

Desert Island DJ

How John Peel helped shape American musical taste.

By Douglas Wolk

On a memorial broadcast for John Peel—who died of a heart attack on Oct. 25 at the age of 65—BBC radio host Mary Anne Hobbs called him “the single most important man that global musical culture has ever seen.” That may not be *quite* true. But the music world’s overwhelming grief over the death of the BBC Radio 1 disc jockey suggests that Peel was right up there—remarkably, for someone who was not a musician himself. Scores of record-collecting geeks are convinced that if you just put them on the radio, they, too, would influence what everyone else listens to. But Peel actually did it—without seeming arrogant about his taste or knowledge—and he was usually three steps ahead of everyone else. Decades after he should, by rights, have become the comfortable old fogey whose persona he affected on air, he was still tracking down and championing the new and newer-than-new.

It’s no surprise that the Brits who grew up listening to Peel’s twice- or thrice-weekly shows have been filling message boards with their fond memories of him. What is surprising is that Americans are doing the same—far more than for the Californian garage-rock standard-bearer and rock historian Greg Shaw, who passed away Oct. 19. There could hardly be a lower-profile job in America than British radio announcer; most of those mourning Peel in the United States probably can’t name two other BBC hosts. And, aside from a short-lived syndicated program in the early ’90s, Peel hadn’t appeared on American radio since he spent a few years in the States in the mid-’60s.

American music fans listened to him anyway—via the Internet broadcast of his BBC show and, before that, shortwave broadcasts of his BBC World Service program and tapes forwarded by kindly friends in the United Kingdom. We sought Peel’s shows out because he seemed to know about *all* the good stuff before anybody else. He waved the flag for David Bowie, Nirvana, T. Rex, the Smiths, the Cure, and the White Stripes long before virtually anyone else had heard of them; Elton John, Black Sabbath, New Order, and hundreds of lesser-known bands tell stories about Peel giving them a hand at the beginning of their careers. Every Peel broadcast seemed to include a couple of homemade records that somebody had pressed in an edition of 400 copies, for which he’d carefully read out a mail-order address.

He was famously inept with mechanical equipment—one listener wrote in to DJ Steve Lamacq’s Peel-memorial broadcast, asking him to play something at the wrong speed in tribute to John. (The fifth clip on this blog features Peel on the air last year turning down his own voice instead of a record.) And he could be dryly snarky about music he didn’t like. A possibly apocryphal story: Following George Michael and Aretha Franklin’s performance of “I Knew You Were Waiting (For Me)” on the TV show *Top of the Pops*, Peel quipped, “You know, Aretha Franklin can make any old rubbish sound good, and I think she just has.” Still, it’s very like him that there’s a compliment concealed inside that put-down.

DJing is, of course, an ephemeral art. But Peel got his name out beyond the BBC’s transmitter range with the “Peel Sessions”: four-song recordings made for his show at the BBC’s studios in a single morning or afternoon. Until 1988, the British Musicians’ Union had an agreement with the BBC that only a certain number of hours of commercial recordings could be broadcast each day, and all other music had to be specifically commissioned for the radio. Peel invited very raw, very promising artists to record for him; by the late ’70s, a particularly good Peel session could instantly popularize a band. In the mid-’80s, the Strange Fruit label started issuing dozens of the best as EPs and albums and spread Peel’s reputation overseas.

That reputation had developed in the late '70s, when Peel caught on to punk rock and induced virtually every good band from the scene to come by for a session or two. (Gang of Four recorded this scorching version of "At Home He's a Tourist" in July 1979.) Punk and post-punk became the core of Peel's show for many years and provided him with his all-time favorite band, Manchester's eccentric and prolific Fall, who recorded several dozen sessions for him over 26 years (here's "C 'N' C/Hassle Schmuk," from March 1981). Eventually, Peel's voice seemed like a natural part of the sound of post-punk. When the Monochrome Set compiled *Volume, Contrast, Brilliance . . .*, a 1983 collection of their sessions and singles, they included snippets of Peel's on-air chatter about them.

But Peel carefully avoided becoming a relic of that historical moment: He was also an early adopter of hip-hop in the early '80s, electronic dance music in the early '90s, and the British grime scene in the last couple of years. Although he generally favored music from the U.K., when American indie rock blossomed in the early '90s, he glommed on to that, too; Pavement recorded a great Peel session (featuring "Circa 1762") the month their first album was released.

Even in his 60s, Peel had the instinct for novelty of a 17-year-old music fanatic—his undying fondness for late-'80s grind-core bands like Extreme Noise Terror and Napalm Death was something of a joke among his listeners, few of whom shared it. (This page includes an MP3 of Peel reading a listener's request to address the "disappointing lack of loud, noisy, three-second-long records that go *bleeraugh!* and then abruptly end.") He played Jamaican and African records he happened to like all the time, without much mind to their significance as "world music." And he had a knack for surprises: In early 1977, with punk busting out, he presented an exquisite session of unaccompanied traditional ballads by folk singer June Tabor (including this version of "Lord Bateman"). Peel was exactly what DJs should be and almost never are: an ideal Sherpa guide to the mountain of music. Nobody liked everything he played, but he was the rare listener who was immediately open to *anything*; as the range of pop music exploded over the last 35 years, that made him the one DJ we could trust to make sense of it all.