

ANDY KERSHAW

# 'If it's Wednesday, it must be Kinshasa'

Andy Kershaw's whirlwind existence is summed up in his new autobiography. Now one phase in the broadcaster's life is over, he's looking forward to the next, finds **Andy Murray**

**Andy Kershaw has always made it his mission to live an enormously full life. It comes as no surprise, then, that publishers have been clamouring for the broadcaster to write his autobiography. In the event, though, he missed his original deadline for the book... by about 20 years. "I was first contracted to do this back in 1991," he admits. "I've hardly raced into it. I suppose I've been reluctant to do it all these years. I'm glad I missed that deadline, though. I'd only had but a fraction of the adventures then."**

Kershaw claims that every significant development in his career has happened by accident or luck. But his all-embracing passion for music and fascination with other cultures have taken him a long way. He failed his politics degree at Leeds University, preoccupied as he was with his role as the college's entertainments secretary, where he was booking some of the biggest acts of the day. At the age of 25, while working as a driver and roadie for Billy Bragg, he caught the attention of a television producer and wound up as co-presenter of the BBC's esteemed music show *Whistle Test*. Within a year he was one of the anchors for the TV coverage of the Live Aid concert, as seen by an estimated global audience of 1.9 billion people. Almost simultaneously he started a regular show on Radio 1, which became pivotal in championing world music – a term he dislikes, insisting it was coined just to pigeonhole the kind of music he was playing.

He's ridiculously well travelled, and reckons on having visited a total of 87 of the world's 195 countries. It's been said that the real appeal of Kershaw's radio shows is that you never know what he's going to play next. He seems to apply the same principle to his whole life. "Yes, of course. No two days the same. If it's Wednesday, it must be Kinshasa!"

Consequently his autobiography has a whole swathe of extraordinary tales to tell, and does so with wit, frankness and beguiling enthusiasm. Kershaw paints a hugely affectionate portrait of the years he spent sharing a tiny office at Radio 1 with his boyhood hero John Peel and their shared producer, John Walters. "One of the luckiest things that's ever happened to me was to be posted with Peel and Walters in Room 318. Not only from a radio education point of view, but also for the downright fun of it. It was fantastic. And largely because of Walters. He was a genuinely great man and I still miss him."

Walters died in 2001 and Peel just three years later. "My intention in the book was to slightly correct an imbalance I think has always been there in the perception of the relationship between those people in Room 318, particularly Walters as the force behind Peel. Until I wrote this book Walters had never really been given the full credit for his contribution to that. Walters was the genius. Peel and I were the front men. I worked with two BBC broadcasting giants in a room which was so small to start with and so cluttered we had to climb over each other."

Surely, if the BBC had recognised Peel's true cultural significance, they'd have had him sitting on a velvet cushion? "Well, he would have been if it'd been left up to him, but he had no say in the matter."

Kershaw's show became a late-night Radio 1 favourite but, despite spotlighting bands from all around the globe, it was considered no place for engaging in political issues. He began to moonlight as a foreign news correspondent and switched stations to Radio 3 in 2001. His documentary reporting from locations taking in Mali, Angola, North Korea, Rwanda and Haiti has won him four industry Sony awards.

And yet, despite the awards, within the industry he's been the subject of some serious condescension: the dilettante music DJ dabbling in serious news coverage. "Oh, that's always been there. And it's still there. It's irritating but it's not a big problem. In many senses I've had the best of both worlds. But there's always been that feeling within certain aspects of BBC News that 'he's not really a proper journalist, he's really only a DJ'. I can cover the Rwandan genocide for them for a week and still I'm regarded as that. In the late 20th century there was no more horrific story and no more dangerous place than that, and I was nearly killed doing it, but yeah, still there's that feeling."

Nevertheless he remains passionate about radio, and dedicated to the beleaguered Corporation. "People should stop grumbling about the licence fee. When you think about what you have to pay to get Sky every month and what you pay overall in the year for the BBC – it's a bargain. We should even be prepared to pay more for it because it's always been – and it could continue to be, if we funded it properly – a civilising influence in our society."

In recent years, though, Kershaw has attracted media attention for all the wrong reasons. In 2006 his



**Kershaw as Leeds University's entertainments officer in 1981.** Photo: Al Thompson



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private life went into meltdown. His wife discovered evidence of an affair he'd had, and he found himself thrown out of his family home, barred from seeing his children. Subsequently he was accused of breaching a restraining order several times, and eventually served three months in prison.

When he came to write the book, he had to discuss with his publishers exactly how much he'd write about this troubled period. "I just made it very clear right from the start. I said: look, this has been one relatively short incident in a life otherwise of many extraordinary experiences. It will be in the book, but it will be kept in its rightful proportion. As it turned out it forms two of 42 chapters. It had to be discussed, and my side of the story had to be told, because really it'd only been what had been reported by newspapers before. Generally speaking that was a reflection of what the authorities or my ex said. For the first time I told it from my own point of view and that's it now – I've done it. I wasn't going to let that dominate the book because I've not let it dominate my life."

He certainly doesn't believe in the cliché that writing one's autobiography can work as a form of therapy. "Give over! I'm not one of these people who subscribe to bloody therapy and counselling and all that bollocks. It's what the rest of us in the real world call 'life'. Deal with it, is my advice."

But he does own up to an unexpected reaction to completing the book. "It's a very strange feeling that I wouldn't have fully appreciated until I'd got to this position. I sit here and I look at it, the physical thing, the book on the table, and that's Life Part 1, there between those hard covers. And what's really exciting is that sense of, gosh, Life Part 2 starts now. And I'm terribly, terribly, boyishly excited by Life Part 2, whatever that's going to bring.

"One or two people have said, now that you've written the autobiography you must have found your off switch. And I just say to them, I don't think so, no. No, I've just found the overdrive button." ■

***No Off Switch is published by Serpent's Tail.***