

You've recently celebrated your daughter's graduation from Liverpool. What was your own education like?

I was packed off to a boarding school in North Wales when I was about seven years old. It was a very strange place – the main thing was just to survive it, really...

A private school education in those days had few benefits that I could see. Unless you were really clever indeed – which I certainly wasn't – you came away with the ability to talk for about 20 seconds on almost any topic on earth but didn't actually know a great deal about anything. So you could be good at something like *The Times* crossword or lacrosse but it didn't exactly equip you for life.

According to my school reports, which I got from my mother a few years ago, a lot of the teachers wanted to throw me out of the school. Not because I was wicked, but I was a real handful in my own way. I was just incredibly absent-minded and I hated being told how to do things – I still do – and that's not a great advantage whatever schooling you have.

Do you have any good memories of your school days?

We all absolutely adored our housemaster, an extraordinarily eccentric man called RHJ Brooke, who always staunchly defended me against the other members of staff who wanted to get me expelled.

He was amazingly perceptive. In one of my school reports he wrote: "Perhaps it's possible that John can form some kind of nightmarish career out of his enthusiasm for unlistenable records and his delight in writing long and facetious essays." And, of course, that's exactly what I have done. The book, if it ever gets published, will be dedicated to him.

John Peel has led a rich and strange life. He's been on Top of the Pops with Rod Stewart, married a 15-year-old in Texas, been given a 'God-like Genius' award from the NME and, recently, agreed a £1.5 million deal for his autobiography. He is also a devoted husband, a father to four grown-up children (two of them Liverpool alumni) and a collector of antique coins.

insight spoke to the legendary broadcaster and Honorary Graduate who still has the ability to surprise.

golden



Was there pressure on you to do well at school?

My father, both my grandfathers and my brothers went to Shrewsbury School, which is where I eventually ended up, and none of us did particularly well so there wasn't really any pressure.

I got four O-levels although I can't take full credit for one of them. In my Divinity exam, I got it into my head that the examiners would be bored reading the same thing over and over again so I wrote all my answers in what I considered to be the style of Damon Runyan. I thought the examiners would be enormously pleased with this because it would be a break from the norm. I got 11% but, for some reason, when the certificates were issued, Divinity was on there so I didn't argue.

Did you want to go to university?

No. At the time I saw university as an extension of Shrewsbury and I wasn't very happy there...

...So, when they said to me 'if you don't work you won't get to university' I thought 'ahhhh...' so I didn't work and didn't go to university. I didn't feel I was letting the family down because nobody in our family had been to university so it wasn't seen as a disgrace at all.

So how does it feel to have so many honorary degrees now?

I'm very pleased and flattered. I like to remind people I work with that I am technically a doctor. Obviously, I can be summoned in a medical emergency so I always tell them to loosen any clothing in a responsible manner.

...But, seriously, it's nice to go to those ceremonies and dress up in silly clothes and be important for a few hours.

Did you ever consider boarding school for your children?

Oh no, even if we'd had limitless amounts of money we would never have sent them away. We didn't have children with the intention of packing them off to somebody else to educate and look after. However much of a pain in the arse they may have been, we liked having them around. I know you can't really miss something that you never had but I would have much rather spent my formative years near my mum and dad than away at boarding school.

Two of your children have studied at the University of Liverpool. Did you influence their decision at all?

Not in the slightest although I was genuinely pleased that they did. Again, if I had limitless money, I would buy a holiday home in Liverpool. The children going to university there has helped me keep some kind of contact with the city. In fact, my daughter who's just graduated is thinking about returning to Liverpool so I'll have no excuse for not visiting.

You did National Service when you finished school. What was that like?

I applied for early call up just to get it over with so I entered the army at 17. The worst thing was, if I'd been born two days later, I wouldn't have had to do it at all, which is frustrating – but I did actually quite like it.

First of all, I got fit and I quite liked all the repetitive tasks in a funny way. Before going

into the army, I worked briefly in a cotton mill in Rochdale. It was really hard physical work and the noise from the factory was so great you didn't have to speak to anybody, which, for a shy bloke, was great. The army was pretty much the same except I did develop some life skills, like petty theft and evasion, which have proved quite useful.

Would you consider it a more useful education than going to university?

I often claim that but I don't know if it's really true. The one thing that university does give you that I would like to have, particularly now I'm trying to write this book, is the ability to marshal your thoughts.

I'm trying to write the book roughly chronologically but I keep whizzing off on tangents and things leap into my mind and I have to write them down while I'm thinking about them.

For example, writing something about when I was eight triggered off some thoughts about David Bowie and so I wrote all of the things I knew about David Bowie in one go. I keep whizzing backwards and forwards in time so I'm hoping the publishers will think it's a clever device and not a truly crap idea and tell me to do it all again.

You've managed to stay at Radio 1 against all the odds. How have you done it?

I've just never got caught up in office politics – I just do what I do and keep my head down. The trick is, if they ask you to do something, don't dig your heels in and say no, say yes you'll do it and then just carry on doing what you were doing before. I've had people come up to me and say 'thanks, John, it sounds so much better now' and I snigger to myself because I haven't actually changed anything. They've just listened to it with a different mind.

Your shows on Radio 1 and Radio 4 have very different audiences.

How do you manage to appeal to both teenagers and pensioners without alienating either?

I think it's by not setting out to have an appeal at all, really. I never spend time analysing either why people would like the programme or why they wouldn't, I just get on with it.

