

The last Peel to leave

Tom Ravenscroft's 6 Music exit is the end of an era that began with his father's Peel Sessions

Patricia Nicol



Two Toms just took their leave from BBC Radio 6 Music. First to go was Tom Ravenscroft, the 45-year-old DJ son of John Peel, who co-hosted his final session of *New Music Fix Daily* on May 29. The last episode of his late-night Friday *The Ravers Hour* went out the next day.

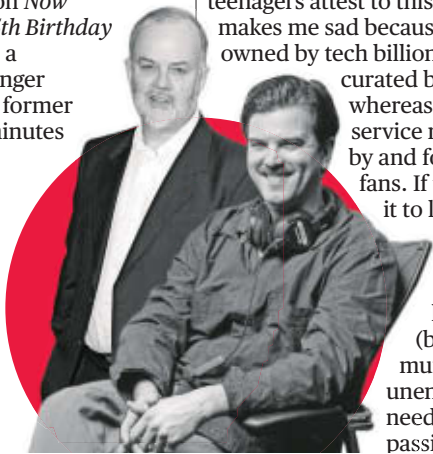
Then on June 1, Tom Robinson hosted his final edition of *Now Playing* – a bittersweet occasion because the musician-presenter's forced retirement from weekly presenting coincided with his 75th birthday. The veteran LGBT activist had been on 6 Music since its launch in 2002.

Robinson has been put out to pasture to make way for Mary Anne Hobbs, from today. Less clear is whether Ravenscroft, a 6 Music presenter since 2010, has been nudged.

The station controller, Samantha Moy, spoke recently of the impact of John Peel on the alternative music station. "The foundation of 6 Music was the Peel Sessions," she said. So is Ravenscroft leaving like the ravens flying the Tower? Will the edifice crumble? Well, no. You listened to Peel as much for what he had to say as play; in an age of musical tribes, he was an arbiter. Ravenscroft is droll and likeable, but far more self-effacing. He has already been replaced on *New Music Fix Daily*, where the rising star Nathan Shepherd now joins Deb Grant.

While Ravenscroft exited quietly, Robinson did not want the party to end on *Now Playing: Happy 75th Birthday Tom Robinson*. As a reminder "to younger listeners that in a former life" he had "15 minutes of pop fame" he allowed fans to nominate his hit songs 2-4-6-8 *Motorway* and *Glad to Be Gay* (once banned by the

All change John Peel and his son, Tom Ravenscroft



BBC) and played out to a 12in version of *War Baby*. Famous well-wishers included Peter Gabriel, Sleaford Mods and Nitin Sawhney. Punk to the end (my husband pointed out that Robinson headlined a famous 1978 Rock against Racism concert), he flouted the BBC's rules on advertising to plug forthcoming live dates.

Robinson's radio will, to some extent, keep "truckin' on through the night". Last week he interviewed Kae Tempest, Peggy Seeger and John Grant for the station's *Loud and Proud* and will cover for holidaying presenters, as he did over half-term for Huw Stephens.

Radio 6 listeners often balk at change. Their campaigning saved the station after a proposed closure in 2010. In 2021, when Shaun Keaveny aired his grievances at having been ousted from afternoons, fans piled in. Station bosses have become better at managing change.

But stubborn fans might wonder why 6 Music must evolve at all when it is the country's most successful digital station, with 2.57 million listeners – "6 Music Dad" has even become a descriptor for a particular kind of middle-ager.

Well, I saw some chilling statistics last week that made clear the existential crisis faced by BBC radio. Edison Research's Infinite Dial UK 2025 surveyed audiences about their listening habits. Among the 55-plus, the BBC accounts for 35 per cent of listening. But among the 16-34 group it was just 4 per cent. Instead, Spotify is where that younger cohort get 63 per cent of their audio.

The listening habits of my own teenagers attest to this. And it makes me sad because Spotify is owned by tech billionaires and curated by algorithm, whereas this is public service radio, made by and for music fans. If they want it to last more than a generation, 6 Music listeners (be they dads, mums or the unencumbered) need to pass their passion on.

Film

The Sugar Plum killer

It's pirouettes at dawn as Ana de Armas plays a ballerina turned kickass assassin in a witty John Wick spin-off that's on point

Tom Shone



Ballerina
Len Wiseman, 15/15A, 125min
★★★

Dangerous Animals
Sean Byrne, 15/16, 98min
★★

The entry threshold for film spin-offs is amazingly low these days. Han Solo got his own because he helped to destroy the Death Star. Professor Dumbledore got one starring Jude Law because he made sure Harry Potter finished his homework. The first we saw of the heroine of the new action flick **Ballerina** was a brief scene in *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* where John Wick (Keanu Reeves) glimpsed a young ballerina, bearing a number of interesting tattoos, in training at his local crime syndicate.

That's it. One wordless glimpse, lasting only seconds, and boom, the screenwriter Shay Hatten was so smitten he wrote the girl her own movie. By this standard, presumably, a Hollywood franchise will be on its way for the bartender who serves Keanu a diet Pepsi at the nightclub in the first instalment.

The barely glimpsed ballerina now gets a name – Eve Macarro – and is played by Ana de Armas. When we first see her she's in training to join the Ruska Roma crime

syndicate, run by Anjelica Huston, which doubles as a ballet academy, as so many crime syndicates seem to do. It's pirouettes in the morning followed by kung fu in the afternoon with practice reloading a Glock 48 after tea. "Fight like a girl," Eve is instructed, which turns out to mean a scissor kick to her opponent's balls. Eve's favourite composer is, of course, Tchaikovsky, for who can forget the scene in *The Nutcracker* where the Sugar Plum Fairy delivers a gunshot to the crotch of the Mouse King in the middle of a nightclub to the sound of pounding techno.

