

# Tribute to John Peel

The British broadcaster John Peel died suddenly last week at the age of 65. Clive Viasen Bennett looks back at this extraordinary man and the effect he had on millions of people around the world.

Most of us remember hearing the news of the death of someone like John Kennedy or Princess Diana. We react in shock and immediately to the loss of these idealised heroes who illuminated our lives from afar. John Peel's death—on a massive heart attack while on holiday in Peru—was different. He was a trusted man saving the world from new dramatic figures and only out from gloomy magazine covers. He was just an ordinary man who loved popular music and played the best of it to millions of us over the last 40 years, that the truth is that he touched many of our lives in much more personal and enriching ways than most great history book figures.

John Peel's late night radio show on BBC Radio One—and, later, about the World Service—was always surprising. His never-ending playlist of hits, the carefully selected commercial pop of the big record companies, he just picked out what he felt like hearing at the time. The mixture of genres was often breathtaking, or even plain bizarre—in a thrilling, psychotic techno-punk band recorded in a garage in the north of the week before, followed by a haunting 1950s ballad, a Rastafarian reggae running into a sharp-edged Manchester rock ball.

The bonus, the contrast in this spicy diet was John Peel's wonderful delivery. His soft, lower public school voice rang through an unimpeachable Liverpool twang would link the music with informative, incoherent, with comment. His laconic sense of humour, self-deprecating and disarmingly personal. He was notorious for missing up record speeds (that is, vinyl singles—remember them?), playing a 45rpm at 33 or vice versa, or choosing the wrong track: "just take among yourselves for a minute while I sort this out...". he would calmly tell his listeners.

The most lasting effect of John Peel was probably the huge influence he had on the music business. Because—even when he got his stories—he was always at the cutting edge, doing things and doing so with iconic clarity, he nurtured and brought to public notice (and, often to fame and wealth) some of the most important new music acts—early examples were David Bowie, Mott the Hoople, Rod Stewart, Led Zeppelin and Heavy Metal. Then, after the punk music revolution of the mid-seventies, which he helped to foment, the Undertones, The Fall, New Order, the Smiths, Primal Scream, more recently, Blur, Pulp, P.J. Harvey and the White Stripes. His record collection was vast and he made a point of always listening to the hundreds of demos he received—often playing them to his sister, Sue. Not even now hard anxious for a bigger audience would miss sending a sample to him.

For listeners like me, he changed our music tastes as we grew up. Until we were often only listened to classical music, mostly initiated by the commercial radio of day-time pop and its fatuous hits. One night, when seeing Bond's film forced

me to listen to his show and the covers, enthralled well on the radio, I tried, to be honest, Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love". I was hooked and started to discover all the amazing, energetic music I was missing outside Radio 1. I can remember just as clearly other moments when his programme introduced me to new music—my university years were a mix of Led Zeppelin, the Clash, Linda Ronstadt, the Sex Pistols, Patti Smith and of course, his beloved Undertones. While I was working and clubbing in London he brought me Elvis Costello, Prefab Sprout, the Smiths and Vast Ice. Even recently, at the obnoxious age when I like stereotypically against "them" but they play on the radio these days, I learned from him about Radiohead, P.J. Harvey and the wonderful White Stripes. (Of course, the "Good Old Days" were never that good, certainly not better and probably worse. If you don't believe me, in Lisbon's Radio 97.5 FM I heard some of the good stuff that is around now.)

There are hundreds of thousands like me—over the last three generations—for whom John Peel's music has measured out the ups and downs of our lives with moral images as vivid as the music itself. It is a childhood home or a woman's perfume.

His reach was far outside the UK. The BBC's website tribute message board, collecting over 20,000 postings within five days after his death, contained messages from people all around the world, including Portugal. "Thanks for all those years of new experiences, new sounds, new bands, new ideas. I can't forget the nights I have spent with my car close to the radio waiting and listening to the show and trying hard to hear the set since I am in Portugal and it was not easy to find a way to listen to John over here. But I am thankful for that," says one Joe Pardo. Indeed, the Portuguese newspapers carried features on him: "The importance of John Peel for music over the last 30 years is unquestionable", said the *Around de Notícias*. *O Pálio* reported: "Peel was one of the strongest voices giving attention to punk in the 1970s and also to reggae and hip-hop".

Born as John Ravenscroft in 1939, the son of a cotton mill owner near Liverpool, he was inseparable at boarding school until he heard Elvis "Everything changed when I heard Elvis. Where there had been nothing there was suddenly something. After National Service, he went to the United States in the early sixties and started his own radio in Texas, Oklahoma and California, where his Bentham, with burgeoning Liverpool accent at the time, filled the Beatles, gave him some success. There is a fascinating archive clip of "John Ravenscroft" with neatly parted hair and home country voice.

Born as John Peel (his new radio name), returned to the UK to work for private radio company Radio London and finally joined the BBC on the formation of Radio One, the new pop music sta-

tion. He was always a maverick, and, he reported, worked with the shuffling feet that he was about to be fired for playing music "they didn't approve of". Even so, his late night show became a 35-year long cult and a breeding place for freedom and young musicians over the decades.

Then, to top it all, in 1998, while carrying on with his music show and the legendary live "Peel Sessions", he started broadcasting on Radio 4, the BBC's glorious "talk radio" station, the heartiest of middle England. His Saturday morning "Honey Truffs" programme became an instant success and, later, major awards. No music, just chat and interviews, a celebration of British family life, ordinary, extraordinary, funny and tragic. His eclectic style was in the heart of the nation, just like his music. Listeners' comments about stiffening their cats (really) would be followed by an interview with a nine-year-old who lived with his severely epileptic mother. He revealed a brilliant talent as an interviewer, responding just as strongly, curiously and intelligently to people who had faced appalling tragedies than to those recounting his own personal hobbies or preposterous life stories. Above all, he was deeply human and, oddly, very humble. Britain's revered broadcaster of avant-garde popular music was

reportedly terrified when asked to do a piece on the death of Jerry Garcia, a gifted guitarist of 1960s rock, Grateful Dead. For the BBC's "From Our Own Correspondent", since this was a "serious" programme. He absorbed celebrities and the trappings of fame, despite remembering a lot of time with unknowns who yearned for exactly those things.

His humour was spontaneous, warm and inclusive. As Brian Gallagher, a regular contributor to "Honey Truffs" said, "He had the gift of making people feel better about themselves" but his biggest skill as a broadcaster, much like, say, Garrison Keillor, was to make you feel that he was talking directly just to you. Many tributes on the website say "I feel like I just lost a friend" or "a much loved uncle". As part of his life he shared many details of his personal life, often hilariously—never maskingly—and millions of long-time listeners felt they knew his wife Sheila, four children, grandchildren, dogs, cats and other animals of his household at "Peel Acres" in Suffolk as if they were members of their own families.

I feel sadder about John Peel's loss than I ever would have expected, because although he may not have been "important", as politicians, business leaders and artists are important, what he did uniquely affected the small, personal, treasured moments of the lives of millions of people, changed our tastes, opened our ears and, maybe even, made us more tolerant.

Photos: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/>



Peel soon made a name for himself at the BBC for breaking unknown bands from a wide range of genres, helping them cross over into the mainstream.



Record shopping on a Wednesday afternoon.



Navigating round town during One Live in Brighton



You can never start them too young



John and Sheila

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