

John Peel's *Home Truths*

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Abstract

John Peel will be remembered mainly as the most influential British radio DJ of the last century, but he was in addition a successful and important presenter of speech radio. The transition from being a DJ on BBC Radio 1 to presenting the Radio 4 speech programmes, 'Offspring' and 'Home Truths' began when he started writing a column for 'Radio Times'. His idiosyncratic accounts of family life made him an obvious choice for Radio 4 producers. His popularity (with audiences if not with the critics) can be understood by identifying the Peel persona on both series. Brand and Scannell's discussion of the radio DJ, Tony Blackburn (1991) provides a useful way of understanding how presenters create a framed discursive space entered by selected contributors. Peel's 'Home Truths' is a particularly striking (even controversial) example of a programme embodying distinct values of Middle England, eccentricity and a sense of alienation from the modern world. The intimate bond between Peel, the programme and the 'congregation' of listeners explains the programme's demise slightly over a year after his death.

Keywords

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Broadcast talk

John Peel has an important position in the history of BBC Radio. He was one of the most popular and respected radio presenters and in a career which lasted forty years he was both the doyen of British radio DJs and also a highly successful and innovative presenter of speech radio.

Peel's popularity was all too evident from the huge crowds which turned up at the public funeral following his death on 25th October 2004 aged 65. Among the flood of tributes many came from the legions of admiring listeners as well as from the many artists whose careers he had helped to launch.

Following a period working on a number of radio stations in the USA in the 1960s¹ Peel returned to the UK in 1967 to join Radio London, where his show *The Perfumed Garden* introduced new ground breaking music. But, as one of the offshore pirate radio stations playing popular music and subsequently having a severe impact on the BBC's listening figures, Radio London was a victim of the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act.²

After the demise of Radio London, Peel joined BBC Radio 1³, the BBC's new popular music station established in response to the overwhelming success of the pirate stations in luring younger audiences. Peel was still a presenter on Radio 1 at the time of his death and had survived many upheavals over the course of the station's history.

From early programmes such as *Top Gear* right through to his eponymous late night shows, Peel was seen as a champion of new music, responsible for providing a platform for new artists and for introducing new forms of music to a UK wide audience such as reggae, punk and hip-hop. Ken Garner's detailed account of the famous 'Peel Sessions' (Garner 1993) is a record of an extraordinary period in British music radio. Peel, above all others, used live performance on Radio 1 to launch the careers of many of the most successful pop acts of the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s and beyond and became an iconic figure in British music radio.

For the majority of people in Britain who were familiar with Peel as a broadcaster their experience was essentially that of Peel as a DJ. His idiosyncratic style as a music presenter was unique among Radio 1 DJs who came and went during the course of his career. Peel's programmes focused on different styles of music and included new record releases, demo tapes and studio sessions as well as material from his vast personal record collection. The music was always played in full and he would never speak over the beginning or end of tracks. Playing records at the wrong speed was a common error which gradually became a cult trait of the show and one which management felt comfortable about ignoring.

Even through the most turbulent period in Radio 1's history during the early 1990s, Peel survived the axe which fell upon many of his colleagues. Matthew Bannister, who became Controller in 1993 charged with regaining the station's severely dwindling audience, decided to hire new, younger presenters in order to create an empathy with young listeners. In doing so however he made it clear that Peel's role at Radio 1 was sacrosanct and that Peel would remain at Radio 1 as long as he was Controller.

Peel's influence and position as a DJ presenting live music programmes in his own inimitable way was well appreciated by the thousands of listeners who bombarded the BBC with letters, emails and message board postings following his death. But among

¹ These stations included; WRR, Dallas; KLIF, Dallas; KOMA, Oklahoma City and KMEN, San Bernardino, California. Peel used his real name on these stations; John Ravenscroft or the shortened John Ravenscroft.

² This law now made offshore broadcasting illegal.

³ BBC Radio 1 launched on 30 September 1967 offering popular music for a young audience. Today Radio 1 offers the same service with populist chart based daytime programmes and more specialist music programmes in the evenings.

the plethora of correspondence a large number came from people who had no or at best a fleeting knowledge of Peel's primary occupation as a DJ but instead recognised him for his talents as a speech broadcaster on BBC Radio 4's *Home Truths*.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Peel, the veteran DJ, made the transition to speech radio. It is based on a variety of sources including interviews with producers of both *Offspring* (1995-1997) and *Home Truths* (1998-2006) two similar programmes, both of which were presented by Peel, as well as some close listening to selected editions of both programmes and press response to them.

