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*"I expected John Peel to be alongside me," says*  
**ANDY KERSHAW**  
*"And he wasn't. And I was hurt by that"*

INTERVIEW BY JAMES MEDD PORTRAIT BY PETER GRESTE

**▶** THE FIRST 50 YEARS HAVE BEEN eventful, haven't they?" asks Andy Kershaw, reassuringly still the cocky young'un off *The Whistle Test* despite 2009's half-century. And there's no denying it, they have been eventful, which is one reason his autobiography, *No Off Switch*, is such a great read. He progresses from his grandparents' Lancashire pub to ignoring his course in favour of booking bands at Leeds University, to *Whistle Test* and Radios 1, 4 and finally 3. He worships Dylan, roadies for Springsteen, discovers Ali Farka Touré in a bargain bin in Paris and tracks down soul legend James Carr in Memphis. He tours Europe with Billy Bragg and North Korea with Christopher Hitchens, and witnesses revolution, heat and horror in Haiti, Rwanda and scores of other remote dictatorships.

It's also fabulously well written, and entirely by him. The wit, the brimming enthusiasm and the outrage all come direct from the broadcasting voice, but there are wonderful turns of phrase too. He's especially good when describing music, from The Beach Boys and their "carefree world of surging, honey-coloured girls, gleaming teeth, infinite leisure time, blond crew-cuts, parental wealth, hot-rod cars and recreational road-traffic accidents" to the Bhundu Boys, who sound "as if the room was being sprayed with a fountain of jewelled guitar notes".

Somehow, too, he manages to be brash and self-effacing almost simultaneously. There's plenty of passion and plenty of rage, as there is in our conversation. Over an hour and a half, *Live Aid* gets some of it - "Geldof was too ignorant to know a single African artist and was too lazy to go and find out who they might be" - but most is directed at the BBC and the Isle of Man authorities. As anyone who cares about him (and many who hadn't even heard of him before) will know, in 2007 he went through a very unpleasant separation from

the mother of his two children that ended in restraining orders and a prison sentence. Fortunately, it's not the end of the story.

**Shall we get the personal history out of the way? Perhaps you could just briefly say what happened recently.**

As I say in the book, more than two and a half years ago I came home after a ludicrous period where I was kept on the run in the UK, having never harmed anybody, but simply because I kept



asking to see my children.

And since I came home two and a half years ago I've gradually put everything back together and, as you know again because you've read the book, I'm back on Radio 3, working as a foreign correspondent for a quality broadsheet, the *Independent*, in the Red Shirt Revolution in Thailand, and my little lad came home. I don't know how much happier an ending you can get.

**Let's go back to the start of your musical obsession, which you cite as Slade's *Mama Weer***

**All Crazee Now. You say it's "insolent" and that "we need some musical insolence again now".**

Yes, of course we do! I've been thinking a lot about this since I wrote the book. I was with a few pals the other day and the Arctic Monkeys came on the radio. I know, because I'm aware of these things, that they have been held up as the saviours of British rock and roll. Well, if that's true, my god, we really are in

trouble. A few years before that it was, for goodness sake, Franz Ferdinand. And before that - who were the bunch from Leeds that everyone's now forgotten about? The Kaiser Chiefs! Do me a favour. When you've been involved in these things as long as I have you're able to make comparisons, you've got judgement and benchmarks. In that very rich environment which is crudely categorised as post-punk, when the dust settled after punk and we'd lost all the loser bands with only half an idea and we were left with the valuable stuff which punk had thrown up and the valuable stuff which had survived

punk, those three wouldn't have got a look-in. In 1979 they would have been dismissed as third-raters. The acclaim that so many of these groups get now is really a reflection of the famine of any quality music.

