

John Peel is an oddity. In a sphere where style, pretension and hype are prevalent he wears his ill-fitting jeans as readily as his unaffectedness and good-humour. Earthy. Not Carnaby St.

"I'm not a hip bloke. Haven't got the figure for it. I'm a 44-year-old father who is two stone overweight and balding. If you are going to be hip you really need to go back and be rebuilt."

He remembers rushing out and buying a pair of drainpipe pants and luminous green socks after hearing Little Richard for the first time. But he never wore them. Having them in the wardrobe was enough.

"A lot of people look at me and say, 'look at the poor old dear, he's 44' but I was lucky to be born when I was. My whole life was transformed by the sudden and unexpected arrival of rock 'n' roll. The first time I heard Little Richard and Elvis Presley it was like nothing before... it just hit you. Wham! This is what I have been waiting for! Life was never quite the same."

Peel is no product, more a music fan whose obsession carried him on to the radio. There is a deliberately amateurish feel to his two-hour nightly BBC programme (whoops... I'll learn to use this fader yet) and the clubbishness of a university station.

Listeners are as possessive and cultish about his programme as the bands he plays. For the last nine years he has been voted Britain's top disc jockey by readers of *NME* and certainly he is pop's essential man behind the microphone.

real radio

He beachcombs the breaking wave of pop, exposing bands to keep the form constantly on the move. Bands from all around the world send him vinyl and demos. We owe more than a passing debt to him that punk exploded as big as it did.

Where he breaks possibly the most ground is in the sessions he has recorded especially for his programme, the bulk of them young unknowns plucked from the plethora of demos he receives daily (between 15 and 30) or maybe spotted in a club.

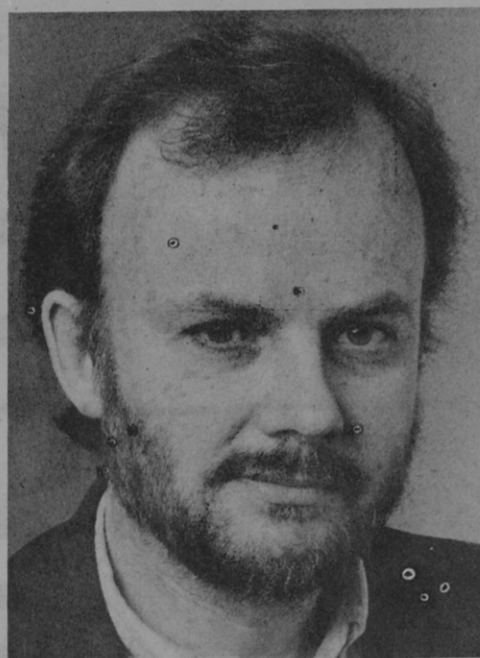
He has a record collection stretching back beyond Noah (with a wealth of anecdotes to match) and his show is further enriched with old soul, blues and rock 'n' roll numbers.

At an age when his peers are content listening to their old Rolling Stones' albums, Peel is still in search of another slab of vinyl to challenge, exhilarate.

"I always relate everything to football when I explain this. I am more concerned with what Liverpool do this Saturday than what they did in their last match and in the same way I am only interested in the records I am going to play tonight or have in the boot of the car."

"Obviously there will come a time when I don't feel like that and I will just want to sit back and listen to my old Fall albums but it hasn't come to that yet. It is not something that is deliberate. It is just a quirk in my nature."

"I think how sad it must be to get locked in a certain time. Quite often people come up to



me and say, 'I used to love your programme back in 1974 but I can't listen to it now!' What a shame, I always wonder if they still eat the same food, read the same books and watch the same television as they did then."

When punk first hit his airwaves regular listeners defected in the droves.

"A lot wrote in saying don't play any more of this stuff it is awful and disgraceful. I enjoyed the music in a rather fearful way. It was just such strong medicine you were rather frightened by it... it was like a snake wriggling out of its tired old skin, it just blew everything away and made it seem redundant."

"I was rather tentative about it but the letters kept pouring in and I was rather excited by this reaction and I knew there must be something here. It was mainly the first Ramones' album and the Damned single."

"The audience dropped heavily but then built back up beyond previous levels and the average age of the listeners had completely changed, from 24 to 16."

"I hate to look back on punk as some golden age but the fact remains there were fewer records coming out and a much higher percentage of them were worth listening to. Out of 10 records four or five of them were wonderful and you couldn't wait to get on to the radio and play them. But now you have to look a lot deeper, dig a lot harder. It is still there but this is part of the whole process of the evolution of popular music where there are periods of things being rather pompous and flatulent which it certainly is at the moment. The new Simple Minds' album is desperately dull and I like the band y'know. I would actually like to be able to find something I like because Jim Kerr is a football fan and when the band warmed up at a festival in Holland a couple of years back they played me

and me wife at football. My wife is very hard on the tackle and she goes in with every expectation of leaving the bugger crippled but I was really impressed the way Jim Kerr rode her tackles."

"You get Siouxsie and the Banshees doing a double live album at the Royal Albert Hall and the Clash have turned into just another stadium rock band and you think 'this is not right! The bad old days, '75 all over again'. In the end things always go so terribly wrong."

He doesn't remember the early and middle 70s being desperately dull at the time.

"There were people like Pink Floyd, Captain Beefheart, Led Zeppelin, T. Rex and Frank Zappa who were doing things that were interesting for the time but a lot of the records that I thought sounded wonderful, now sound terrible and that is the way it should be. The records I like now I am probably going to say in 10 years time, 'Jeez, how could I have ever liked that'. At least I hope I do anyway."

"Obviously there is always stuff that sounds great like the great individual voices of say Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis, Captain Beefheart, Kevin Coyne, Neil Young, Feargal Sharkey, Robert Wyatt... Little Feat sounded wonderful back then and they still do and I still like those early Ry Cooder albums."

Peel lives in a village of 450 people, 100 miles north of London and such is his distaste for the capital he spends as little time as possible there. He eschews the bar and cocktail trail and avoids spending his time shaking the hands of pop stars.

"I always think it is a mistake to meet your heroes. You meet people whose music you despise and they turn out to be really nice and the people whose music you like turn out to be wankers. I only met Mark Smith (of the Fall) recently. His wife came over to me and thanked me for what I had done for the band. She said Mark would have come over but he is not that type of bloke and fair enough: I find the whole idea of someone like him coming across to me quite tasteless. I met Joe Strummer and he turned out to be a real tosser and one of the Sex Pistols threatened me with violence. Paul Weller and I were once on a programme and when reviewing a Style Council single I commented that Weller didn't seem to have much of a sense of humour. Afterwards he came across and said 'ere, what's this then Mr Peel - think you know more about Mr Weller than me?' which just seemed to prove my point."

He does, however, admit to asking the BBC if he could bring his four children (all are named after Liverpool football stars) along to the studios when star striker Kenny Dalglish was paying them a visit.

The family cottage is awash in records and tapes and before he gets his children breakfast he puts a record on his old mono player. (The way they are heard on radio.)

Among his five favourite singles of last year was a reggae tune 'Picture on My Wall' by the Naturalites. The others were: 'This Charming' **CONTINUED ON PAGE 34**

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