

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# Margrave of the Marshes

John Peel and Sheila Ravenscroft

## **About the Book**

Through nigh-on forty years of laconic brilliance on Radio 1, a musical taste which defined a culture and his wildly popular Radio 4 show, *Home Truths*, John Peel reached out to an audience that was as diverse as his record collection. He was a genuinely great Briton, beloved by millions. John's unique voice and sensibility were evident in everything he did, and nowhere is that more true than in these pages.

*Margrave of the Marshes* is the astonishing book John Peel began to write before his untimely death in October 2004, completed by the woman who knew him best, his wife Sheila. It is a unique and intimate portrait of a life, a marriage and a family which is every bit as extraordinary as the man himself - a fitting tribute to a bona fide legend.

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Part Two

Epilogue

Picture Section

Picture Credits

Appendix

Index

About the Author

Copyright

# Margrave of the Marshes

John Peel and Sheila Ravenscroft

It was John's wish that this book should be dedicated to the  
Revd R. H. J. Brooke.

And we would like to dedicate this book to John, with our  
love.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Chris Berthoud, Lawrence Blackall, Big Bob, Billy Bragg, Richard Clark, Fiona Couper, John Darin, Paul Gambaccini, David Gedge, Peter Griffiths, Stewart Henderson, Claire Hillier, Tracey Holmyard, Alison Howe, Kid Jensen, Anita Kamath, Louise Kattenhorn, Andy Kershaw, Phil Knappett, Chris Lycett, Mike McCartney, The Misunderstood, Tom Robinson, Mike Sampey, Shurley and Clive Selwood, Feargal Sharkey, Bridget St John, Mike Stax, Dave Tate, Helen Walters, all the staff at Transworld and all those friends we have almost certainly forgotten to mention.

An extra special thank you to Frank, Alan, Gabs, John, Angela, Paul, Carmel, Zahra, Ashley, Hermeet and Archie.

Also thank you to Ryan Gilbey and Cat Ledger for helping to make this as enjoyable an experience as it could have been.

