

# Turning it up to eleven

In the middle of our interview, as he walks his dog Buster on the beach near his home on the Isle of Man, broadcaster, DJ, foreign correspondent, motorcycling nut and world music evangelist Andy Kershaw suddenly starts singing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” down the phone to me. It’s an appropriately unexpected moment from a man whose life has taken more turns than a 12-inch single on a record deck. “The publishers commented that my book was a bit uneven. I said: ‘Well life’s like that. Or at least, that’s what my life has been like’”.

The fact sheet *Serpent’s Tail* sends me to accompany his forthcoming autobiography, *No Off Switch* (July, Serpent’s Tail), is startling enough. This is no bland celebrity autobiography. “Andy Kershaw . . . has seen his own intestines . . . went on holiday to North Korea with Christopher Hitchens . . . went on a blind date with Courtney Love to see Motorhead . . . suspects he is being stalked by Dr Kenneth Kaunda, former president of Zambia.”

The book was first signed by Rachel Calder, Kershaw’s “long-suffering” literary agent, 22 years ago. “I’m really pleased I didn’t do it then. I wanted to put off writing it until I’d been to North Korea,” he says. Years later, after he’d been to North Korea four times, Calder suggested that it might be time to get going.

## SOUNDTRACK TO LIFE

In *No Off Switch*, Kershaw charts the myriad enthusiasms, musical and otherwise, that have provided the soundtrack to his life. Born in Lancashire, he bunked off his economics A-level paper early to go to a Bob Dylan concert (he still got an A grade), and then spent three years at Leeds University, failing a politics degree but fueling his subsequent career by staging gigs as the Student Union’s entertainments officer. The Clash, The Boomtown Rats; Iggy Pop; Dire Straits; Ian Dury and the Blockheads and Black Uhuru all appeared on his watch.

A stint at Radio Aire followed, and then out of the blue he was

DJ, radio and television presenter, and world traveller Andy Kershaw talks to **Caroline Sanderson** about living life in the fast lane



Kershaw and his pet dog Buster

offered a job presenting BBC’s “The Old Grey Whistle Test”. Shortly afterwards, Kershaw became a Radio 1 DJ, sharing a chronically untidy office with John Peel and legendary producer, John Walters.

At the age of 25, he found himself co-presenting Live Aid. Already a keen evangelist for the music of artists from the developing world, notably the Bhundu Boys and Ali Farka Touré, Kershaw was openly critical of Bob Geldof for not including a single African performer in the line-up.

After 15 years at Radio 1, Kershaw fell out with the BBC management of the John Birt era and was dropped from the station in 2000. He quickly found a new home on Radio 3, its controller a fan of his Radio 1 show because he “never knew what was coming next”.

Kershaw also began a rewarding career as a foreign correspondent, reporting for Radio 4’s “From Our Own Correspondent”. Working for such a revered programme gives him enormous satisfaction. “I love

the discipline of it,” he says. His most recent report was from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the now derelict stadium that once hosted the “Rumble in the Jungle” between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman.

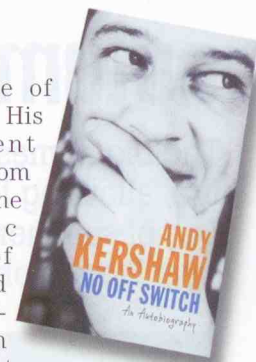
Travel rivals music as Kershaw’s greatest passion: at the last count he had been to 97 of the world’s 193 countries. His favourite place is Haiti, which he has visited more than 20 times. “It’s the single most exhilarating and exasperating place on earth. When I first went there in 1989 it was like stepping into the sequel to Graham Greene’s *The Comedians*. The Haitians are amazing people”. Kershaw wrote a hard-hitting piece for the *Independent* last year about the scandal of the aid operation to the earthquake-hit country: and how it has been reported.

How does music help us understand a place? “It’s a great door-opener. If you show interest in their music, people tend to welcome you in. It’s a fundamental

human thing. No matter if you can’t speak the language. I don’t understand a word of perhaps 70% of my record collection.” How many records does he have? “No idea. But they weigh about seven tons. And I still can’t think of what to play.”

After some well-documented turmoil in his personal life, Kershaw appears back to his irrepressible self. Has the man who once said he was waging a “jihad against mediocrity” mellowed at all?

“Fuck, no. The book’s called *No Off Switch* for a reason. I’ve just found my overdrive button. You ain’t seen nothing yet”



## CV

**Born** Rochdale 1959

**Education** Hulme Grammar School for Boys; University of Leeds

**1984** Tour manager for Billy Bragg

**1984–87** Presenter of BBC’s “The Old Grey Whistle Test”

**1985** Co-presents BBC coverage of Live Aid

**1985–2000** Hosts own Radio 1 show

**1990 – present** Contributor to Radio 4’s “From Our Own Correspondent”

**2011** Co-hosts Radio 3 series “Music Planet”

**2011–12** Major UK speaking tour for *No Off Switch*

**Editor** Mark Ellingham, Serpent’s Tail

**Agent** Rachel Calder, the Sayle Literary Agency