

The cultural importance of john peel

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'Making it' in the music industry is one of the most difficult career paths any individual could make today. Thousands of demo tapes get sent into record labels daily, only not to be glanced at by label executives, so understandably there was and still is the need to get material exposed in a way that is accessible to a global audience and not harmful to the recording label profession. This is where the late legendary broadcaster John Peel entered the 'equation'; he enriched the lives of many radio listeners across Britain and America with his unique ear for talent, therefore he is arguably significant to the moulding of our musical tastes.

For my essay, I will look at John Peel and the work he did on Radio 1 and how it has placed him as a figure of great cultural importance in contemporary society. The importance of radio is fundamental to the availability of we consume music. Goslich et al in their *Radio: V. Impact on musical life* (2005) article state that radio broadcasting evolved in the 1920s when very few commercial records were accessible, so the innovation of radio encouraged a strong push in record purchasing.

Britain was riddled with autocracy at the time of World War Two (1940-1945), radio was produced for escapism to enable the public to listen to a broad range of music. The BBC Third Programme in the 1940s was the initial radio show that broadcasted classical music and was essentially 'high-brow' by nature for the more affluent listeners. Some years later a cultural movement began overseas, which made radio move away from the cultural constraints of orchestral music to more revolutionary samples. John Peel was born John Robert Ravenscroft in Heswall on the 30th August 1939.

Peel instantly acknowledged this revolutionary movement of rock music surfacing, according to Inglis in the Popular Music and Society (2005) article, Peel thought where Presley was concerned, '... where there had been nothing, there was suddenly something... unleashed on the world that would never go back in the bottle. ' Realising that rock music 'was up and coming' he moved to America to make 'waves' in his career. The 1960s outlined a period with the emergence of controversial rock 'n' roll music, also known globally as corruptive satanic music.

Rock evolved in America at a time of conservatism and Cold War paranoia and was used as a means of challenging conservative attitudes as Bradley (1992) notes as cited in Negus (1996, p. 141) 'Beatlemania' was also sweeping Germany and later Britain during the 1964 British Invasion and in turn so did Peel. Peel debuted as a Beatle's expertise radio disk jockey at the Texas station WRR, and KOMA in Oklahoma- he was anti-establishment by nature and loathed playing set play lists. Arguably it was his career at KMEN in Los Angeles that marked the beginning of setting him aside from other DJs.

There, he dabbled in music such as The Doors and The Yardbirds and aired their records at the station, this was the Peel that British radio listeners came to know and love. Upon his return to Britain, he experienced the madness of rock music that teenagers just could not get enough of. The British Broadcasting Corporation, (the BBC) at the time was bound by state regulations to play more conventional live dance-hall bands of the audiences of the forties and fifties era. They were obligated at the time to play live

music that guaranteed live musicians a wage, this is known as the 'Needle Time' restriction set by Musicians Union.

With the rock and psychedelic movements well and truly happening, Peel decided to pirate live from a boat where he was able to freely play music that opposed the 'Needle Time' restriction and regulatory play lists. Joining Radio London was culturally significant, as it allowed Peel to cater to the needs of the teenage rock masses; it also established his career as an anti-establishment DJ. However, Radio London's life was short-lived, as the Labour government were displeased at appearing incompetent by the pirates they introduced the Marine Broadcasting Act (1967) to 'silence' them as Heatley (2002, p. 8) notes.

John Peel was innovative; he thought music should be free of the constraints of the ownership as music should be about inspiration and creativity. Musical theorists would suggest there are power struggles between the music industry corporates and the artists in terms of who truly owns the music. Industry corporates declare ownership because they put the effort into marketing professional music for audiences, whereas artists claim ownership as they produce the material- so as result a tension is created between the married partnership.

Adorno et al (1977) as cited in Negus (1996, p. 40) have concerns with ownership as a small proportion of companies control the majority of record distribution, therefore creative possibilities are lost as they are 'coopted' by commerciality. Notably, Peel was a major player in the construction of our contested musical identities, as he opened our ears us to a blend of musical

tastes through live music sessions where world music was accessible specifically for listener, so he overcame the argument of industry music ownership.