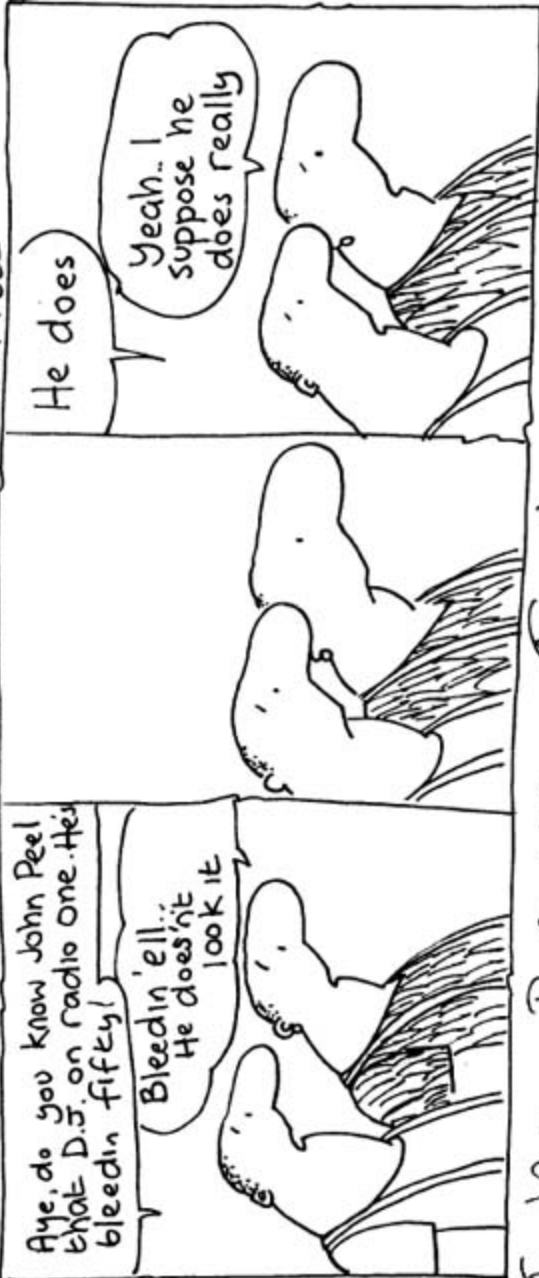
A YOB'S SPECIAL TO COMMEMORATE THE BIRTHDAY (50) OF JOHN PEEL

Aye, do you know John Peel that D.J. on radio one. He's bleedin' fifty!

Bleedin' ell... He does'n't look it

He does

Yeah... I suppose he does really



To John Best Wives Tony Husband Sept 89



# Introduction

This has been for our family an unexpected and daunting launch into the literary world and in the circumstances somewhat unwelcome. Dad got as far as writing half of this book. Although we had the option of publishing this alone, we thought it important that his story should be finished, if only to make clear that he didn't meet our mother in the establishment in which he ended his half. He got as far as his adventures in America but stopped just short of his first radio appearance. There are no first-hand accounts of the seven years between that radio début and his meeting Mum, and frankly, even after that details can be a little shaky, but we pieced together what we could until Mum's steadfast memory could be relied upon.

Various people had been on at Dad to write an autobiography and he had been promising to do so for the past thirty years. We even went so far as to have a room built for the purpose of his writing, which he promptly filled with records. Eventually, after the collapse of numerous pension schemes he realised it might be a good time to get started. At one point he wanted to begin with the line 'The junior officers exchanged glances. Mrs Bradshaw was on board again.' Not sure why. Once he'd developed a routine he was very productive, although cruelly all of his early progress was accidentally deleted one careless Monday morning. He wasn't terrifically good with computers. He would sit in his place at the kitchen table tapping away on his laptop under the watchful gaze of the Bill Shankly photo on the wall. To be honest, we were terrified when we learnt that Dad was writing a book. It's not that he made things

up, but he had, in the past, exaggerated stories about us, misread situations and, well yes, he had also just made things up. We're fairly sure he hasn't done that here. We would like to have seen what, if he had got the chance, he would have concocted.

The title of the book had not, so far as we are aware, been decided upon. He enjoyed coming up with amusing if slightly puzzling titles: *How's Your Flow?*, *Wet Echo*, *Flying Cream Shots*, *Goatman Codd's*, *If He Ever Hits Puberty*, *Buckskins and Buggery*, *The Wotters Won the Wace*, *A History of the Iodine Trade 1847-1902*, *An ABC of High-Jumping*, *The Questing of Stempel Garamond: How He Overcame the Gelks and Punished the Dwellers within the Well* and *Jesus Wasn't Made of Fish*. We found the titles in his suitcase from Peru alongside a note to self: 'Lay in bed composing powerfully vulgar Wayne Rooney chants. I've got a gem but this is not the forum for it,' evidence that he wasn't concentrating fully on the task in hand. Contained within this notebook were also various quotes, reminders and observations:

Woke at three,  
people being woken at five,  
American shouting at 5.30,  
Man farting so loudly in adjoining cabin,  
Then silence,  
Has there been a coup?  
6.45 complete silence.

The major difference between their political situation and ours is that we are better - more subtle perhaps - at corruption and cronyism. There is no Peter Mandelson in Peruvian politics.

Incorporate book on Finnish sheds into autobiography.

We put off making any decisions regarding the book, as we had no idea what Dad had planned, if anything. We are fairly sure, though, that he would have approved of Mum's silly drawings of the both of them being used as chapter headings. Dad always said they would be the first thing he

would save in the event of a house fire, but then he said that about everything.

