

Caller: No, I...I... [caller hangs up]

Kevin Ryder: Hello? Hello?

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: The call was fake.

Kevin Ryder: We had called a friend of ours in Phoenix, who we had known from working with him at a station there, and woke him up and we said, hey, we need to juice up this topic a little bit. It's not really going well. So can you, you know, we're doing something called Confess Your Crime, can you just say something that's a little, you know, that's got something that gets people's attention. And we were talking to a guy who was just waking up while the song was fading, and we threw out, you know, you stole a car, you got in a fight, you did whatever. And somebody said something about hurting a girlfriend. And then when he said that on the air, he said, "I think I may have killed my girlfriend", it was...felt like getting hit in a head-on collision because that was one billion miles further than we had hoped. And I just remember being in a fog, like, one second, we were in charge of everything and the next second, I didn't know what was happening and I couldn't process what was being said quick enough. So it felt like I was in a haze. I don't remember what we said back to him. I don't remember hanging up. I don't remember any of it. And then the TV stations wanted to interview us about it. The timeline that I remember is our producer coming into the studio and saying, "I just got a call from KCBS and KNBC and all these stations want to interview you." And I remember—this is the first thing that I remember clearly—is that I said to Bean we have to go talk about this. And we went into the restroom, we made sure no one else was in there, and I said, look, yes, it was faked. But we'll get fired if we tell the truth. Also, we know for a fact that there's no crime, that it was something somebody made up on the phone. So, the police could search for the rest of their lives, they would find nothing because there was nothing, because it was made up. So I said because there's no crime for anyone to find, let's just deny, deny, deny and it'll go away.

Phoebe Judge: So they agreed never to tell anyone.

Kevin Ryder: And within, I don't know, five minutes, we had requests from all the major TV stations to do interviews about that call. And what did we know about it, and how did it come about, and did we know the person, and could we tell if it was true or not? And, you know, we didn't—we said we didn't have any of those answers. We said we don't know. We don't know who calls us and if they're telling the truth or not.

Phoebe Judge: Later in the show they apologized to their listeners for what they'd heard on air and read some helpline numbers. Kevin says that when they finally finished their show, a sheriff was waiting for them in the station's lobby.

Kevin Ryder: Who was asking for a copy of the aircheck—the tape, and they gave it to a voice expert who said that it was either real or the person deserves an academy award, and they started an investigation into exactly what was said and who could it have been, and does it match any of the cases that we are working on. And it just sort of started from there.

[to Kevin]

Phoebe Judge: Why do you think he was so convincing in the call?

Kevin Ryder: I can tell you exactly because I've talked to him about it. He was high, he was smoking marijuana and had gone to bed two hours before that. So he was just in a complete haze and he almost never answers the phone, but he saw it was us and his room was dark and he picked up the phone and he literally, I mean, literally had no idea what was going on. We were probably talking a little too quickly because the song was fading, and we needed him to do something. So he was just out of it and was trying to help us out.

Phoebe Judge: As the days went on and you realize now the police were taking this seriously and trying to investigate it, did you and Gene continue to check in and say, maybe now we've gotta say something.

Kevin Ryder: Oh, you mean with each other?

Phoebe Judge: Yeah.

Kevin Ryder: No, not really. I think we sort of had cast the die. We sort of had said, okay, well this is gonna be our response. And every time somebody brought it up in any way, I wanted to crawl in a hole.

[jazzy music]

Phoebe Judge: And then the case was covered on the TV show, *Unsolved Mysteries*, which reportedly resulted in 400 people getting in touch with the police.

Kevin Ryder: One of the things that I said, the only thing that I remember saying other than the line that we had created the whole time, which is we don't know who calls us, we don't know if what they say is real. For some reason, I didn't feel like that was enough for *Unsolved Mysteries*. So I actually said the sentence, "There are definite lines that you don't cross, and that's one of them."

[archival audio from *Unsolved Mysteries*]

Kevin Ryder: There are real, definite lines that you do not cross. Obviously everybody's, you know, trying to get ratings, trying to get noticed, trying to be this and that, but there are lines that you just don't cross, and that's one of them. I don't know that anyone could sit down and say someone confessing to murder will make our ratings go up.

Phoebe Judge: Then Gene comes in.

