

# There Is A Light That Never Goes Out

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There Is A Light That Never Goes Out Copyright (c) 2004 By Tom Roche And so we begin at the end. John Peel, the legendary broadcaster, master communicator, perpetual adolescent, and champion of three generations of unsigned bands, died at 65 on October 25, 2004.

He did what would turn out to be his last live BBC Radio 1 show on October 14, featuring the usual fascinating genre collision of the up-to-date and vintage, the obscure and the memorable, all in the same way he had presented this unique parade continually since 1967.

Peel's playlist that Thursday would, as usual, send a Clear Channel programmer into an apoplectic fit: Techno-chill from DJ Preach, full-throttle rock from the Detroit Cobras, and yet another fresh new Peel Session. The exclusive session guests this time, joining hundreds of others over the decades, was the unsigned grindcore band Trencher (with their jolting new songs "I Lost All My Hair in a Skiing Accident" and "Trapped Under a Train Alive.") Trencher, a band so new and obscure that a websearch returns nothing, was soon followed by an actual Conway Twitty 78. John also dug out regular favorite Jimmy Reed, and later, The Fall's "Powder Keg."

His final track was by the amazing electro-innovators Klute, called "Time 4 Change" from their new LP No One's Listening Anymore on, tellingly, the Commercial Suicide label.

Although he sounded as lively and as happy as ever on air, by some accounts he was overworked and made weary by a schedule that would burden a person half his age. While programming and presenting three two-hour late-night Radio 1 shows weekly, plus a weekly spoken-word hour on Radio 4 "Home Truths," plus a weekly music show on the BBC World Service, and still other shows for small European networks, he somehow kept track of the hundreds of new demos arriving every month from unsigned bands. Not to mention his role as a busy and devoted father of four. And, lastly, he was in receipt of a huge advance to write his definitive autobiography, a task he could barely find time to begin.

So John, along with Sheila, his wife of 30 years, set out on a three-week vacation to Peru as a much-needed break.

A few days later, John phoned the BBC from Peru to tell his young producers all was fine, and could someone go on the internet and look up where the best record stores are in Lima? Later that week he journeyed to the town of Cuzco, Peru, high in the Andean Mountains. After an uneventful day, John was preparing for dinner when he suffered a massive heart attack.

The attending physician, Dr. Alcides Vargas, told Peruvian Radio, "Mr. Peel was lying on the floor in the (hotel) lobby, and his wife Sheila was crying uncontrollably. There was complete hysteria. We had medical equipment like defibrillators and a ventilator. But there were no vital signs."

Dr. Vargas said the thin air of Cuzco, some 11,000 feet above sea level, almost certainly triggered John's fatal attack. (Peel had been diagnosed as diabetic in 2001, a condition that can quietly elevate heart risks.)

Back in Britain, the outpouring was immediate and overwhelming: Over 5,000 messages of condolences to the BBC web site within three hours, and 30,000 tributes from all over the world were sent by the end of the week. Radio 1 scrapped all regular programming for the day. Reggae and techno-dance websites paid tribute. Alt-country and doom-metal websites paid tribute. And the next issue of NME featured a simple black and white close-up, over the text: "John Peel 1939-2004. HERO. LEGEND. GOOD BLOKE." It was a sudden, tragic end to a fascinating life story, full of both ambition and the lack of it, strange detours, and simple twists of fate.

John Robert Parker Ravenscroft, (his real name) was born near Liverpool England Aug. 30, 1939, the son of a well-off textile broker. In his early school years, Peel was, admittedly, quite unmotivated, as evidenced by a note attached to his report card one day. He told Esquire UK in 1998, "At my primary school (and bear in mind that my name is John) the headmistress wrote, 'Robin has failed to make much impression this term.'"

Later, "People said to me (at high school) that if you don't work hard you won't go to university. I assumed university would just be an extension of public school, and, at the time, it would have been. So I thought: thank you for telling me that. So I didn't work and didn't go."

"You had so little control over your life" in that regimented British upbringing he said. "Maybe failure was the only instrument of control you had."

