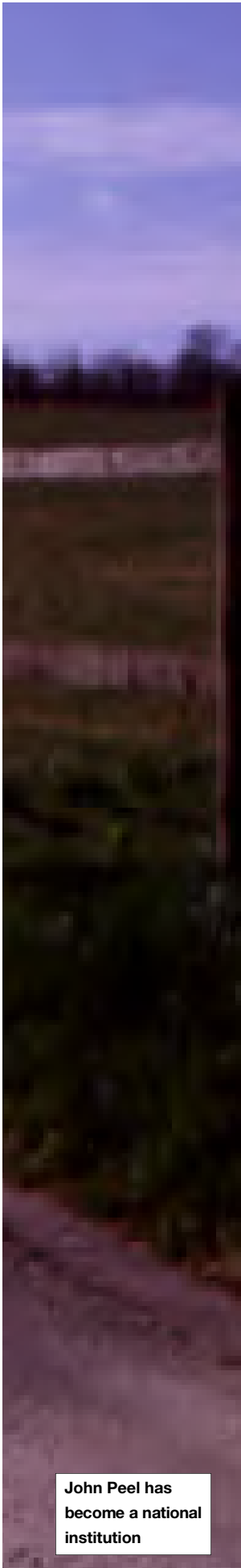


Why has this grumpy balding man just been paid £1.5 million for his life story?

At 63 – and no slave to fame, fashion or fitness – John Peel is now, in publishing terms, worth more than Kylie. Just what is the huge appeal of this deadpan DJ and presenter of Radio 4's Home Truths?



John Peel has become a national institution

Tune into John Peel's Radio Four Home Truths for the first time, and you'd picture a grumpy, cynical bloke with a whiney and – come to that, fake – working-class accent. By his own admission he 'looks like a minicab driver', is 'old, overweight, with not enough hair' and collects coins as a hobby. Peel is now also £1.5 million better off thanks to a book deal to write his autobiography. What, you wonder, is the appeal of a man who calls his wife 'Pig' and likes to slob out in old shorts in his Suffolk home?

Unlikely as it may seem at first glance, John Peel OBE is a national institution.

If you didn't catch him first time around as the maverick seventies DJ responsible for discovering Roxy Music and the Sex Pistols, chances are you now listen to his phenomenally successful Home Truths on a Saturday morning – or for great blasts of raw musical talent you could tune into his weekly Radio 1 show that attracts the biggest teenage audience in the business. The secret of spanning the generations lies in Peel's passion for gritty class-act bands and his genuine interest in how people cope with whatever life throws at them. He has street-cred and emotional intuition. Peel also has a voice that grows on you – the whiney becomes worldly wise. He is a right-on lad-dad who has made his mark with his rare breed of grown-up radio.

Home Truths, a very British mix of ordinary people talking about their extraordinary emotional experiences and quirky domestic habits, was Peel's idea and never quite works as well when other presenters sit in for him. One of the biggest pulls is his unabashed empathy.

'I frequently get upset when I'm interviewing people. Once a woman was describing how her son had been killed in a car accident while waiting for his A level results,' says Peel, a father of four. 'At the time Sheila and I were waiting for our son Tom's A-level results and I had to keep stopping the interview because I was sobbing helplessly.'

In Home Truths, Peel uses 'slightly tasteless levity' to relieve tension in any of the really painful inter-

Known for years as a Radio 1 DJ, Peel now also presents Radio 4's incredibly successful Home Truths



views. In real life, he uses the technique to re-live his own difficult memories, starting with his chilly, deeply middle-class upbringing on the Wirral in Liverpool. He and his two younger brothers were brought up by nannies; boarding school and National Service (where he ditched the posh accent for scouse) followed. Peel's pre-boarding school days had been spent mostly with his mother – his father had been away in the war and they didn't meet until John was six.

'I was affected by not seeing my dad until I was a young boy,' says Peel, 'but a lot of my generation never saw their dads at all. He was affected by not seeing his son.' His father died when Peel was in his 30s and he still regrets never having got to know him better.

Ten years ago, for a television programme, he revisited the holiday house in North Wales where he had met his father for the first time. 'I thought I was perfectly in control but when recounting the story I fell apart completely. I ended up lying on the ground – I thought I was having a heart attack, it took such a physical form.'