The research we have all done for the second part of the book has, of course, been strange, but also an opportunity to read Dad's many newspaper and magazine articles. Some of these are really good, some fairly daft. Hidden away amongst all the obscene badges, German thrash magazines and old Radio 1 postcards, we found his old diaries that have been our staple diet over the last six months. These cover, sporadically, the years 1967 to 1983. They demonstrate just how hard Dad worked, traipsing up and down the country gigging and sleeping in motorway service areas. We came across a few details we would rather have missed, frankly, and plenty of stories about us growing up that we found very amusing but won't bore you with. Apparently, Thomas ate a mouse.

Later in the book you will come across Dad's account of his close relationships with US presidents. The photographs to which he refers, the evidence of this bond, were not, as he believed, destroyed. His first wife's brother had been carrying the slides around for nearly forty years and offered to send them from America. When, after so long, he got them in his grubby hands, pleasure danced across his pretty face. He could hardly believe that he finally had proof that his stories were true.

There is no physical evidence that Dad isn't still with us here at home. The records in his to-listen-to pile are still stacked by the turntable, a smaller selection waiting to be allocated a place in a running order. The machinery of his long-established system is still in place, but unused. We don't know what to do with the piles of demo CDs that fill every corner. 'There could be another Elvis in there,' we can hear him say. We all feel as guilty as Dad used to at the thought of getting rid of these. Obviously we can't continue his work, listening to these demos and promoting these

bands, but we felt that we could at least try to complete this book.

We can't pretend that *Margrave of the Marshes* will be the read that Dad would have provided, though in plagiarising enough of his work hopefully his voice remains throughout. There are many stories that he didn't tell us enough times for us to remember, but we have tried to include all the things we think were important to him. We hope the effort Mum and ourselves have put into making this a worthy chronicle of his life has gone some way to showing how much he meant to us all.

William, Alexandra, Thomas and Florence

# Part One



It is obvious that disc-jockeys, as a class, are essentially parasitic. We are, with lamentably few exceptions, neither creative nor productive. We have, however, manipulated the creations of others (records) to provide ourselves with reputations as arbiters of public taste. There is no more reason (nor no less) why I should be writing this column than you - however I am in this unmerited position and you're not. I believe very much in radio as a medium of tragically unrealised possibilities and also in the music I play. Therefore accepting the falseness of my own precarious position I will do what I can, wherever I can, to publicise these good things I hear around me. These musicians have made you aware of, and appreciative of, their music - not J. Peel.

John Peel, *Disc and Music Echo*, 1969



# Chapter One

SHEILA AND I are babysitting today and our grandson, Archie, isn't happy. He doesn't like the tomato, yam and basil mixture his mother, Alexandra, our daughter, sent over with him this morning. I'm not sure I would either. He also seems unenthusiastic about the harness that secures him in place in his highchair. I'm with him most of the way on that one too. Do I really remember the pressure, the chafing, even the smell of the various harnesses that held the infant John Robert Parker Ravenscroft in place? There was, I know for a fact, a brown leather lead that Nanny used when she took me walking and I can remember the smell, even the taste, of that. It may have had bells on it.

I was born, I have always told people, at the age of four in a woodcutter's cottage in the Black Forest, but the disappointing truth is that I was born in Heswall Cottage Hospital a few days before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Cottage Hospital is a private home now and the family living there has been in touch with me twice. Once when the father sent me a brick from a wall they had removed, and more recently when I was playing Chibuku in Liverpool - it's a club, not a board game - and his sons invited me to stay in the building in which I was born. If we hadn't already been booked into the Racquets Club and I hadn't recognised that a lot of red wine would have to be taken to get me through the night, I'd have accepted too. You'd be amazed at the number of people who've suggested some sort of link between my birth and the outbreak of war. 'So it was your fault,' they've chortled, but I've never laughed - any more than I have at the people who have



greeted me in more recent years with the words, 'D'yer ken John Peel, then?' Several of these are buried in shallow graves on B roads off the A505. The police have confessed themselves baffled.