**But that's only rock music you're talking about?**

Oh yes, don't get me wrong. I'm talking specifically about rock music. And I've got another theory here, which no one's had the balls to confront, which is: why should we have any more expectations of rock music? It's coming up to its 60th birthday - just about all possibilities have been explored. I think

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there's a limit to what can be done with four blokes and guitar, bass, drum and keyboard. We don't have those expectations of any other artistic movement, that it should remain fertile for this long. I'm not a closed-minded person; I'll trot the world on behalf of Radio 3 and find music no one's ever heard of in the Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea or Kinshasa. I'm always looking for new music, but I'm always looking to be impressed, and nothing in rock music has really impressed me for a long, long time. And this is linked to what happened to my tastes in the mid-'80s when they swerved dramatically to Africa and the Caribbean and other parts of the world. By then, I found myself on Radio 1 with two hours a week to play records, and I'm having trouble filling them.

**So that's what set you off? You thought, "Where do I go?"**

Well, you have to remember that they brought me in as a rock DJ. I could never play anything on the radio that I wasn't personally enthusiastic about, I would have felt fraudulent doing that. So, given the fact that I was also something of the archivist, custodian, enthusiast for all those different

styles from the past – rhythm & blues and country and blues itself, soul and particularly Southern soul, folk music and gospel – I found I was filling the show more with those. And then as certain labels in the UK started to feed me these things like South African township jive or Zimbabwean guitar pop, I thought, "This is alright." I didn't know anything about it, but I started to incorporate that and before we knew where we were, Radio 1 had a world music programme by stealth. And the stealth of that surprised me as much as Radio 1 management.

**And that started with investigating where Bob Dylan's music had come from?**

Yes, the attitude came from that. I'd read something about him and he'd talk about these people I'd not heard of, like Woody Guthrie and T-Bone Walker, and the next time I was in a record shop I went and looked for those people.

**You're intensely curious, aren't you? Is that what sent you round the world?**

Nosy is the word. Nosiness is the fundamental of journalism, and it's what makes life interesting and what keeps you young. I have to invoke Bob: "He not busy being born is busy

dying." But the first time I went to Africa, I had to be pushed. It was with Lucy Duran, who's now a fellow presenter on Radio 3 but was then working at the Commonwealth Institute in London. She organised trips to the Gambia for music enthusiasts and she kept trying to get me to go, and finally I relented. She almost had to shove me on to the aircraft and I'm so glad she did, because as soon as that aircraft door opened in Dakar, Senegal it was instant love.

**That's strange that you needed pushing. Everything else in the book suggests you're a glutton for knowledge.**

Well, like many people who've never been to Africa before, I probably thought I was going to be eaten by a lion. But I was so lucky to have become aware of the world during a period that was incredibly exciting. For me, that point where you're becoming aware of the world, when it's not just your bedroom and your toys and your mum and dad, that was 1968–69 and everything that was in the news seemed like a huge event. There were the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, there was the Vietnam war at its height and the hostility towards that, the



start of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, man landed on the moon – incredible! Mankind's biggest adventure since Columbus disappeared over the horizon and I was alive for that! How lucky can you be? I think that triggered in me an appetite for that kind of excitement, or nosiness, and it probably reinforced that appetite for yet another fix of "What the fuck is this?", which is what I wanted to call the book. That's what my life's been about, the pursuit of that sensation, whether it's been foreign adventures, motorcycles, relationships with friends, romantic relationships, whether it's putting a record like *Highway 61 Revisited* for the first time – that's what I've been pursuing and still am. And then there was my dad as well; he was a teacher by profession but also instinctively, and I got that from him. I knew all about manned space flight when I was six years old, and at eight or nine years of age I turned myself into an expert on John Kennedy's assassination.

**Is that desire to know more what turned you into a foreign reporter, do you think?**

When I get stuck into something, yes, then I tend to do it thoroughly, but I think it would be rather pompous of me to say that I've spent so much time in Haiti, for example, because I had to know everything in depth. It's probably more superficial than that. It's nosiness – we can't dress it up as anything more respectable. I decided I wanted to go and see those things for myself, but I'd go somewhere the world had taken its eye off. There was no point in me turning up in Moscow in the early '90s, because the place was already full of reporters a lot more experienced than me. I went to Haiti because I wanted an "in at the deep end" experience in a fairly difficult place and I had to find a space – and by God I found one. I got really lucky: I walked in on the story of a parish priest from the slums, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, going from fugitive to president in the space of a few months. And I was about the only British person there.