It wasn't even the 1960s yet and Peel was already dropping out. He sought out non-BBC radio fare such as American Forces Radio from Europe. In a 1990 interview with Pulse magazine, John recalled "The first time I heard Little Richard on AFR, I was actually frightened by it - you could not believe such an intense and simple noise could be coming out of your radio. It was like Saul on the road to Damascus, a life-changing experience." One schoolmate at the time was Michael Palin, who would eventually be a co-founder of Monty Python's Flying Circus. Palin tells the BBCWS, "I remember him lying on his back in his study, listening to, I guess it was, skiffle. Even then he introduced us to music he'd

never heard. Even then he was a rebel, an independent voice."

From 1957 to 1959 he was drafted into the Army as a radar operator in the Royal Artillery. He noted later, "The Army said afterwards, 'At no time has he shown any sign of adapting to the military way of life.' I took it as a compliment."

Peel's father had business contacts in Texas, and offered to send Peel there in 1960, where the contacts treated him as cheap labor. He then took a brief stint selling door-to-door insurance. Around this time, incredibly, he was in Dallas on November 22, 1963, blocks from where President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Out of curiosity, he went to the Dallas police station and bluffed his way into Lee Harvey Oswald's arraignment hearing, claiming in a heavy accent that he was a reporter for The Liverpool Echo. "I then went and made what I'd said retrospectively true and phoned The Liverpool Echo to give them the story. But they didn't care. I was a bit wounded by that."

Old newsreel film of the event shows Jack Ruby to have been in the room also, and Peel standing off in a corner. Peel remembers, "In a documentary they showed on British television, the camera pans across the room to show Ruby, and, in the last few frames, me and my friend Bob are standing there looking like tourists."

Peel's only respite from the insurance racket was the Dallas Top 40 AM stations. When the Beatles invasion hit, one DJ (WRR's Russ "Weird Beard" Knight) began cluelessly talking up England and Liverpool. Peel found it to be "complete nonsense. I phoned him up, and he put me on the air as 'Our Man From Liverpool.'" After few weeks of on-air call-ins, Peel was offered a weekend job.

His first full-time radio gig was at KOMA in Oklahoma City in 1965. "Americans thought Europe was the size of a village, so they assumed anyone from Liverpool was a close personal friend of Ringo."

Peel moved to San Bernadino, an hour outside of L.A. in 1966, landing a gig at tiny KMEN-AM. The winds of change sweeping the Southern California music scene were having an effect on regimented Top 40 radio formats. The Doors, Frank Zappa, Love, and Quicksilver were abandoning the three-minute hit single format for extended innovations, but would radio "play" along?

Around this time, a younger-than-she-looked music fan became a groupie of some of KMEN's eclectic DJs, offering various services—services Peel has declined to name. Unbeknownst to all, in a plot twist straight out of Riot On Sunset Strip, she was also the daughter of the San Bernadino sheriff. Said sheriff, like practically all holding that office in 1966, policed on an anti-hippie, clean-up-the-town platform. In short order, he swore out arrest warrants for all the stations DJs. Peel felt he could have exonerated himself, but with a furious sheriff on his back, and with his travel visa long overstayed, he elected not to fight city hall. He left town within hours, eventually crossed into Canada as John Robert Parker, and returned to England. Back in his homeland, Peel longed for the free sounds he'd heard in California, but he found BBC radio to be totally, banally, out of touch. In another odd twist of fate, a neighbor in London knew someone who worked on the pirate radio ship Radio London. Along with pirate Radio Caroline and others, RL was illegally broadcasting a steady stream of pop and psychedelic music from a ship anchored in choppy seas five miles off the UK coast. He was hired to do Top 40 during the day, but also volunteered to pull the midnight-to-three shift, developing the unique programming style that would last nearly four decades. "When I realized none of the management was listening at night, I did away with the format and played what I wanted, even read listeners' poetry - hippie stuff I would find amazingly embarrassing if I heard it now."

But the pirate era was ending. The British government whipped up Draconian new laws granting them the power to board ships in international waters and confiscate transmission gear (and record collections) in the name of national security. Peel's pirate stint lasted only five months. The BBC had seen their youth audience near-totally absorbed by the pirates and the Euro mega-power Radio Luxembourg, so, reluctantly, the BBC created all-pop Radio 1 in 1967 (signing-on with The Move's "Flowers In The Rain.") Even more reluctantly, the BBC was forced to turn to former pirate DJs to try to shore up some semblance of credibility. Among the first group of DJs hired, Peel would outlast them all, playing music on Radio 1 from 1967 to October 2004. When punk arrived, Peel carried the torch for this amazing new wave of audacity and amateurism, finding it to be "a welcome breath of foul air," he told The Guardian. "When I first played the Ramones, I got nasty letters from people wanting me to play the Grateful Dead for the rest of their lives. The average age of the audience in those four months dropped from 25 to 15." Peel's longtime producer John Waters once said, "When we were listening to new bands, it was like John had a divining rod— as if he'd walk out into the middle of a huge field and say, 'It's here.'"