Naturally I don't remember much about the war. Father was away, eyeball to eyeball with the Germans in North Africa. Mother was in her bedroom. Sometimes I'd be carried to the air-raid shelter at the top of the garden, out of the French windows from the sitting-room, across the crazy paving and up the former tennis court we called the Big Lawn. Later, I would be joined by Francis Houghton Leslie Ravenscroft; conceived, it was explained to me years later, in London, when Father was halfway home on leave. On the big blue radio in the air-raid shelter we heard, without understanding what it meant, of the war in Europe. Somehow, though, we understood that the words on the radio were linked to the aircraft-recognition books we were shown from time to time, with the barrage balloon that came down in the field across the road, with the strange powdered foods we ate and with the fact that Father wasn't there. Father, I decided, probably didn't exist at all, remaining, for the first six years of my life, a figure as remote and improbable as the characters in *The Blue Fairy Book*, less real to me than Dame Washalot, Moonface and the other folk of Enid Blyton's *Faraway Tree*.

The aircraft-recognition books were useful though. I knew to look for black crosses on the wings and had been warned that under no circumstances was I to venture into the top half of a garden that was about the size and shape of a football pitch, with a path running along, as it were, the halfway line between the sandstone wall and what would become, when Father came home, the hen run. One afternoon, I had toddled up the path from the kitchen door, past the tool shed, the greenhouse, the cesspit, the gooseberries, the rows of peas and beans, the rhubarb and the rubbish dump, with Francis, intriguingly yellow as a child

and rarely awake, tottering unsteadily at my side. When we reached the path that divided the garden in two, I indicated to my brother that it was my intention to venture into the forbidden half. He demurred, in as much as an eighteen-month-old child can do serious demurring, as I took my first step as a free thinker. As I did, a plane – a German plane – hurtled low over the garden. Several years of peace had passed before I crossed the halfway line again.

I, it has already been established, was a child that liked to keep itself to itself. At home, if the weather was fine, I climbed trees and read. Thanks to Nanny, christened Florence Home but re-christened Trader, in honour of the famous sea captain, by our father, I could read before I went to kindergarten. My favourite reading tree, a sappy, flaky pine, overlooked the field that separated our house from our neighbour's, a field in which, at appropriate times of the year, German prisoners of war worked. These prisoners worked unsupervised, showing as they did, I suppose, little enthusiasm for deserting the relative safety of a Cheshire farm for a profoundly uncertain future on, say, the Russian Front. In halting but rather charming English, they would warn me of the dangers of climbing pine trees. I have since claimed that on feast days they would give Francis and me presents carved from scrap wood, but an inner voice tells me that I have made this up.

Apart from the Whittimores, who farmed the fields across the lane that led to the Behrends' house some distance away in the trees, and Mr Hughes, who farmed across the main road, we had few visitors. Colin and Martin Whittimore were about the same ages as Francis and myself, and in the absence of any other children we could play with, we spent a lot of time with them. Francis even went through a form of marriage with Colin Whittimore, a marriage unrecognised, alas, by any of the major religions, but one that the Church of England might nowadays look upon in a friendlier spirit.

(Note to self: check Church's position on same-sex marriages between consenting three-year-olds.)

When we were not with the Whittimores, Francis and I were pretty much left to our own devices. As Francis was usually asleep, this effectively meant that I was alone to wander the garden and commune with Boo Boo, my imaginary friend. Boo Boo lived in somewhat inhospitable quarters beneath a shrub in the rockery, only a stone's throw from the flagpole and just around the corner from where a temporary gardener, a lad in his late teens who cycled up from Burton to plough the fields and scatter, offered to let me see his penis. I remember being impressed by the size of this and by the lad's ability to make it grow bigger or smaller, seemingly at will. I declined his subsequent invitations to gaze upon it again. It was big though.