Gene Baxter: All we could say is what the experts feel that this guy was legitimate. It's no one we know. And as far as we're concerned, that's his story. We certainly hope it's not true. You know, I'd trade whatever publicity we got from it for the story not to be true 'cause it's pretty grim, really.

Phoebe Judge: For nearly 10 months, they kept up the lie. KROQ unknowingly ended up hiring the man who had called in, Doug Roberts. He had never told anyone either. And then one day it all fell apart during Doug's show.

[to Phoebe]

Kevin Ryder: He called us off the air one time when he was doing a shift.

Phoebe Judge: Kevin says during the call they talked about the murder confession. They thought it was a private conversation. But the way the studio was set up, two colleagues overheard them and one of them called a reporter at *The LA Times*.

Kevin Ryder: So she called our general manager, Trip Reeb, and she said, "Trip, I'm really sorry to have to ask you this 'cause I know this is old, but is there any possibility that they faked it?" And Trip assured her that there wasn't. And she said, would you mind asking? And he said, "Yeah, I'll ask. No problem. So he called us in and Trip said, "Was that phone call fake?" And we said, "Yeah, yes it was." And he had to call *The LA Times* back and tell them that it was fake. And then it all started again with *The LA Times*. The headline was "Will KROQ, Get Away With Murder?"

Phoebe Judge: A morning DJ at another radio station was quoted in the article saying, "I think that morning radio has gotten to be one giant trash bin that we need to examine a little." Another DJ said, "to stoop to such a sleazy level to get another tenth of a ratings point, spits in the face of everything Bob Dylan and John Lennon and the Rolling Stones and U2 stand for." Another said, "They couldn't have bought press like this." The general manager of another radio station told the reporter, I think they went so far and they couldn't get out. It's like a kid who steals. All of a sudden you tell a lie, and you have to tell another lie to get out of the first lie. KROQ suspended Kevin and his co-host Gene Baxter without pay.

Kevin Ryder: And the whole time we just were assuming that that was our KROQ career. That was it. We had the golden ticket, the great opportunity, and we threw it away, and there was really nothing else to be done at point.

Phoebe Judge: Kevin and Gene weren't charged, but the company that owned KROQ told them to pay back the Sheriff's Department \$12,170 for the money it had spent on the investigation and to do 149 hours of community service to compensate for the 149 hours the homicide detective spent on the case. The homicide detective told *The LA Times* that he'd had multiple people contact him about their missing loved ones, hoping the on-air confession would be a clue. One woman whose daughter had been killed a couple of months before the prank call was quoted saying, "The DJs have obviously never had anything serious or painful happen in their lives." [pleasant, minimalist music] The FCC launched an investigation into the hoax to determine whether management ever knew about it. If they did, the station could lose its license. The commission heard testimony under oath from multiple KROQ staffers, Kevin and Gene were both at the hearing.

Kevin Ryder: To Bean and I this was the ultimate, this was the best radio station in the world. And it was devastating to think that this radio station that we worshiped might go down because we were idiots. It just felt like, if this happens, I don't know how I'll ever get over that.

Phoebe Judge: In the end, KROQ received a letter of reprimand, the lightest punishment the FCC could give. Kevin and Gene continued doing their morning show for the next 28 years.

Kevin Ryder: And I do think since that happened, that was 1991 when we went to court, I think we earned that trust back. But it took a while because people were a little hesitant and it took a while for us to help people understand that we're decent people that you can trust and we're also idiots at times. But, you know, we're never gonna be that level of idiot again. One of the only things that you have between a radio station and its listeners is trust. And that trust when it's betrayed like that feels like you've been betrayed by a family member. And I just...if there was one thing that I could edit out of my life, it would be that. I wish it didn't happen.

Phoebe Judge: In our next episode, a broadcast hoax that tore a city apart.

Criminal is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Katie Bishop is our supervising producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Libby Foster and Samantha Brown. Our technical director is Rob Byers. Engineering by Russ Henry.

Julienne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com. If you like the show, tell a friend or leave us a review. It means a lot. We're on Facebook and Twitter @criminalshow and Instagram @criminal_podcast. We're on TikTok @criminal_podcast, where we're posting some behind the scenes content.

Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a part of the Vox Media Podcast Network. Discover more great shows at podcasts.voxmedia.com.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal. [music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.