In 1977, Peel was almost fired for playing the Sex Pistols on the BBC; yet in 1997, Peel's BBC show was pre-empted for a long-form Sex Pistols radio tribute special. Waters told Esquire, "The BBC didn't like Peel from the start. They were terribly shocked when he came in first place in the Melody Maker DJ Poll. That wasn't in the script!" He was first to play a number of historic albums in their entirety, from Sgt. Pepper's to Trout Mask Replica to Tubular Bells to Meat Is Murder. Genres we are now all familiar with, from progressive to punk, from grunge to jungle, from glitch to grime, he played first -- before these genres even had a name.

I first wrote to John Peel nearly 20 years ago to just say thanks for the weekly BBC show he did on shortwave (received with barely passable reception in Atlanta.) I mentioned that some band he'd played doing a noisy Paul Simon cover was nothing new to Atlantans, home of the memorable all-Paul-Simon-punk-cover-band The Coolies. I didn't expect a response, but he wrote back promptly. Apparently he didn't get much international mail at all for his World Service shows

other than "play-more-Hall-and-Oates" requests. So in the rare instance someone wrote to say they "got it," he took note. In his reply he said I should "tell (Atlanta record label entrepreneur) Danny Beard I played that Coolies record a lot." He also asked to ship him any Atlanta and regional records he might enjoy. I sent off the 688 Records Compilation, (and he latched on to Dash Rip Rock briefly) and many other records over time. Once, he replied to a post card I'd sent about a great weird reggae record he had played ("Border Clash" by Ninjaman, look it up) by, surprisingly, sending along a copy of that record he'd bought himself. This correspondence went on for years, and we'd meet for a pint whenever I'd visit London. (His current BBC producer said recently that John still spent upwards of 200 pounds a month of his own money in London record shops purchasing records for his shows.)

I was invited to his house in the English countryside, where I last saw him in 2001. It was a normal Saturday at "Peel Acres," and he was preparing for yet another week of shows. Sacks and stacks of incoming CD's and LPs were sorted, and - stopwatch in hand - auditioned. (He never trusted the song durations printed on the disc.) He seemed to spend every waking hour auditioning records, finding favor with perhaps 30% and discarding the rest. Slowly, a 2-hour playlist, amazingly diverse and yet consistently solid, took shape.

I had always assumed these shows just rolled out before me for everyone's enjoyment as if by effortless magic. Now I knew better. By the end of that week those shows were history, and six more hours of blank BBC run sheets stared back at him, and it was time to start the process again. BBC Radio's daytime programs back in the '80s, though pop-laden, were still filled with incredibly cheesy presentation and inane patter. Undaunted, Peel trudged on. In late 2004, as the tributes poured in, it was worth remembering this quote from 1987: "BBC Radio 1 is not sympathetic to my program and music. In 20 years, no one in the building has ever come in with an encouraging or complimentary word. In a way, it keeps you going; you say 'I'll show the bastards!'"

Peel told Pulse 1990, "I cannot understand why people want to hear stuff coming out of the radio that they've got on record at home and have heard a hundred times before!" There you have it: one voice, in one sentence, totally trashing the business model of corporate FM radio today.

John Peel had the fearless confidence that within one program it was it was totally logical to mix alt-country, cutting-edge dance, dub reggae, death metal, and African pop, alongside the most ragged yet earnest young bands. As Peel told Stomp and Stammer magazine in 2000, "There's good stuff going on all the time." His program format was radically simple: Say what you are about to play, play it, then say what it was. The end. Even if it was 15 seconds of speedpunk. "Sometimes the music was just awful," said fellow BBC DJ Andy Kershaw. "But you mainly listened to Peel for Peel."

Above all, Peel had confidence in the intelligence of his audience.