Peel was 'head-hunted' by the BBC as he was a potential threat being an ex-pirate DJ and was reeled into the launch of Radio 1 in 1967. Peel's shows *The Perfume Garden* and *Night Ride* played contrasting material that mirrored the obscure cultural changes occurring at the time. Peel became renowned for not playing popular hit lists and straying into the unknown by airing underground acts like *Tyrannosaurus Rex* and *Fairport Convention*. Many artists owe their careers to Peel as he often played albums in entirety which was unheard of for radio DJs and considered blasphemous by the BBC.

In essence, he did everything in his power to promote music to the extreme of breaking every rule he could, he was also a humble toned broadcaster who truly connected to listeners through poetry and politics which contrasted with outspoken extrovert DJs like *Everette* and *Blackburn* at the time as *Heatley* (2004, p. 46) notes. Radio 1 became one of the hottest radio stations around with Peel on board presenting the infamous *Peel Sessions* on the *Top Gear* programme, thus making Radio 1 culturally important to the public as an institution in socialising us on music history.

Peel Sessions featured an array of live musical talent, like *Pink Floyd* and *David Bowie* who Peel respected; clearly, these artists owe their successful careers to John as he made their music accessible to British radio listeners. The sound of the seventies saw Peel responsible for introducing punk into Radio 1 when he accidentally discovered the *Ramones* by playing the song

'Judy Is A Punk' and this led to Peel doing punk exposés on the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Buzzcocks, the Jam and the Undertones from which their track 'Teenage Kicks' became a regular favourite of Peel's Radio 1 show.

Subsequently, the 1976 Festive 50 chart saw the likes of The Beatles, The Doors and Jimi Hendrix make the list, which could be seen as Negus (1996, p. 138) pointing out how '... Music identities are created out of knowledge and experience of the past'. Peel was culturally imperative in influencing our music identities through Radio 1 because he made listeners recognise past artists, evidently by the artists that made the Festive 50 chart. He also exposed Radio 1 listeners to hip-hop in the 1980s, according to the BBC website (no date) Peel listeners would now hear '...

Dick Dale sandwiched between Grandmaster Flash and Robert Wyatt, with a bit of punk, reggae, new wave... thrown in for good measure. ' Although commercial music made an important come-back in the 1980s, Peel remained truthful to his anti-establishment ways in getting world music heard, he made a variety of television appearances on Top of the Pops, The Archers and went on to win many awards whilst continuing to plug underground acts on Radio 1 right up until his death in 2004.

Undeniably, Peel took tremendous lengths where necessary in the production of new talent or alternative musical styles- this can be seen in the opening of his own record label Dandelion. According to the BBC website (no date), although the initial reason behind Dandelion's launch was to record a friend, Peel still used the label as a vessel to release material from eighteen

different acts. Jarvis Cocker from Pulp states in Heatley (2004), that Peel '... was a launchpad for a thousand careers....

No one medium could match his influence as a supporter of new talent... ' Peel went out of his way to promote music because he realised how central music is to modern British culture, if it was not for the explosion of the Peel Sessions on Radio 1 bringing live performances from the likes of Led Zeppelin, Joni Mitchell and Elton John, music would not have the same cultural value to every generation that it has today, the Peel Sessions are the reason why there are music festivals today.

Overall, Peel was the forefront figure in discovering some of the most renowned acts within music history. As Inglis (2005) states '... the importance of his career is not measured by its longevity, but by its ability to retain and encourage enthusiasm, optimism, and alternatives in the production of popular music. ' In essence he was a great figure of cultural importance as he exposed radio listeners to a mixture of alternative styles mainly through Radio 1.

Peel was loved by the nation, his death in 2004 caused an emotional '... outpouring of national grief not seen in the world of popular music since the deaths of John Lennon, Freddie Mercury or George Harrison. ' as Inglis notes in the article Popular Music and Society (2005). There will never be another Peel, he was the 'alpha and omega' in making world music accessible and can never be replaced no matter how hard Radio 1 tries to fill the void.