

John Peel Unplugged

John Peel died suddenly on holiday in Peru at the age of 65. These are a few of the things he had to say.

Six years ago I conducted a series of interviews with John Peel at Radio 1 and in the wine bar nearby. It wasn't difficult work: I turned on the tape-recorder and sat back, and after ten minutes of mild suspicion and Rioja he hit a groove of sad and funny stories that brought tears to his eyes and mine, and all I could do was hope the batteries were fresh.

My memory of him is of a hugely sensitive man who cared very much about his music and his family, but also about how he was regarded by others. A magazine interview he had given some months before had been very harsh on him, questioning whether he genuinely liked most of the records he played, and Peel had been terribly hurt by it. Looking back, it is significant how often in our conversations he considered his standing among his peers, and how much he relished his reputation as a pariah within the corporation. This was a role he found useful to foster, but in truth he was a shy and quiet man, prone to internalising his anger. And he was immensely loyal; he knew that he could only function in public service broadcasting, and in time he became its best advertisement.

I had first met him eighteen years earlier when he provided the narration for a radio documentary I had written. I told him how thrilled I was to hear him voice my script, and was astonished when he replied that he was genuinely happy to have the extra work. The extent of his talents was not fully exploited until Home Truths many years later. His impact on so many lives has not been fully measured until this week.

His producer and great friend John Walters, whom Peel was convinced would deliver the eulogy at his funeral but died three years before him, had warned me that many of Peel's stories were embellished, and he could prove that some of them couldn't possibly be true. Peel often told him that his grandfather used to get champagne on the National Health. Walters questioned him on this, and Peel always said, 'Yes, champagne.' Eventually, the story changed. 'Oh I asked my mum, and I muddled it up,' Peel conceded one day. 'It wasn't champagne. It was morphine.'

Peel told me that his domestic life had recently been 'complicated'. His beloved wife Sheila had made a good recovery from her brain haemorrhage, an event he found 'unimaginably terrifying', but her eyesight had deteriorated. In addition, her mother had recently died, and her father had moved in, and their children were in various stages of leaving home. Throughout these turmoils, there was one reliable comfort. He said that everything 'seems to be all right again when I come in and start mispronouncing the names of songs.'

Here are my own favourite Peel stories from those tapes.

Something unleashed on the world

I'm a great believer in getting your priorities wrong, setting your sights low so that you don't go through your whole life frustrated that you never became prime minister.

As a young lad I used to listen to the American Forces Network in Europe, coming out of Stuttgart, and to Radio Luxembourg, and the signals were always satisfyingly feeble, so that you really felt you were participating in something quite exceptional. The record that genuinely changed my life was on Two-Way Family Favourites on the BBC. It may be hard now to understand how frustrating it was to listen to the radio then, because you could often sit and listen to a programme for several hours and not hear a single record that you liked. You'd listen to things like Housewives' Choice in the morning - based on the premise shared by Radio 1 when it started - that housewives were some sort of subnormal minority group, as if perfectly sensible women would walk down the aisle but then return as gibbering idiots.

Two-Way Family Favourites was a show that reunited our boys overseas with their families back home on a Sunday lunchtime. One afternoon I heard them say, 'Lance Bombardier Higgins has requested the first record by the new American singing sensation Elvis Presley.' On came Elvis, and it sounds idiotic to say it now, but at the time Heartbreak Hotel was just a revelation, like being transported immediately to another planet. The only thing that came close was when I heard Little Richard a few weeks later. It was genuinely frightening, as if something had been unleashed on the world that would never go back in the bottle. It turned out to be the case, wonderfully.

The quest for perfection

I lived in the States for seven years in the sixties. In the days before we knew about sexism, me and a couple of mates used to follow the fortunes of a young woman who performed under the name of Chris Colt, the Girl with the 45s. We used to follow her from grisly strip joint to strip joint. I was driving back from a particularly exhilarating performance in New Orleans, having left my friends down there, and I was crossing what they call the Piney Woods of East Texas, which cover an area the size of Belgium, as all big woods invariably do. I was driving along this long road in the middle of the night, and the moon was at the far end, so it was like driving along a silver ribbon if you want to be poetic about it, and the hills were rising and falling, and there was a small town before me, and on the radio came a record by Elmore James called Stranger Blues. The first line was, 'I'm a stranger here/I just drove in your town'. I just thought it was a perfect conjuncture of time, place and music. You always hope in the course of doing a programme that somebody somewhere may experience a moment like that.