Radio Times⁴

In the early 1990s, the BBC's own listings magazine, *Radio Times* had been trying to ensure its survival by changing from a mere listings journal to a full colour modern magazine package. One aspect of this redesign was to employ regular contributors. To that end BBC personalities began weekly columns, for example Barry Norman (films), Geoff Hamilton (gardening), Alan Hansen (football) and Polly Toynbee (programme reviews).

Polly Toynbee's columns were rather cerebral and issue driven and it was decided that a foil was needed for her, something softer and more personable. The editorial staff at *Radio Times* thought of John Peel because they knew he could write (he had previously written a column for *The Observer*). With his outre yet middle age views, he fitted perfectly the mantra of the new look *Radio Times* - "modern but not trendy". After negotiations, Peel agreed to start his column entitled *John Peel's Family Album* in 1993 designed to be a simple critique of a normal family's viewing.

From the very first column the *Radio Times* editors knew Peel was able to write well. For many people familiar with his Radio 1 job the columns showed an entirely different side to Peel, not the alternative music but a family man possessing great humanity and warmth. It also introduced him to a whole new, predominantly middle class, audience.⁵ For many in this group it was their first full exposure to him and indeed many of them were also Radio 4 listeners who would recognise his name when he took to the air with *Offspring* a few years later.

The brief for Peel's column was quite simple; it was to be a weekly column, describing what programmes the family had been watching or were looking forward to watching. *Radio Times* was still acutely aware of the hearthside aspect of the magazine in its early days and wanted to reflect this heritage of being a family magazine. Because of this, part of Peel's brief was to write about fatherhood. At the beginning he followed this very closely but then it took on a momentum of its own and he veered away from programmes to describe happenings in the Peel household itself. The column developed an almost cult personality of its own through its warmth and humour and letters from readers showed it was one of the things many people first turned to.

⁴ Based on an interview with Nicholas Brett, Editor, *Radio Times* 1988-1996. (November 2005)

⁵ At this time *Radio Times* had 3.5 million readers with a median age of 44 and 70% ABC1.

Offspring⁶

In the early 1990s, three producers⁷ in the BBC Radio 4 Features department went on maternity leave around the same time. On their return they spent a lot of time talking about being mothers and about how they now thought differently about families and relationships. Nothing existed on Radio 4 which tackled the whole notion of family and the raw emotion of parenthood and they decided to develop a programme idea which reflected their shared experiences and which they were sure would appeal to an important part of the Radio 4 audience.

The embryonic idea received little support when pitched to senior Radio 4 management. The then Controller, Michael Green thought Radio 4 did cover the family and was unclear about the programme concept but after continued bombardment he asked the producers to refine their idea and commissioned a pilot.

As well as having to establish a structure and direction for the programme a crucial question was who would present it. The producers wanted the programme to be 'sharp and edgy', so it was important to find someone who could empathise with family life, appeal to the audience and, quite importantly at this time, aid the network policy of attracting new listeners to Radio 4. In common with all the BBC national stations in the early 1990s, Radio 4 had been feeling the effects of the boom period for the commercial sector which followed the 1990 Broadcasting Act.

Among the many names to emerge was that of John Peel. Although he had never presented on Radio 4 and his abilities in speech broadcasting were unknown, his *Radio Times* column had demonstrated his ability to comment on family life in an amusing, irreverent way - exactly the format the producers were trying to capture for the radio programme.

There were naturally concerns about how Peel might cope in a new environment; doing pre-recorded programmes, writing the programme scripts and interviewing listeners, a far cry from a solitary figure presenting a live programme consisting mostly of music. And of course there was the question of how the existing, notoriously difficult, Radio 4 audience would take to him.

The pilot revealed Peel's talent as a speech presenter and the series began in October 1995. The success of the programme⁸ was largely down to Peel's ability to interact with his listeners and his interviewees as well as his ability to write fresh, witty scripts each week.

The first edition of *Offspring* was broadcast on 7 October 1995 with this billing,

From pets and parenthood to puberty and piano teachers – for the next eight weeks John Peel, seasoned chronicler of domestic life in his *Family Album*

⁶ Based on an interview with Cathy Drysdale, Producer, *Offspring* 1995-1997. (October 2005).

⁷ Cathy Drysdale, Fiona Couper, Elizabeth Burke.

⁸ It eventually won a Sony Gold Award (the Sony Awards are the annual awards of the UK radio industry).

column in *Radio Times*, presents dispatches from the frontline of family life. (*Radio Times* 7-13 October, p.113)

Offspring came to an end in 1997 at the same time as the introduction of new Radio 4 schedules and a new Controller, James Boyle. The demise of the programme did not mean the demise of the presenter whose success had guaranteed he would play an important role in the future output of the network.