Apart from climbing trees, talking to Boo Boo, inspecting the private parts of junior members of staff and helping Mother hoist the Union Jack that flew over the garden throughout the war, the only real excitement in our lives came from our regular walks into Burton with Nanny. Depending on her whim, Francis, asleep in the pram, his yellow hue exciting comment from everyone we encountered (NB, Francis is not yellow now nor has he been for a number of years), and I, skipping, were led either down Denhall Lane towards Burton Point station and the marshes beyond or left along Burton Road towards the village. If Nanny had opted for the former - and longer - route, she was compelled to make a second decision when we reached the railway bridge two thirds of the way to the river. Here we could either go left through a gate and along the footpath that led to and beyond the station, or carry on down the hill to the marshes.

On the corner at the bottom of the hill lay the entrance to the home of the Summers family. The Summers were clearly several cuts above us socially. As we understood it, they

owned the steelworks we could see through the blue haze on the far bank of the Dee. More importantly, they seemed to have dozens of gardeners of the type that vanished, deer-like, into the undergrowth at the approach of visitors – and they had a swimming pool. From time to time, we were authorised to use the pool and to grow deeply envious of its changing rooms, wooden boats and implausibly blue waters. We were occasionally joined by a Summers, the only one we ever saw and who was at Shrewsbury when I turned up there years later. This Summers – I don't think we ever knew his name – looked the very model of the spookily good-looking boys drawn with care bordering on lust by the artists who illustrated the stories of schoolboy derring-do to which I was later to turn when I wearied of the Folk of the Faraway Tree. He had what would have been described in these stories as a frank and open face, and silver hair of the type now apparently considered essential for anyone running for high office in the US.

Whichever way Nanny, Francis and I walked, we ended up in Burton village. Here, at Mrs Boyle's or Jackson's the Grocers, Nanny would fall into conversation with other nannies. Jackson's the Grocers was a shop so breathtakingly exciting that I believed that a life in the grocery trade would bring me all of the thrills in life it was possible for one person to experience. Mrs Boyle's was run, reason insists, by a Mrs Boyle and sold, I think, newspapers. Both these shops ceased trading at some time lost in the mists of pre-history and Burton is now a dormitory village that you can drive through during working hours without seeing a living soul. I know this because I've done it on more than one occasion.

It was outside Jackson's that Nanny told a gathering of rival nannies the details of an event that was to shape the next twenty or so years of my life. I would be deceiving you if I were to attempt to persuade you that I was already, at the age of five, striving to establish some sort of identity for

myself, something that set me apart from the rest of humankind, but I was aware, on some level, that whereas Francis was yellow and asleep, the Summers boy had silver hair and the gardener an enormous penis, I had nothing very interesting to commend me to the passer-by.

The day dawned, as all days seemed to then, with the sun shining, butterflies swarming outside the dining-room window and song-birds making idle conversation almost impossible. So it was that looking out on the morning and finding it fair, I elected to take my tricycle for a spin about the garden. The high point of this would be the wild dash through the vegetable garden from the rubbish dump, down a long straight which ended with a slight swerve past the greenhouse before the tricyclist changed down, as it were, for the tricky ride past the tool shed and the back door and through the gate into the driveway. Unfortunately for me, fate intervened at the slight-swerve stage, the steering on the tricycle failed and I plunged through the side of the greenhouse. Upon realising that I was out of control and headed for what was effectively a wall of glass, I had instinctively put my left arm up to protect myself and thus it was that Nanny found me lying in the wreckage, the left rear wheel of the tricycle probably still spinning lazily in the swooning air, with a deep gash on the inside of my elbow and another on the inside of my wrist. Looking at the scars now, it is hard to imagine how I avoided slashing open a major blood vessel and bleeding to death. If the opportunity ever presents itself, I'd be very happy to show you my wounds. Suffering from shock but curiously feeling no pain whatever, I was led into the house so that Mother could assess the damage and decide upon appropriate action. She chose to call Dr Gunn.