**A lot of people don't like anyone having more than one career.**

They slightly resent it because you've come



With faithful hound Buster in his home town of Peel, righteous indignation still firmly intact: "Geldof was too ignorant to know a single African artist and too lazy to go out and find one."

from a rather unconventional background for this sort of thing. I've always had to cope with this rather tedious thing – "Oh, he's not a proper journalist, he's only a DJ." That's tedious and nothing more – proof of the pudding, etc. It doesn't worry me at all, but you have to do it twice as well as anyone else. **You were certainly a bit of a maverick. For example, you just wandered into a meeting with Nelson Mandela in 1990.**

I went through a gate in the stadium and across the running track. Nobody said he was going to be there. I knew in all likelihood that Mugabe would come strutting out of the player's tunnel, and in those days I happened to be a big fan of his – there were no indications until a year later that he was going to go completely barking. And I thought I'd probably see some other frontline-state leaders, like Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, and I thought, "This'll be quite exciting." Then I just swung round to my right and Mandela came out of the tunnel and he was standing at my shoulder. At that stage,

even the crowd hadn't spotted him – but by God they soon did. That was April 1998 and I think he came out in the January, and he'd just come back from that concert at Wembley, with Simple Minds. So I apologised to him.

**You also travelled to North Korea with Christopher Hitchens. I wouldn't have put you two in a room together.**

Why not? We're both iconoclasts. We're both to some extent – though Christopher far more elegantly and prolifically than me – polemicists. And contrarians – we're both prepared to say that something's bollocks when no one else will. And he's a Dylan fan. **And what you call a "connoisseur of the absurd"...**

Oh, I immediately spot a kindred spirit. It's a refinement of sense of humour. It's a sense of the absurd and ridiculous. You've got to find it in yourself or, for example, the people out to get me four years ago would have done so. It's also a close ally of my favourite sensation, "What the fuck is this?"

**You had that bond with John Peel at Radio 1, too. But did you also feel competitive with him?**

No! No, I didn't. We were allies. There was a lot of music that we both played but once I'd found my own radio voice, my own music and my own audience, then I didn't feel threatened by him at all, and that happened very quickly. Peel and John Walters, his producer, felt threatened when I arrived – and not surprisingly, since it was a barely concealed secret that they'd wheeled me in as a hip young gun-sliding kid from the

PETER GRESTE/AL THOMPSON

**"It was a barely concealed secret they'd shipped in the hip young gunslinger to replace Fatty as he was 45. Peel realised I had a rebellious streak that was far more genuine than his"**



*Whistle Test* to replace Fatty because he'd got to 45. And to that extent, he and Walters were very accommodating. The threat didn't last long. They realised I wasn't trying to replace him and then they realised I wasn't some arriviste, some brash kid who'd come off the street. We could sit around and discuss Lightnin' Hopkins and the sermons of the Rev TL Franklin. And then Peel realised that I had this jihad against mediocrity and that I had a rebellious streak that he could see was far more genuine in me than it was in himself. And in that sense, very quickly, he and Walters saw me as an addition to the team, not an infiltrator.

**The passages where you're describing the companionship of that time are great - with you, Peel and Walters.**

Walters was the genius of the place. Neither of us could have done what we did without him. Going back to the '60s until Walters' retirement in 1991, the *John Peel* programme and the impact that had culturally on the nation, and to a much lesser extent my own programme - none of that would have happened without him. After he retired we had a couple of producers who were nice guys, before they brought in the children, but no one could defend our positions as philosophically as Walters. He was the engine of it all, and me and Peel were sort of the frontmen. It was very paternal - or avuncular. He was an exotic uncle. Of course I exaggerate the preposterous aspects of Walters, and the endlessly entertaining aspect of Walters, but he really was almost a guru.