Home Truths⁹

By 1998, Radio 4 Controller, James Boyle had begun implementing major changes to the Radio 4 schedule. Among the slots which audience research suggested were not working very well was Saturday morning, then occupied by *Sport on 4* and *Breakaway*. In his quest to revamp this slot, Boyle was heavily influenced by two Commissioning Editors¹⁰ who had previously been responsible for devising *Offspring*. They wanted something fun on a Saturday morning and believed that it would be the perfect vehicle for Peel to build on the success he had earned at *Offspring*.

The network knew Peel had the skill to occupy a key Saturday morning slot but it was still a gamble as *Offspring* had not been a long running programme and he had been heavily produced and everything was pre-recorded. Occupying a very exposed part of the schedule and with a longer duration (one hour) the new programme would be a considerable challenge. From the moment the decision was made to go ahead, the production team were under intense pressure from management to get it right. The team assembled to create the programme had only two months to prepare the pilot and initially had no real idea what the programme was to be about except that it was to be about leisure and have a weekend feel. It soon became apparent that filling an hour with tales of domestic life would be a challenge. The programme gradually redefined itself with the words, “extraordinary stories from ordinary folk”. The conclusion from the pilot was to combine the extraordinary (or eccentric) with the everyday and to use Peel as the presenter and consequently the new programme, called *Home Truths*, was first broadcast on 11 April 1998.

There can be no doubt that *Home Truths* was controversial. It inspired quite different reactions from critics and other listeners, with the devoted community of fans on the one hand and some contemptuous critics on the other. The one and a half million or so regular listeners to Peel’s *Home Truths* were, however, proof of its popularity. The critic Paul McCann, writing soon after the start of its run was typical of those who admired what he heard, an ‘exploration of the ordinary. It roams over the terrain of domestic life, nudging gently at the minutiae of the word to uncover wonderful real stories...’ (McCann, 1998). A very different view was taken by the radio critic, Gillian Reynolds: ‘I am an unfan of Radio 4’s *Home Truths*. That Let’s Go Trippin’ tune which introduces it drives me mad. I really and truly hate this programme, always have.’ (Reynolds, 2005). Similarly the Radio 1 DJ, Andy Kershaw said

⁹ This section is partly based on an interview with Chris Berthoud, Producer, *Home Truths*, 1998-2000. (November 2005).

¹⁰ Fiona Couper and Elizabeth Burke.

‘although I do think John is a broadcaster of genius, *Home Truths* is cloying, sentimental and indulgent.’ (*The Observer* April 11 1999). In a similar vein Julie Burchill wrote, ‘I find it filthily objectionable for someone who has grown rich and respected for preaching sixties mantras to come over so cosy and domestic...’ (*The Observer* April 11 1999).

It is not the aim here to pass judgement on *Home Truths*, to side either with its admiring ‘congregation’ of listeners or with its many critics. For students of radio the programme and its presenter are of interest because of the discursive space created by Peel. His crafted radio persona ruled over a unique programme which inspired in its listeners a very wide range of reactions.

Peel As Presenter

Although he was operating on two very distinctive networks at Radio 1 and Radio 4, Peel’s Radio 1 career suggested that he would fit very comfortably into the type of programme Radio 4 was seeking through the incarnations of *Offspring* and *Home Truths*. Back in 1969, for example, Peel received a considerable amount of media attention when, following a trailer on his show promoting a BBC programme on venereal disease, he openly revealed that he was a sufferer himself. Such candid revelations to his listeners would also crop up on his future Radio 4 programmes and highlighted Peel’s ability to develop an unusually open relationship with his listeners. Many of Peel’s anecdotes at Radio 4 of course revolved around his family. This was an important element of his *Radio Times* column but also in his Radio 1 show where live sessions would be broadcast from his family home in Suffolk. There were frequent references to family members and what they thought of various pieces of music played on the show and the regular *Pig’s Big 78* where his wife Sheila¹¹ selected a 78 rpm record for the show.

What was the persona of the John Peel who presented *Offspring* and *Home Truths*? One way of answering that question is to look at the opening words of the first edition of *Offspring* broadcast on Saturday October 7th 1995.

John Peel:

When our children were much smaller than they are now (they are, or they were at the time of my leaving home this morning, 19, 17, 15 and 13) I would entrance them on long journeys by singing them selections from the early work of Lonnie Donegan. These programmes, this programme, *Offspring*, is about that sort of thing, the means by which parents establish at least the semblance of some sort of working relationship with their children. Children whose own happiness and sense of achievement may depend on making this theoretically workable relationship, unworkable. *Offspring* is also about the tactics children devise to sneak stuff past their parents and the degree to which parents should allow stuff to be sneaked past them. And the extent to which children know that

¹¹ Pig was Peel’s nickname for his wife.

their parents are allowing them to sneak stuff past them. It goes on, of course, for ever¹².