Dr Gunn I remember only for the case filled with surgical instruments and bottles of amusingly coloured liquids that he carried with him and for the fact that he drove a seriously strange car of a type I've not been able to identify

to the present day. So strange was it, in fact, that throughout my childhood I treasured an early Dinky car that I never saw replicated in anyone else's collection which would now be worth, I like to think, thousands of your pounds, a car known to all the family as Dr Gunn's car. I waited for the doctor sitting on the dining-room table, the table favoured by Mother as the location for my many beatings, passing the time by gazing at my wounds. I remember thinking how like the inside of a tomato the inside of the human arm looked. I was still too shocked to cry, and continued tear-free when the doctor sewed up my arm - without anaesthetic, of course - before discharging me into the community.

That afternoon, outside Jackson's, I heard Nanny tell the massed nannies of Burton village that I had gone through all the above without a single tear. The nannies were impressed. So impressed, in fact, that I decided then and there that from now on I was to be The Boy That Never Cried. To be honest, I probably did cry on occasions after that: upon going to boarding school for the first time, perhaps, and when the puppy I had wanted from the womb and which I was given at Christmas 1947 was taken from me in the first week of 1948 and given to Mr Hughes the farmer instead. But by and large I rarely cried again until I met Sheila. Since then - and I don't know what an analyst would make of this - I have cried almost without cessation, at everything from *The Little House on the Prairie* to Liverpool's triumphs in Europe.

At the time of my accident I was already a pupil at Miss Jones's kindergarten, located in the badlands along the Neston/Parkgate border. Not for Miss Jones and her valkyries the reckless modern notion that a year or two should be spent in action-painting, plasticine work and drawing pictures of Mummy and Daddy. On the first day at her establishment we were taught the days of the week in French - I know some of these to the present day - and a

Miss Laxton introduced us to the realities of contemporary education by throwing board rubbers at us. She had a sturdy throwing arm and a good eye, did Miss Laxton. Despite my accomplishments re. the days of the week in French, I failed to impress at Miss Jones's. So much so, in fact, that the Headmistress's report at the end of my first term read, in its entirety, 'Robin has failed to make much impression at school.' Wounding, I felt.

It was at Miss Jones's that I fell in love for the first time, with a dark-haired girl named Helen Maddox. Our love never took physical form - something to do with the poor wartime diet on which we'd both been raised, I expect - but I can still close my eyes and picture Helen and her home up a pathway near the Wheatsheaf pub in Ness. Or was that Jane Barker's house? She was kinda cute too. Either way, Francis and I walked past the end of the pathway on an unforgettable walk we had with Father.

Father rarely spoke to us on matters of moment, preferring to leave health and welfare issues to Mother - who didn't speak to us about them either. However, on this occasion we had travelled from Birkenhead to Neston on the bus and had missed the connecting bus to Burton so had no choice but to walk the three or four miles instead. Every step of the way Father spoke to Francis and I on the paramount importance of regular bowel movements and the damage that could be done to us both physically and spiritually if we failed to adhere to an appropriately rigorous regime in this area. I feel now that much of the wickedness that has emerged in me since that walk has been the result of my failure to follow Father's advice. 'Go when you want to go' has summed up my attitude to the whole untidy business and has been the advice I have given to our children when they have in turn sidled into my room, as sidle bewildered young persons will, to ask, 'Father dear, tell us about, you know, going to the lavatory.'

The above account will have alerted you to the fact that Father, unlike so many other fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers, had returned undamaged from the war. In common with almost everyone I've ever met who saw service in the Second World War, he never really spoke about his experiences. When he came home, Father came home as Captain Robert Ravenscroft, Royal Artillery, but settled almost immediately back into civilian life and had little time for other men who had signed up for the duration but insisted on being addressed by their military ranks after the war had ended.