**"Robotic zealots, true believers and little spivs... crap-and-confidence modernisers, a corporate Khmer Rouge": is it fair to say the BBC under John Birt got to you in the end, though?**

They got to me only in the sense that I carried on doing what I'd always done and survived longer than most Radio 1 DJs, whilst not being shy of taking up a position as radio critic of the *Independent*. I thought, "I have to do this. Nobody else is doing this." I had to try and defend what I saw as valuable about the BBC against this barbarian onslaught led by the director-general of the BBC, for fuck's sake. It was my duty!

**And that's a duty you don't think John Peel fulfilled.**

Yes. I felt let down by him, let's say that. I understand, though. For most of that period of scrapping with the Birtists I was a single bloke with no dependents. He had four

## "Arctic Monkeys? Franz Ferdinand? The Kaiser Chiefs? Do me a favour. It's coming up to rock's 60th birthday. Maybe all the possibilities have been explored"

kids, a wife, a lovely home in Suffolk. He had to survive. I wouldn't want people to think I'm bitter about it. I'm not. I wish he was still with us. It's the TT Races this fortnight, and John came for about six years. Around this time, I miss him. What I wanted to say with this was: yes, he was great, he was a broadcasting giant, but he was as flawed as the rest of us. When it came to the point where I knew I had to stand and fight, I expected him to be alongside me, and he wasn't. I was hurt by that. What hurt was that I thought Peel was big enough, enough of an institution, to be able to show some solidarity with me...

**Could that not have been his insecurity that stopped him?**

Yes. But the key word with Peel is survival. There's going to be an outcry because I've pointed out something that everyone else has avoided pointing out over the years, that it comes back to survival. There is a man who - very publicly, on national radio - changed his on-air personality, his style and even his voice at least twice. Now, if I'd tried to attempt that, do you think I would have got away with it without being ridiculed?

**But is that so awful? Couldn't it equally be called evolution?**

That's not evolution, that's survival. It's seeing which way the wind's blowing. Say, halfway through the 1990s, I suddenly started to present my programmes with a fake

Zimbabwean accent and no one remarked... Does that not suggest a certain insincerity? **Does having such high expectations not paint you into a corner?**

Well, I tell you what, I've been in a hell of a lot of corners then, haven't I? I seem to have covered most corners of the globe... I don't think I've been pinned down. What's wrong with expecting people to have principle, morality and integrity? If most people aren't prepared to stand up for that, then I'm delighted to be different.

**How has Radio 3 been in comparison to Radio 1?**

When Roger Wright, the controller of Radio 3, took me over in 2001 it was just an immense relief. And a delight, because suddenly I was working with all these bright, energetic, curious people who had all those qualities seemingly in the same quantities as I did, and suddenly I wasn't seen as some loony and eccentric. At Radio 1 I was a bloody nuisance because I refused to build a radio show around what I was being fed by the music industry, both major and independent. I refused to be told what I liked by the music press. I was robustly independent, I was my own man. That was tolerated under what I call the end-of-the-pier regime of the old Radio 1 and it was considered a damn nuisance by the Birtists, because we all had to like Britpop. And - can we just put this on record? - that was shite too.

**You say in the book that you're the luckiest person you've met. But don't you think you make your own luck?**

If I fell off the quayside in Peel, Isle of Man this afternoon and got hit by a passing fishing boat and drowned, as I was going under I would have to say, "I couldn't have asked for more." But yes, I think you're on the right lines with that. It's back to nosiness: energy and enthusiasm and curiosity. If you want a colourful and eventful life, they're pretty good allies.

*NO OFF SWITCH: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY by Andy Kershaw is published by Serpent's Tail*



"Thirty-seven quid and all the pizza they can eat!" Booking a follow-up to *The Only Ones* as Leeds Ents Sec in 1981.