Heroin in his hair

I used to run a record label, catastrophically unsuccessful, called Dandelion. Named after a hamster - that's how things were in the late sixties. We put out about thirty LPs using other people's money. There were one or two I quite like to listen to, and one or two atrocities. Stackwaddy were fantastic. They had an album called Bugger Off, which Annie Nightingale used to play a lot. They were

punks before there were punks - these very primitive lads from Manchester who played a rather violent and inaccurate R&B. Once we got a person over from the States to see a whole load of Dandelion bands at a college in London. We made the mistake of putting Stackwaddy on first. The singer was a deserter from the army, and wore this improbable wig all the time. They turned the treble up on all their equipment so it was like listening to a kind of buzz-saw. The singer was very drunk, and the first thing he did at the start of the gig was just walk to the edge of the stage and piss on the students.

When Radio 1 started it was generally regarded as rather unhealthy for presenters to show any interest in music, as it was believed this would lay us open to unscrupulous promotions people offering fast cars and women. Of course these things never happened, but you did have to keep your interest in music very much to yourself. In earlier days there were times when senior management at Radio 1 seemed to be rather surprised that I walked upright and used knives and forks. I never saw my programmes as all that radical - more an alternative to what was on at other times of the day. But at one time I was regarded within the corridors of the BBC as being the Baader Meinhof Gang of British broadcasting, and treated with a certain amount of terror.

It used to be that we had a controller, name of Muggeridge, who was joint controller of Radio 1 and 2, quite a good idea. When the BBC was looking for a man to do this job they quite naturally chose someone who until that time had been head of the Chinese section of the BBC World Service. Once he had got the job he interviewed various DJs one after another, and I was last in. I think he thought I would do something unpredictable and startling, like rub heroin into the roots of his hair.

He was sitting at his enormous desk, a sort of Dr Strangelove position. At some point in the conversation I mentioned public schools, and he brightened up a little at this idea, as if at some stage in my life I had actually met somebody who had been to a public school.

I said, 'Actually, I went to one myself.'

He went, 'Extraordinary! Which one?' He was assuming it was some minor public school somewhere on the south coast.

I said, 'Shrewsbury.'

He said, 'Good heavens!' At this stage he was getting quite elated. 'Which house were you in?'

I told him and he said, 'How's old Brookie?'

It was clear that he thought, whatever he looks like, and whatever sort of unspeakable music he plays on the radio, he is still one of us. I think for a long time it was this factor that sustained me at the BBC.'

That bloody awful rubbish

At Radio 1 I try to keep myself to myself. I've always thought that avoiding office politics was a rather shrewd thing to do. I feel a bit like a person who lives in a cottage while a new estate is being built around him - so long as I can tend to my bees I'm perfectly happy. I don't socialize that much with people here. I occasionally go to the pub or the wine bar with some of the women, because obviously they don't see me as a threat. I'm not likely to try to get off with them.

I do still see the Radio 1 thing as being what I do. Radio 4 is still seen as being the senior service, so when a couple of impeccably middle-class women call up and ask me to do a programme I'm always hugely flattered. You go off to very low-key places like Coventry to interview a family who have nineteen children, and you think 'Oh no', but then you meet them and you come away quite heartened by it all. Sometimes if you're a regular reader of the newspapers and watch TV news programmes you can whip yourself up into a froth of despair. So going out and finding that not everybody wants to kill you is kind of reassuring.

In thirty years there has genuinely never been an attempt by management to exert any control over my programmes, not beyond the occasional comment like, 'Ah, John, you still playing that bloody awful rubbish?' Someone from management did come down when I was playing a lot of hip-hop, and then later when I was playing jungle, to inform me that I shouldn't be playing this music because it was the music of the black criminal classes.

I think I was a handy safety valve for some time. If someone called up to complain about the safe and predictable nature of the station's playlist, someone could always tell them, 'You can always listen to John Peel. He plays strange discs.'

One controller, Derek Chinnery, disliked me intensely, and took every opportunity to let me know that this was the case. He was persuaded to keep me on largely by John Walters, my producer for about 20 years. Walters was a brilliant debater, or rather arguer. There have been times in the history of Radio 1, and this will no doubt surprise you, when the controllers have not been people of enormous intellectual stature. And these men would just get so fed up with arguing with Walters that they would just roll over. Once Derek Chinnery called Walters into his office after he had read something in the papers about singers with spiky hair who were spat on by their adoring audience. He said something like, 'We're not playing any of this punk rock are we?' and Walters gleefully replied that the last four programmes had consisted of nothing but.

Tony Blackburn goes Barry Manilow

As a Radio 1 DJ you were expected to do ludicrous things. We had these Radio 1 Fun Weeks, which usually consisted of travelling the country with a bunch of other DJs and Noel Edmonds filling people's hotel rooms with chickens. In more enlightened days than ours you'd be burnt at the stake for doing that. People like Mike Read and DLT would often complain that they couldn't go anywhere without being recognized, but of course would go everywhere in a tartan suit carrying a guitar, so they would have attracted attention in a lunatic asylum.