It has been estimated that 80% of the music he played in his 37-year run on the BBC had never been played on the radio before. And 98% of what he played, he played once and never again. Although an expert radio technician, he'd regularly play records at the wrong speeds, leaving him embarrassed but defensive. Look, he'd say, these are new advance-release white label 12-inchers with no artist, titles, or RPM info at all - but killer tracks nonetheless. It would be so much easier not to play them at all, and most DJs would do just that.

BBC Radio began webcasting in 1997, extending his domestic program to an international reach. And soon ISDN technology enabled him to do his 10PM programs from a small studio at his home in the country, a few steps from his astounding personal record library. Freed from the bureaucratic hassles of transmitting from BBC HQ, and elated at the instant feedback from both positive and negative e-mails, he had recently said he had never enjoyed presenting radio shows so much.

His impact on so many lives is immeasurable. Nearly every listener considered him a personal friend to some degree. And the few listeners that would contact him directly, such as this writer, found a lasting and real friendship. That friendship, like the man himself, will be irreplaceable.

The massive 400-year-old St. Edmundsbury Cathedral, near John's rural home of Stowmarket, was the setting for John's funeral on Nov. 12. Some 900 mourners had filled the church more than an hour before the service's start, while an overflow throng amassed before loudspeakers on the abbey lawn. There were hundreds of friends from the nearby villages and hundreds of BBC staffers, both young hip DJs and retired legendary voices going back to the birth of Radio 1.

A swarm of British paparazzi camped outside the church and zeroed in on the arrivals of Robert Plant, the White Stripes, Billy Bragg, Jarvis Cocker, Michael McCartney, and on and on. Soon a solitary church bell began tolling, and all fell silent.

John's casket, borne on the shoulders of six bleary-eyed pallbearers, and piled high with Liverpool-red flowers, was carried from the hearse to the cathedral's center aisle. As the Stowmarket Choral Society gently sang, there came the heartbreaking sight of John's widow Sheila and his four grieving children, slowly following the casket to the altar.

Amidst the somber mood, some of the eulogies were as funny as they were touching, but mostly the service was as sad

as sad gets. Yes there were Bible readings and hymns, but John's eclectic stamp was evident throughout. At one point the hymns stopped, and across the vast cathedral space began the opening notes of the 1950s Howlin' Wolf classic "Goin' Down Slow," the rough-hewn Chicago blues masterpiece about one man's reflection on a life well-lived. "And wimmen....ohhhh wimmen...."

As Wolf's maniacal vocals bounced over the pews to the five stories of stained glass that surrounded us, many were confronted with radically mixed emotions, unsure whether to laugh or cry. As the song echoed away, fading into a blurry ambient gauze, the more musically knowledgeable looked at each other and smiled broadly while the villagers and the cheese-era BBC staffers seemed to be asking John, yet again, "Just what was that awful racket??"

There was other music that day, from Mozart to Roy Orbison. After these and after every eulogy, the church remained reverentially silent... while in the distance could be heard the roaring applause of the thousand-plus punters listening outside in the cold drizzle.

The concluding eulogy was co-written by John's four children, now in their teens and twenties, and read by a family friend. As they had entered that day it was clear they were emotionally wiped out, yet the tribute they had written was fresh, clever, brash, bratty, insulting, and fun, just like pops.

Although John Peel had always admitted he was on an endless quest to find the perfect record, he had long ago decided that "Teenage Kicks" by Ireland's The Undertones was his favorite record of all time. "Sheila, my wife, knows that when I die, the only words I want on my tombstone, apart from my name, are: 'Teenage Dreams, So Hard To Beat.'"

As the cathedral doors were swung open, the pallbearers raised the casket and started back up the center aisle. The grief-weary congregation rose, and, not unexpectedly, the church was filled with the sound of "Teenage Kicks" -- played really, really loud.

"I wanna hold you, wanna hold you tight  
Get teenage kicks right through the night  
Oh yeah."

Material from The Guardian, The NME, The Times, The Daily Mail, and Pulse!, Filler, and Q magazines, and BBC World Service, contributed to this report. This article originally appeared in Stomp And Stammer (December 2004) and later in the book "DaCapo Best Music Writing 2005" Tom Roche can be reached at troche2255 circle-a yahoo.com