Francis and I first set sight on our father when we were on holiday in Tre-Arddur Bay, Anglesey, where the then-unborn Alan was to go to school years later. It's hard to imagine now, but the unavailability of motor transport to all but a relatively well-heeled few, allied with petrol rationing, meant that there was little traffic on the roads, so whenever Francis or I heard a distant engine we would run to the end of the drive to watch whatever was passing pass. One afternoon - I think we can afford now to take the sun and blue skies as read, although you can add wheeling gulls to the equation if you like - we were playing in the garden when we heard a motorcycle engine at the top of the road and ran to the gateway to watch the bike pass by. To our surprise and, I think, mild alarm, instead of passing by, the bike slowed and turned into the driveway. This was of gravel and circled a small lawn, and as the rider carefully picked his way along this, I ran ahead across the lawn and into the house. Mother was washing her hair in a sink overlooking the driveway and I ran in shouting, 'Mummy! Mummy! There's a funny-looking man at the door.' She looked out of the window, burst into tears and said, 'That's your father.' Seconds later I stood with Francis looking up at the man we now thought of as our motorcyclist. So this was what a father looked like.

Years later I found myself standing in the same spot retelling this story for a television crew. As I told it, I could



feel something ungovernable rising within me and fancied that I would have some sort of seizure at the completion of my account. In the event, I gave a rather theatrical low moan and slumped to the ground in tears. The television people mercifully edited this collapse from their film. I can only assume that their thoughtfulness was due to their lack of experience in the ways of television.



## Chapter Two

BARBARA FROM RADIO Flora, Hannover, will ring shortly. When I spoke to her last week, she seemed a little vague about the programme I record each month, when I remember, for FSK in Hamburg. This, these days, is my only radio link with Germany. My friend Sebastian Cording copies the DAT tape I send to FSK and it is distributed to, I have been told, a dozen or more German-speaking radio stations. The bulk of these, unsurprisingly, are in Germany, although there have been subscribers in the past in both Austria and Switzerland. Quite what becomes of the programmes, two hours of matchless fun for all the family, after they have left the village post office, is something of a mystery. I'll go further: it's a complete mystery. Despite having recorded for FSK for four or five years at least, I have yet to receive my first letter or email from a listener - unless you count the note I got from a woman working for an unnamed community station somewhere near the coast of northern Germany. The highlight of her month, she told me, was when it fell to her to play out my programme and she could sit alone in the station with a glass of wine, staring out to sea, and listen to the music. It is for this woman and for her alone that I continue recording.

But Barbara is not sure that Radio Flora still transmits my work - 'Call that work?' The Voice of the Critic - and I wonder whether the station ever did. She will call soon on behalf of Kai who doesn't much English speak and Kai will want to know about David Bowie.

All Europeans want to know about David Bowie. Only a few weeks ago a film crew arrived from Denmark and

wanted to know about David Bowie. 'Tell us about David Bowie,' they cried in their attractive, lilting voices. 'How did you react when you first heard "Aladdin Sane"?' In vain I explained that I really couldn't remember how I had reacted to the release of the LP. 'I expect I liked it and played tracks on the radio,' I smiled. 'But your deeper feelings, John, tell us of those,' they insisted. So, instead of explaining that I have no deeper feelings really, I told them about touring with Bowie and Tyrannosaurus Rex. This story gives me the chance to do a little mime I've worked up - nothing complex, just that man-in-a-phonebox business - that usually goes down well.

I only recall one of the gigs on the tour, the one in Brighton. It was Marc Bolan/Tyrannosaurus Rex's tour and Bowie, despite having had a huge hit with 'Space Oddity', was down on his luck and bottom of the bill; billed below, if you can believe it, that lowliest of God's creatures, an Australian sitar player. I was sitting backstage talking to Marc when I realised that it had gone eight thirty and that the show should have started, so went to the door and shouted down the corridor, 'David, you're on.' That was about the only direct contact I had with 'the chameleon of pop' (copyright: just about everyone who's ever written about Bowie) on the tour. I mean, what's the point in talking to a mime artist? D'ya know what I mean?