Welcome to the world of John Wick, a noirish realm of crunchy ultra-violence and neon where groups of contract assassins lay waste to one another in the middle of crowded nightclubs and the goose-feather beds of luxury hotels go up like confetti when the gunfire starts.

On her first assignment de Armas rocks a red sequin dress and fur coat while killing a squadron of martial arts goons – although nothing in the scene is quite as good as the one in the Bond movie, *No Time to Die*, where de Armas fussed with the slit of her floor-length gown, confessed ditzily to Bond that she had only three weeks' training, then took out an entire Cuban bar of assassins sent by Spectre. That scene is presumably what caught the eye of *Ballerina's* director, Len Wiseman.

De Armas looks pretty grim throughout the film thanks to her motivation – to avenge her

father's death – although this does obey the first rule of the John Wick Universe, which keeps the action almost entirely assassin-on-assassin.

How talkative do you like your villains? The Bond baddies couldn't help boasting of their plans for world domination, thus giving Bond a chance to wriggle free. Tucker (Jai Courtney), the villain of Sean Byrne's **Dangerous Animals**, certainly looks the part of a shark-obsessed serial killer – beard, mullet, insinuating smirk – but boy, is he a chatty Cathy. About the shark attack he survived as a kid. The deities he believes all sharks to be. And the tapes he likes to shoot of his human victims before he serves them up as sacrificial chum.

"You think you don't want to watch, but you know deep down you do," he leers, the master of ceremonies in his own grindhouse spectacle.

He would be frightening if only he weren't so boring. "Intermission time, folks," he says when he hits a snag in his latest plan: the drugging and murder of a nomadic surfer named Zephyr (Hassie Harrison) who puts up more of a fight than he was expecting.

The movie is a knockdown, drag-out fight for survival between the pair of them. She escapes from his boat twice, only to be dragged back – lending a tedious circularity to the plot, which is light on actual scares.

You're 100 per cent certain of the way it's all going to turn out. It's a slasher movie spent waiting for Freddy Krueger to bite the dust: grindhouse without the grind.

★★★★★ KO ★★★★★ A-OK
★★★ OK ★★ So-so ★ No-no

Arts

Do we really need a publisher for men?

Conduit Press has been set up to focus on 'overlooked' male writers, amid handwringing about their place in literature

Aoife Barry



When the writer Jude Cook announced he was setting up the independent publishing press Conduit Books in the UK, he immediately kicked off a debate – because Conduit will initially only publish male authors.

It's fair enough to just focus on male writers. After all, the proof is in the pudding. Will Conduit bring forth something fresh, or double down on tired male tropes? We won't know until its first books are on bookshop shelves. Thankfully, Cook's comments indicate it will be the former.

Yet the debate over Conduit highlights how the success of female authors has led to handwringing about men's place in literature. Cook says that Sally Rooney and peers ushered in "a renaissance for literary fiction by women, giving rise to a situation where stories by new male authors are often overlooked, with a perception that the male voice is problematic".

A "renaissance" is a revival of something that existed before, and this situation with regards to the popularity of books by women is brand new. For generations, literature was seen as a largely male preserve.

When I studied English at university, women were just a whisper from the edges of the canon. For centuries, women were not offered the same opportunities for education and literacy as men. Those who made a name for themselves had to vault over countless barriers, or be born into a life of privilege. Female writers' work was seen by many to be

Pioneer The 'Sally Rooney effect' changed the publishing world

inferior. This isn't ancient history – remember the "chick lit" label slapped on fiction written by women in the 1990s and early 2000s?

We can forget this context today, and thus the popularity of female authors can be erroneously viewed as a cause for panic. In the grand scheme of things it's a small adjustment of a long imbalanced situation. As recently as 2011, the author VS Naipaul said: "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me."

Naipaul's comments were generally seen as ridiculous. But the fact he felt comfortable saying them publicly spoke volumes. I haven't ever seen a high-profile female writer saying that men can't innately write as well as women.

In 2014 the author Joanna Walsh started the #readwomen hashtag on Twitter. This might seem unnecessary now – but a year later, an analysis by the author Nicola Griffith of six major literary awards (including the Booker and the Pulitzer) found that a novel was more likely to win a prize if the focus of the narrative was male. In 2016 the phrase

Remember the 'chick lit' label in the 1990s?



"breasted boobily" was coined online to parody how some male authors wrote about women. In 2017 Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* was published. In 2018 the author Kamila Shamsie called for a year of publishing only women.

The 2020s does feel different, as the "Rooney effect" had a knock-on impact on the market. She showed publishers that readers wanted to read young female writers. Ergo, more were published. But in the case of the Booker prize, eight of the past ten years have been won by men, and men still sit at the top of publishing companies.

New male voices are strong in Irish contemporary literature. Books on my to-read shelf include these 2025 debuts: Dave Tynan's collection *We Used to Dance Here*, John Patrick McHugh's novel *Fun and Games*, and Shane Tivenan's collection *To Avenge a Dead Glacier*.

But I think we need to zoom out from this conversation. Gender balance is important, but so too is representation as a whole. Ireland thankfully has independent publishers and journals who make a point of publishing trans/non-binary writers, writers of colour and Traveller writers. But we need this diversity to continue and grow, as publishing in this part of the globe can still be overwhelmingly white and middle class.

Assuming some sort of conspiracy is afoot and that male writers aren't welcome can distract us from the bigger picture. Yes, things have changed – but rather than fear female success, we should look at it as a sign that progress is possible.

Not as an excuse to drag publishing back to the olden days. There's room for everyone. You might just have to push up a bit on the bench.