Peel constructs here his identity as a 'family man' with an early reference to his own children, including their number and ages. As a father he presents himself as both 'fun loving' and unconventional (the Lonnie Donegan reference serving to remind the listener that this is not only a father but also a famous DJ). There is also a sense of the vulnerable but stoical parent engaged in the difficult task of controlling a younger generation trying to 'sneak stuff past' him.

As Brand and Scannell point out in their discussion of the Radio 1 DJ (and contemporary of Peel's) Tony Blackburn, presenters must maintain their radio identity over a period of time: 'This may involve the projection of a carefully crafted public identity and the maintenance of that identity in and through time.' (Brand and Scannell, 1991, p.203). This persona must be routinely 'reproduced and reaffirmed by talk.' Peel maintained the family man and bewildered father persona in the transition from *Offspring* to *Home Truths*. References to his children, wife, brother and cats were frequent. Added to this, however, was a pronounced eccentricity which might be characterised as an older person's dislike of the modern world. Peel delighted in challenging modern fads – keep fit, gadgets, the mores of modern Britain. After reading out the *Home Truths* web and email details he once commented, 'we also received a message asking, rather plaintively I thought, whether it was still acceptable to communicate by pen and paper. 'My own preferred option, dear sir!'¹³. The Peel persona matured over the years into an ironic and self-deprecating sceptic, constantly challenging modern conventions and expectations. In doing this, Peel celebrated the eccentric, the deviant - the roller skating mother, the ping-pong playing granny, people who name their fridge or are in love with their 'teasmade'.

Home Truths consisted partly as a space for Peel's identity and was at times strongly self-referential – being about Peel, his family and the institution of the programme itself. At the same time it drew in its absent audience:

John Peel:

The crazy teen beat sounds of Dick Dale introduce *Home Truths 2*. I'm John Peel and you're just, you know, you, and that's good enough for me. This week we have a bit of this (*words of contributor*) and we'll also be taking you back in a special way to nature (*words of contributor*) and let's have less of that silly sniggering, and for carp fans (*words of contributor*).

In this 'invigorating new series' (the Gallowshields Clarion) we are in a strong position to check on both sides of the story or to follow up on stories we have already heard. Last week, Dominic Warmesley told us about Brian Edgings, a prince among carp fisherman and I'll be listening to Brian, with mounting incredulity I have to admit, later on, so hopefully will you. If you were listening

¹² *Offspring* (1995), BBC Radio 4, UK, Saturday 7 October, 6.50 – 7.20pm.

¹³ *Home Truths* (1998), BBC Radio 4, UK, Saturday 18 April, 9-10am.

last week you'll have heard our 'Final Straw' couple rowing over hoarding. Kay Smith rang us with an update (*words of contributor*). We are a 'social worker *Home Truths*' it can work for you! ¹⁴

This introduction exemplifies Peel's broadcast talk. It is a strongly inclusive sequence in which the listener is hailed by direct address ('you' is used seven times and 'we' five times). The playfulness of Peel's address is combined with edited words of contributors and the overall effect is to create the welcoming discursive world of the programme.

Contributors entered the world of *Home Truths* in a way not dissimilar to the callers to the *Tony Blackburn Show*. On live radio, Blackburn was particularly harsh with some callers and refused to allow anyone to speak out of 'frame'. The rules of engagement were to talk 'within the terms of the discursive space of *The Tony Blackburn Show*'. (Brand and Scannell, 1991 p.219). In their very different ways, Blackburn and Peel both policed the boundaries of their programmes to ensure only appropriate contributions were heard. Peel had the luxury of selecting and pre-recording contributors and their contributions were entirely synchronous with the values of the programme. Themes of eccentricity, family life, nationality and ageing not only reflected the Peel world-view but were often expressed in a style which aped his own, here are two examples:

Contributor:

'Get your GCSEs out of the way', I apparently declared some months ago 'and I'll agree to you having your nose pierced'. So, exams safely behind her, my teenage daughter, Anna, began researching tattoo and piercing parlours in the East Anglian region with a fervour she singularly lacked as far as revising for American history was concerned. ¹⁵

Contributor:

We sprint to the number 50 bus stop, I'd like to think we are doing our bit for the environment but actually we haven't got a second car. The bus screeches to a halt. As I steer my two small charges onto the deck I'm greeted by thirty-five under sixes en route to the swimming baths and some very hacked off pensioners leaning in the aisles from the onslaught. ... we mountaineer our way to the top deck where we are greeted by plumes of smoke, it's the underage school smokers spread-eagled and churlish over the back seats. ¹⁶

The theme of the alienated and embattled parent confronted by recalcitrant youth is well expressed in both extracts. In both we hear a crafted and slightly mannered attempt to imitate Peel's style and sense of humour. It is as if contributions not only had to reflect the values of the programme and its presenter but also in a style reminiscent of Peel himself.