One of the things that pleases me most is that, according to audience research, my Radio 1 show has the highest percentage of listeners under the age of 15 on the station. I don't know why that is but it could be *because* I don't know why it is, if you see what I mean. The teenage audience is pretty volatile and easily offended and I think people often try too hard to win over 'the kids', as they would put it. Just because you're 15 doesn't mean that you're stupid or you can't tell when someone is coming on to you just to get you to listen to their show or watch their TV programme. I think people resent that. I resent it and I'm 65.

Can you see yourself still doing your Radio 1 show at 70 or 80?

Provided I still like it myself, I can't see why I wouldn't. My life was transformed by hearing Elvis – you can't imagine what that was like in the mid-50s. It was like meeting a man from another planet. It was just the most extraordinary event.

So, in a way, I'm still looking for the next Elvis. The next thing that will just seem so astonishing to me that it's almost frightening. Like when punk first started or hip hop – it did seem a bit scary.

Do you actually like everything you play on your show?

I do, or at least I can see that someone else might. I couldn't fake it because I'm not very good at lying. I may not like it in three or four years' time, but that's quite good too. A lot of people my age still like what they liked in 1969 and haven't moved on at all. Occasionally, someone will say to me 'how come you don't play the Grateful Dead these days?' They're not aggressive about it but they basically want you to play their record collection because they can't be bothered... or they've got arthritis.

You've been instrumental in the careers of so many bands. Is there one you're particularly proud of?

That's not really the way I perceive myself. I almost see myself as the editor of a magazine or a newspaper. It's just my job to choose which stories to set before the public. So I never think this band or that band wouldn't be in the position they are in now if it hadn't been for me.

I'm pleased that I've managed to keep The Fall in the public eye for a long time because I think that they're as important a band as there has ever been. I played a small part, I suppose. Of course, Mark E Smith (The Fall's grumpy lead singer) would deny that anybody had any responsibility other than himself, which is his right, but at the same time I like to feel I've played John the Baptist to his Jesus.

Do you have a lot of famous friends?

People are always saying 'what's so and so like?' because they imagine I have this glamorous life hanging out with Elton or something and, of course it's not like that at all. Nor would I wish it to be. I live near Delia Smith but that's about it. I don't really know people in bands and you have to bear in mind that I am a pensioner and people in bands don't want to hang out with old geezers.

Who would you like to play you in the film of your life?

Because I'm so busy listening to records, I don't really get the chance to go and see films so, if Brad Pitt walked in now, apart from thinking 'what the hell are you doing in my house', I probably wouldn't know who he was.

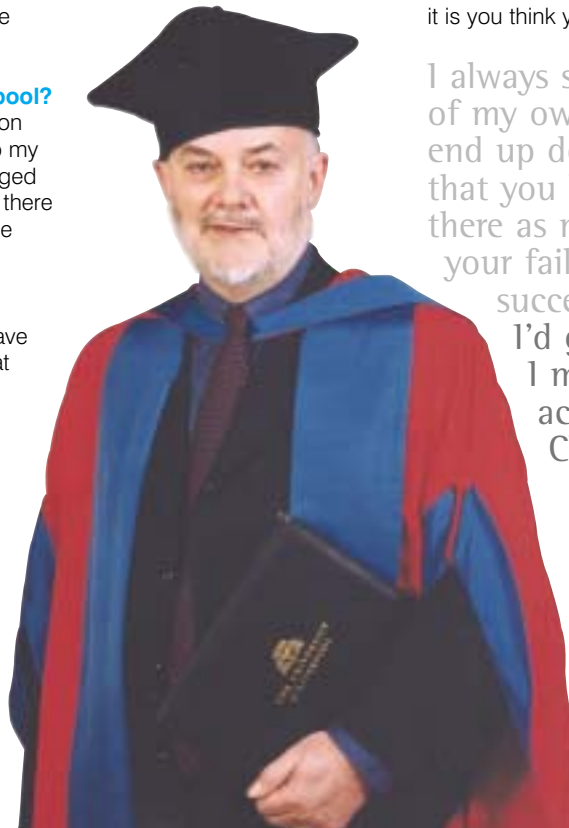
When people ask me if I've seen such and such a film, I always say 'is Margaret Rutherford in it?' and when they say no, which invariably they do, I say 'in that case I don't think I will have seen it'. So, I guess the answer would have to be Margaret Rutherford.

What's your favourite place in Liverpool?

There's a place called Irwell Chambers on Fazakerley Street. It was the entrance to my dad's office and, amazingly, it's unchanged since he used to work there. I like to go there and imagine my dad walking through the entrance because I really miss my dad.

What kind of a dad are you?

Quite a good dad, I think. Before you have children you think you know exactly what to do and how they're going to be and how you are going to be with them. But from the moment they issue from the womb, you can forget all that. They simply refuse to conform to your notions of what they should be like. Our children seem to like us but they also like each other immensely, which is really nice. We all get on enormously well.



So there was none of the usual teenage angst in your house?

I'm not saying that but we had very little striking of attitudes and adopting bizarre anti-social beliefs in order to annoy us.

It's great when your children get a bit older and start to treat you like an equal rather than regarding you as a grossly inferior form of life. That's really nice.

They all went through a stage where they found me slightly embarrassing, but I don't think they find me so embarrassing now. I did a gig recently in Barcelona during the Sonar Festival and when I looked up three of our four children were there dancing to the records I was playing. They had made their way to Barcelona independently and I just thought, how nice is that to be doing a gig and to have your own children dancing to it?

Do you have any final words of advice for recent graduates?

Set your sights low, that way you might find something that you can actually do and might even enjoy rather than driving yourself mad because you haven't become whatever it is you think you should have aspired to...

I always say, in justification of my own life really, if you end up doing something that you like, you've got there as much through your failures as through your successes. Just think, if I'd gone to university I might be an accountant in Cheshire now.