Peel's relationship with his mother offered few compensations. 'I was beaten a lot – but my mother thought that's what she needed to do to make me a decent human being. Parenting was a very different business then.

'People who met my mother thought she was hilariously funny, but she wasn't terrifically good as a mum. She didn't like me' CONTINUED OVER PAGE



Peel with Sheila. He describes her as 'the battery on which I run' and says she is 'entirely without pretence'



In the late Sixties and Seventies Peel achieved cult status as an influential DJ and champion of new bands

much and was rather proud to say it. Both my parents drank fairly considerably and once, when she came to dinner, she said, "Alan was always my favourite, and then Francis, and then you..." It was a bit of a stunner. Initially, obviously, I felt sorry for myself, but then I felt the loss was in her, not me.'

In the late Sixties, Peel was asked to make a BBC radio programme called *Inquiry*. Its audience was teenage schoolchildren. Peel's comments on the wedded state – 'I feel that marriage is an unfair, artificial device which tends to destroy relationships rather than build them' – were shocking, and provocative enough to establish him as much more than your average disc-spinner. It also heralded the beginning of a fairly wild period in his life.

During a stint in the US as a DJ, Peel admits to 'a lot of sex', one acid trip and a passing taste for weed in California. There was also a disastrous marriage to a 15-year-old in Texas (Peel had been convinced that she was two years older). Eventually an epiphany of sorts came in a toilet in Portsmouth: 'I found myself having sex with a go-go girl on a tiled floor. I just thought, this is depravity and I decided I would never use anybody purely for gratification ever again. It's one of the key moments in my life.'

'My mother didn't like me much and was rather proud to say it'

Thirty years on, Peel has an almost boringly cosy marriage with his second wife Sheila. The couple met when Peel spotted her in a studio audience and sent her a note – which she still has – asking her out. With four grown-up children, Peel regularly includes snippets of his own domestic life and journeys through teenage angst in his broadcasts. But celebrity – his own or anyone else's – makes him as uncomfortable as it makes his kids. When he drove his eldest, William, to Liverpool University, Peel wasn't allowed out of the car.

'We've met an amazing number of famous people – once,' he says. 'Everyone else exchanges phone numbers, and Sheila and I stand there – we're not terribly showbizzy people. I just like being with the

children and Sheila – a woman entirely without pretence – and seeing our friends in the next village.'

But Delia Smith, who lives across the fields, is a close friend despite the chasm that divides them over football: Delia is director of Norwich City Football Club, Peel is a passionate Liverpool fan. Peel patently admires Delia for her lack of preciousness – when Sheila and John visit for supper she gets them all an Indian takeaway.

Sheila, whom Peel also refers to as 'the battery on which I run', is nine years his junior. She's small, straightforward, sings in a choir and cooks Northern portions. She gave up teaching to look after their children William, Alexandra, Tom and Florence, who all went to local schools. Seven years ago, Peel was on the Isle of Man when Sheila suffered a brain haemorrhage. Peel hurtled back through the night, knowing she could be minutes from death. In the weeks that followed he slept at the hospital.

'The brain haemorrhage was like seeing a film,' he says. 'It seemed to exist independently of everything else. Later Sheila had a fit – she seemed even worse, and I thought, how am I going to cope with this? A lot of things that had hitherto seemed important suddenly became fantastically unimportant.'

Happily, Sheila has now fully recovered, and the couple are as soppy about each other as ever as they look in their wedding photo. There are few blots on the landscape these days, apart from Peel's recently diagnosed diabetes, which he controls with diet, his utter disillusion with New Labour (he was a life-long Labour voter until the last election), the empty nest (he misses the kids a lot) and the duck he found dead on the road recently (she was an old friend).

But John Peel's great strength is that he doesn't dwell on the past. There's still immense pleasure to be got from the next thing, whether it's an email from a dedicated Marc Bolan fan, the ancient Greek coin he bought to celebrate his autobiography deal or the nightly walk to the top of the hill with Sheila and the dogs. The reason he's worth so much to a publisher is that he's a wild man made good. **GH**