



PEACHES AND ME

In what may have been her final interview, Peaches Geldof talked at length with the American biographer of her favourite singer about fame, heroin and her daily struggle to control her public identity

William Todd Schultz

One of the first things I told her was that I knew very little of her back story, and Peaches laughed in a fulsome way that I quickly came to see as an essential part of her personality. There was something overflowing about her. An avidity, combined with enormous mental energy. I think the laughter was partly surprise — intentionally, I hadn't done my homework — and partly relief. 'The worst thing,' she told me, 'is shaking someone's hand and realising full well they have a completely preconceived notion of who you are. They know your whole life! And you know nothing about them. It's an imbalance that's frightening.'

This was, microcosmically, Peaches's burden, the disconnect between the script foisted on her by others — sometimes accurate, sometimes not — and the alternative, fuller life she was struggling to write for herself. The British press told her who she was, and it was her job, almost daily, to agree or disagree.

I got to know Peaches Geldof in the way people do these days. She followed me on Instagram. I'd published a book in October — *Torment Saint: The Life of Elliott Smith* — and she wrote to say how

much she liked it. Her paperback was beaten up and waterlogged from readings in the bath, so I sent her a signed hardback, along with all of my other books. Smith, a spectacularly gifted songwriter, was a heroin and crack addict in the last few years of his life, and he died violently in 2003 of two stab wounds to the chest. We got to talking about Elliott's music, his songs. Peaches was a serious fan. She said Smith had been a 'constant anchor' for her 'when everything else was drifting further away'. It's comforting, she said, 'to have someone, even if it's just a disembodied voice, who understands the unsayable'. His music, she felt, was 'timeless' and 'perfect'. I agreed. The 'sad deaths of virtuosos', as she phrased it, had been on her mind recently. She was also a fan of Philip Seymour Hoffman, whom she called a 'total genius'. 'Heroin is such a bleak drug,' she said. 'It always makes me so sad to hear about people like Hoffman who were real masters and also family men who were just wasted by the constant, gnawing obsession with it. All heroin users seem to have the same core internal pain, though. It's a fascinating concept — drug of choice.' In the days following her death, articles highlighted Peaches's Elliott Smith 'obsession', insinuating (simplistically, brainlessly) that it killed her. In fact, it did the opposite. She 'sought solace' in his music. Like a lot of great dark artists, he made suffering beautiful, he redeemed it.

Through March, Peaches and I spoke more and more — over Twitter, via text, via Instagram, then finally, for roughly two hours in the second part of the month, on the phone. There always seemed to be something chaotic going on — a cat dying, babies not sleeping, her phone running out of charge, or, by virtue of what she called 'dyspraxia', her email locking her out. In between false starts I mentioned my new project, on the psychology of fame, and it was that which became the basis for all our subsequent discussions. 'Oh my gosh,' she said at first, 'don't even get me started! I grew up in the worst kind of whirlwind where every mistake I made was not only watched by my parents but the whole of the public. It was scary.' She confessed she'd never spoken to anyone about it, 'even though many interviewers have desperately tried'. She said it didn't 'feel right' to discuss 'the fame thing and everything that came with it in *Elle*, for instance. It didn't make sense.' Yet for some reason I never understood or questioned, she did, with remarkable candour and real, unguarded spontaneity — and intelligence — open up to me, this naive (in terms of her celebrity) and far-off Oregon writer. We had a rapport and a connection. Maybe she was a little bored. Raising babies is tough, tedious work, a daily war, as she said, 'against dirty nappies'. Maybe she felt that if Elliott Smith understood her, and I understood Elliott Smith, then I'd understand her too. Who knows? But we talked about our families, about trauma (she'd had the lion's share), and about how to move past it to a state of relative composure. She felt she was on a solid track (something belied, it now seems clear, by released toxicology reports). Yet to me, she was flagrantly, fiercely alive. Funny, smart, incisive, always in high gear, her thoughts tumbling out in breathless, fully formed bunches.

Peaches was born famous. She never knew any other existence. 'From day one it was super intense. I was hyperaware of it. But as a kid, of course, I wasn't mentally capable of understanding it. And the paparazzi freaked me out.' She said her childhood was a 'mind blank'. The absence of memory struck her as 'bizarre', a 'weird

sort of protective thing'. She recalled, vaguely, being treated oddly by teachers. They kept telling her she was no different from anyone else, that she wasn't special, but that's not how they behaved. It was the same with her peers. 'Parents would always be starstruck by my parents and want their kids to be friends with me so they could come over and meet my father, a sort of knight in shining armour.'

This sense of all eyes on you, of growing up and feeling understandably tender, all while 'being on the front page of the world press' was like a 'fucking fire', Peaches said. It never left her. It was an all-out assault on experience. But when, at 14, she was given a platform to write short opinion pieces in the *Sunday Telegraph* — 'I was this 14-year-old famous person's daughter' — the fire burned hotter. 'It was a little ego boost but it also annoyed people. No way did I aspire to be a model like a lot of kids of famous parents. I wanted to try something different. But I got a rep for being nothing. I got this stupid title as the voice of British Youth Culture. I had to work hard to make that dissipate, to create myself. I tried



to establish myself as having a brain, as a serious person. But at the same time I was going out and it was a bit hysterical.'

