

Lust for life

Toby Litt

No Off Switch: an Autobiography

Andy Kershaw

Serpent's Tail, 432pp, £18.99

"Ali Farka Touré" – if you were a Radio 1 listener in the Eighties, a voice will have started up in your head as you were reading the name. Not a voice from Mali, birthplace of that African bluesman, but one from Rochdale – a disarmingly direct voice that rumbles and tumbles along as it attempts to convey how great music is, when it's great. And how great life is, too.

It's his ability to convey a sense of moment-by-moment aliveness that makes Andy Kershaw, in my opinion, the greatest living broadcaster in the English language. *No Off Switch*, his autobiography of rise and fall and (you hope) rise again, paints a very consistent self-portrait. You could say that he has had, from his earliest years, an aesthetic. It's a pretty simple one, and all the better for it. To anything that's on the side of life, anything that puts electricity in the blood, anything that truly surprises: "Yes! Give me more." To anything boring, routine, corporate or predictable: "Ignore it."

This explains Kershaw's apparently diverse enthusiasms – for very fast motorbikes and in particular for the Isle of Man TT; for raw (as opposed to overcooked) music, from the Clash to Zimbabwean guitar pop; for privately financed visits to "bonkers countries" such as Equatorial Guinea, Haiti and North Korea to make award-winning documentaries. He has had to suffer from the stigma of being seen as neither a "proper" Radio 1 DJ (you wouldn't catch Bruno Brookes reporting on the Rwandan genocide) nor a "proper" foreign correspondent (you wouldn't catch Kate Adie OBE arriving with a Frisbee so as to make friends with the local children). Yet he has done both jobs better than anyone else.

All along, instinct has been Kershaw's best friend and worst enemy. It was instinct that made Billy Bragg call up the former ents sec of Leeds University and nab him for a roadie. It was instinct that led the BBC producer Trevor Dann to ask Andy to present *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in 1984 on the basis of a couple of hours of conversation while Bragg set up for an appearance on the show. In telling these anecdotes, Kershaw modestly suggests that he has been "the luckiest person I know". What he misses out are the waves of energy that "the Boy Kershaw" (as even he refers to himself) must have been zapping out at that point. Encountering this rare kind of life force makes people want to trust their instinct.

Conversely, within the managerial-minded BBC of the late Eighties, instinct was a no-no. Pretty soon, Kershaw had been infuriated into leaving. He was welcomed across to Radio 3 by the then controller, Roger Wright. But over the years his radio appearances have become rare. He's not always there, at a regular time, something to look forward to. He's an intermittent eruption, making everything before and after sound as if it were made by zombies.

In July 2007, Kershaw's radio career stopped dead. From the outside, his descent to the position of fugitive from justice (Isle of Man-style), on the grounds that he was harassing his ex-partner and the mother of his two children, seemed to be judicial harassment of a man who showed his passion too easily. Like Hamlet, he was a "distracted" lover, turning up dishevelled and distraught to protest his bonafides. But in tabloid-speak he was the "troubled DJ back behind bars again after breaking a curfew order".

No Off Switch gives Kershaw a chance to tell his heavily lawyer-vetted side of this story and to bring it to a close. As of Christmas 2010, he was sober, back working on an ambitious documentary series for Radio 3, *Music Planet*, and reunited with his two children. The only other thing I could wish him, apart from continued health and sobriety, would be his own show on 6 Music. How about a straight swap for Craig Charles?

Kershaw's voice doesn't transfer to the printed page without loss. On his studio-based radio shows, it is always this great new record he has discovered that achieves lift-off into the sublime; in his documentaries, it is some round-the-campfire jamming that makes you envy him the chances life has offered him, and that he has grabbed, and that – somehow, miraculously – he's managed to get on tape for us. More power to your microphone, Andy. ●

Toby Litt's latest novel is "King Death"

(Penguin, £7 ebook)

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