¹⁴ *Home Truths* (1998) op.cit.

¹⁵ *Home Truths* op.cit. 21 September, 2002.

¹⁶ *Home Truths* op.cit. 18 October, 2003.

Another theme developed by contributors was 'Englishness'. An edition broadcast in March 2001 contained a long item on Haile Selassie. Aspects of a rather dated English culture are described; village fetes, swimming baths, lemon meringue pie and Sunday school. The visit of the African emperor acts as a device for articulating essentially English features of 1930s Weston-Super-Mare. In the same programme we hear about the boy who saved a girl from drowning and 'came to tea'; the 'divinity teacher' who sang Abba songs in class; Peel makes fun of his own baldness, a BBC correspondent whistles through his teeth. The apparent range of subjects led Peel to comment, 'That does it! Dick Dale, Abba, Hindemith and now a respected BBC correspondent whistling the Birdie Song. Eclectic or what?'¹⁷ A possible answer to Peel's rhetorical question might be 'not as eclectic as you seem to believe'. The range and variety were restricted by the discursive framing of family, eccentricity, age, Englishness and the conventions of Peel's style.

It would be wrong to accuse Peel, as many did, of a comfortable complacency in his speech programmes. Indeed, a feature of both *Offspring* and *Home Truths* was a striking contrast in mood within individual programmes, defying the radio orthodoxy that jarring changes in mood should be avoided. The edition mentioned above moved from the light and amusing 'eclectic' stories to a dark and disturbing item. Peel interviewed a disabled man who had been sent to a home for disabled children in the 1950s. He described the vicious bullying of a friend ('I could hear his screams') and his own participation in beating him to save himself from abuse. Peel used a highly non-interventionist interviewing style which includes long silences and the man comes close to tears.¹⁸ Most editions of *Home Truths* included the darker side of life and especially stories on neglect and estrangement. This combination of the serious/informative and the humorous can be found elsewhere in broadcasting. Andrew Tolson's examination of talk in television chat shows describes 'a certain ambivalence between forms of talk which are designed both to inform and to entertain; to appear serious and sincere, but also sometimes playful and even flippant.' (Tolson, 1991, p.178)

Conclusion

How do we explain the undoubted success of Peel's *Home Truths*? Over a period of time a programme, especially one embedded in the schedule, comes to express or embody certain values. Brand and Scannell describe the different values decipherable in *The Tony Blackburn Show*. *Home Truths* was the place for values of eccentricity, nationality and an empathy for parents and the elderly. At its best it acknowledged both the comedy and the tragedy of everyday life. In her account of radio and the American imagination, Susan Douglas wrote these words:

Before starting this book at the usual place, with the radio boom of the 1920s, I'd like to explore why the act of listening might be pleasurable and how it cultivates both a sense of national unity and, at the same time, a conspiratorial

¹⁷ *Home Truths* op.cit. 23 March 2001.

¹⁸ *Home Truths* op.cit.

sense of subcultural difference, of distance from, even superiority to that national ethos. (Douglas, 1999, p.23).

Douglas may have been discussing 1920s American radio but she could have been writing about *Home Truths*. It has been argued here that the programme achieved exactly what Douglas so perceptively describes. The audience was addressed both as a national citizen, reminded of the often archaic eccentricities of England, but also identified as a separate community, the 'imagined community' of Benedict Anderson's widely quoted book (1983). Peel's *Home Truths* cultivated a sense of 'subculture' in his listeners because of their distance, and Peel's distance, from aspects of the modern world and their affection for the way things were. Eccentricity was at the heart of a programme which, at its very best, intriguingly combined the fact of Middle England's conformism with a Peel-centred celebration of the eccentric. For those who study radio, Peel's *Home Truths* is a good example of how a listening community is drawn in by the persona of its presenter, embodying and expressing the values of the programme, which they share. Their, largely surrogate, participation through the contributions of the selected few helped to make that imagined community more real and kept audiences above one million.

Home Truths continued with different presenters following the death of John Peel but in December 2005 the Controller, Mark Damazer, announced it would come to an end in the spring of 2006. He cited the fact that Peel's personality was too bound up in the success of *Home Truths* for it to continue without him. He was right.

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