By any average standard, it was abnormal — the excessive attention — but it was normal too, it was what she 'grew up with'. And over time the greedy, remorseless dissections of her person — 'There's no in-between, you're either a fat pig or a bulimic' — shaped her beliefs about human nature. 'It's playground politics. It's a base part of the human psyche. I took it as part of what people do. If someone, God bless them, has a bad life, they want to hear about the golden fucking goose getting the prize. People love the phoenix-from-the-ashes story. Someone you lust for but can't have. It's like reading a fantasy novel. That elusive thing, the unattainable. But they also love a downfall. Humans at their core are so rotten. They're a hateful breed. It's exciting to hate celebrities. It's archaic.'

'I don't care if someone in Boise, Idaho thinks I'm a fat bitch,' Peaches declared. But seconds later she added, 'Anyone who says they don't read their own press is categorically lying. You need

'It's like I'm someone in a book. Your life, they keep telling you, is pre-ordained: you're going to die like your mother, you're going to end up like your mother'

Previous page:
Musician Elliott
Smith

Right: Peaches in
the arms of her late
mother Paula Yates.
Peaches posted this
photo on Instagram
days before
her death



to keep on top of it for your work. You cannot be in the public eye and not have it affect you.'

Celebrities, she said, are not 'automatons', nor are they deities. They are 'human beings who happen to be objects of extreme attention. But because you are unreachable, people throw rocks at you, like stoning you.' Part of the problem, she believed, was that she never apologised to the press for anything, she never participated in what, these days, seems like a more or less required public atonement, an airing of sins combined with pleas for forgiveness. 'I was labelled rude because I didn't conform to the unspoken, invisible rules.'

After Peaches's death, there was sanctimonious frowning over her use of social media, her tendency, shared by many 25-year-olds, to post pictures of herself, or her boys, her home, her dogs, her books, her husband. This was reduced to neurotic neediness. It was seen as a sign of weakness. Her own take was more nuanced. 'I guess it's the selfie generation. People have an innate desire for the approval of others. You always want to be the alpha in some ways. It's a buzz when people tell you you're great. But if I upload a pic I always wonder, "Why am I doing this? It's not a cool thing to do." Cool would involve posting some bizarre, arcane image nobody has ever heard of. Yet there is something about seeing yourself in the mirror of the eyes of other people, projecting yourself.' She said that, despite what people think, 'I never actually chase it. I didn't want, at first, to be suckling at the tit of fame. But when I got better known, I got caught up in it a little. If I'm on a train, for instance, and everyone is staring at me, I wonder, "Is there a part of me that likes the recognition?" If everyone loves you, it's like a big happy family. This may be why I'm obsessed with cults. It's the biggest cult of all — celebrity.'

Throughout our conversations one theme recurred. It had to do with a sort of epic battle over The Image. Peaches was fighting to author her own identity. Like any young adult, she was finding out who she really was. At the same time, however, faceless others forced on her alternative, clichéd, distorted scripts. 'I'm young,' she said, 'but people all know the same information about me. That's the worst thing, the preconceptions.' She felt like a

'character. It's like I'm someone in a book. Your life, they keep telling you, is pre-ordained: "I'm going to die like my mother, she's going to end up like her mother." And people expect you to spew these intimacies to them. Like you are in a church confessional. It's an interview, not a therapy session.' Having kids, she felt, switched the narrative up. 'Suddenly I was this earth mother. It was an overnight transformation. It was so profoundly hateful. Then, out of nowhere, it was "Dang. We can't hate you anymore. Here she is in her golden hair, etc." Now, for the first time ever, there was gushing adulation.'

Long ago, she told me, celebrities were famous for a reason — talent, accomplishment, genuine distinctiveness. They weren't only personalities; they weren't mere amusements. 'Now it's just socialites and people with big tits. It's very blurred.' This dynamic, the shifting landscape, was something she was in the process of taking on directly, asking herself the hard questions. 'When you're a celebrity it's like, "Who are you? Why are you being celebrated?" You start to think that if people pay attention you must be good at something. But I did not want to be just a personality. I wanted to be something more.' In the end, she said, 'It's like trying to prove your whole existence to yourself.'

I found out Peaches was dead in the same way I found out Peaches was alive — on social media. I'd just spoken with her, and I was planning to check in the very next day, so what I felt, at first, was confusion. My instinct was that this was some demonic, belated April Fool's hoax. I sat in my office and cried, for this lovely, brilliant, generous person I'd never met, this powerful life force impossibly extinguished. It seemed absurd, but I had a class to teach in 30 minutes. I was to be talking about John Lennon, how he'd used his music — songs like 'Julia' and 'Mother' — to process and work through feelings about his own loss of his own mother when he was a teenager. I said, melodramatically, I'll do this for Peaches. It will be about how one can move on, dispatch grief. But I couldn't speak. I cried again, in front of 20 bewildered undergrads.

Today what's left is regret, death's debris. I knew one Peaches. They were others only she knew. I wish I'd seen them. Either I didn't want to, or she wouldn't let me. Or both. Probably both.