But these things did have compensations. Perhaps the best moment for me took place in a multi-storey hotel in Birmingham, in something called the Dickens Bar, lots of dark-wood booths full of people who no doubt travelled around the country selling Dickens Bars to other hotels. Tony Blackburn got up with Paul Williams, a Radio 1 producer who used to play the piano tolerably well, and sang for about half an hour. There was massive indifference to his efforts, if not downright hostility, yet he went through the whole thing as if he was Barry Manilow at the Copacabana, as if everyone was absolutely adoring everything he

did. He soared in my estimation after that. I thought, 'He's not such a tosser after all'.

A particularly vicious tackle

Occasionally I'd be invited to these rather serious BBC events at TV Centre. I used to dread these things, but you had to go. Quite often I was the only person from Radio 1 who was invited, probably because I had been to public school. Once I found myself sitting across the table from the Two Ronnies and thinking, 'What do I say to these bastards?'

On another occasion I had just recorded Desert Island Discs, so I went along with Sue Lawley. When we sat down I was at a table which included Nicholas Witchell, PD James and Jonathan Powell. I turned to the bloke sitting next to me and said, 'Hello, I'm John Peel.' And he said, 'I'm John Birt, and actually we were introduced five minutes ago outside.' You don't really recover from that. After about an hour of non-conversation I said to him something about football, and he said, 'Didn't you break your wrist playing five-a-side in Holborn about ten years ago?' I said, 'How did you know that?' He said, 'I was the bloke that tackled you.'

People say I 'discovered' or 'made' certain bands, but I never really think of it like that. I don't have a series of notches on my bed-post. They discovered themselves really, or some record company or manager did, and what I did was what I'm paid to do - play their records on the radio. I didn't discover the Undertones or Joy Division - they made a magnificent record and I played it because I loved it. The fact that most other people were not playing it is the thing, but you'd have to ask them why that was. I think I helped listeners discover the bands, and if one more person has the chance to see Misty In Roots because they heard them on one of my shows, then I'm happy about that.

I don't tend to mix with bands. I'm too shy or respectful, and I don't think I would know what to say. I don't know very much about their history. Also, there's that thing about not wanting to lower my admiration of them, which I might do if I met them, and I feel they'd certainly have a lower impression of me.

The cute mistakes

I do get asked to do a lot of voiceovers, and at one time I would think long and hard about doing them. Perhaps the advertisers thought I was playing a waiting game in an effort to get them to raise the fee, but I was never really smart enough at those sorts of games. Initially I thought I'm not sure I want to be forever associated with nappies or whatever it was, but after I did a few I didn't really mind. No one complained about it, or said they were never going to listen to my show again. Obviously there was the money, which invariably went to buy nappies.

I'm not conscious of great change over the years, though I occasionally hear tapes of early programmes and swoon with embarrassment. I had an absurdly affected voice - terribly laid back in a sub-Scousy way. But that was how I spoke at the time. Now my voice has changed, from living in East Anglia, and the fact that Sheila comes from Bradford. Perhaps my presentation now is a little more urgent. Now I'll talk over the ends, the fades, of records, because there are so many records I want to get in. But I probably make the same number of mistakes

as ever. There is this body of opinion which thinks that I do them to be cute, but I think that being cute in my condition would be being not far short of offensive.

Let's go surfing

A lot of people working [at Radio 1], young people, come up to me and make rather un-British little speeches about how they grew up listening to my programme, which is lovely to hear, and then you can think to yourself, Well, perhaps you wouldn't even be working here if it wasn't for me, and I quite like the thought of that. But even the younger ones stopped listening to the programme at some stage. It seems that people listen to the programme for a while and then stop, and often listen to the programme later on in their lives. I get letters from people who say, 'I hadn't listened to your programme for twelve years, and I was driving home the other night and heard something I thought was fantastic. I've listened every night since, and it was just how it used to be.'

Sometimes kids write in and say, 'I was listening to your programme in my bedroom the other night when I was doing my homework, and my mum came in and said, "What are you listening to?" I said, "John Peel," and she said, "Oh, I used to listen to him when I was your age."' It's nice being woven into people's lives in that way.

I always compare a good programme to surfing, not that I ever surf. I always imagine what it must be like – when a programme goes well you do feel you're riding along on the crest of something. You go out of the studio at the end and say, 'Wow, what a great programme!' and they say, 'Oh it sounded like all the others to me.' But some nights you can come away feeling so desperate because you've made so many mistakes, and you go out and say, 'that was just a disaster.' And people say, 'Oh, it sounded just like all the others to me.'

I listen to bands' demo tapes almost exclusively in the car in the two-hours' drive back home. The ones I don't like get thrown on the floor in the passenger's area and by the end of the week they swill about. The ones I do like get thrown over my shoulder into the back seat, and then harvested at the end of the week. I know that I'm going to die trying to read the name of some band in the headlights of a car behind me, and then drive into a truck in front. People will say, 'Oh, this is the way he would have wanted to go.'

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