Anyway, cut forward a few years to the point at which David has become a star, has lived in Berlin and New York and is big, Big, BIG. His record company is hosting a reception for him somewhere dark and red and plush and I'm lurking in a corner musing on life and what little I remember of the Tyrannosaurus Rex tour and thinking of the letter Bowie wrote to me once asking if I would consider helping fund an Arts Lab he had in mind for Beckenham and District, and decided I'd go and have a word with my old mate. With this modest purpose in mind, I left my corner and moved towards where the star stood surrounded by

impossibly glamorous courtiers. When I was but a few feet away, a very large black guy – a karate expert, I told everyone later – interposed his substantial body between me and my objective. ‘Hey, asshole! Where the fuck you think you’re going?’ he wanted to know. ‘Just going to have a word with David,’ I replied with that quick, nervous smile I do. ‘Like fuck ya gonna have a word with David,’ he insisted. Since then, and surely way beyond the New York karate expert’s intention, I’ve not had a single word with David. However, he did appear, on film, when I was the subject of *This Is Your Life*, and although I don’t remember what he said about me, I imagine it was something pretty nice. As – was it Capt. W. E. Johns? – said, life’s a funny business.

So I’ll tell Barbara from Radio Flora this story and hope she’ll be satisfied. People usually are.

At the age of seven, I left Miss Jones’s, having served there with little distinction – although I like to think that by the time I left they had recognised that I was called John, not Robin – to spend the summer at home before being packed off to Woodlands School, Deganwy. I can recall little of that summer – you can build your own paragraph here but don’t forget to include endless sunshine, butterflies, food shortages and a few thoughts on the amusingly primitive techniques involved in bringing in the harvest in those days, with, if you’re up for it, a sidelong glance at the laughing land-girls and what can only be described as their sauciness – but probably spent much of it trying to imagine what life would be like at Woodlands and trying to avoid spending time with local children that my parents believed I would benefit from knowing. These boys would be startlingly good at everything, and I remember one in particular who was a classic example of a child hugely admired by adults but loathed and mistrusted by other children. In moments of despair, Father would ask me why I couldn’t be more like him, and wouldn’t listen when I tried to explain that I would

rather be eaten alive than be like him. He excelled at cricket and tennis and probably at squash and fives and hockey and - oh, I don't know - everything, but on one of the rare occasions on which my defences were breached and he appeared in our garden, he had the impudence to attempt time and again, and on my bike, to beat the world-record time I had set for the track Francis and I had developed around the garden. As he left the start line, shouting with excitement, Francis and I watched gloomily as he disappeared from view, hoping against hope that as he reached the difficult right-then-left-hander through the gate by the kitchen door, he'd get it wrong and we would hear the satisfying sound of skull on gatepost followed by the crash of bike and rider hitting the concrete outside the garage.

As the summer - endless sunshine, butterflies, where have they all gone? - drew to an end, the household started to prepare for the trauma of sending the young master away to boarding school. A trunk big enough to house a couple of average-sized adults was bought and Mother took me to Browns of Chester to obtain the uniform, in a giddy combination of red and grey, with which to fill it. Although I have always striven to give the impression that, regardless of what I may look like as of even date, I was a comely child, Mother was convinced that in one respect at least I was seriously malformed. Arriving in the Boys' Uniform sector of Browns she sought assurances, in a booming voice, from the staff members who scurried obsequiously forward to offer assistance, that clothing could be found that would adequately cover what she characterised as an excessively large backside. As she shouted these her thoughts, the centre of Chester came to a standstill. Like something from an H. M. Bateman cartoon, I would shrivel almost to nothingness as other customers and members of staff craned to see the malformed body part and its unfortunate owner, doors to Accounts Departments and Managers'