

## A good face for radio

By [Ben Rackstraw](#)

Thursday 31 May 2007



**Steve Lamacq's Radio 1 show was essential listening for a generation of music fans. *Ben Rackstraw* chats to his childhood hero**

The name Steve Lamacq may mean little to you but for a group of people, myself included, he was the voice of musical reason throughout secondary school. For a musically-keen generation that was too young for John Peel, the Evening Session on Radio 1 – presented by Lamacq – was essential listening. Each morning, my friend Alex and I would huddle for protection from the biting chill of the South Manchester weather and discuss the discoveries that we had made the night before: 'Clint Eastwood' by Gorillaz, or 'Empty At The End' by The Electric Soft Parade.

Taking a break before broadcasting his BBC 6 Music radio show live from Vanbrugh last week, Lamacq maintains that although he was initially shocked by fevered hero worship of him, it is something he definitely identifies with: "It is very much the equivalent of when I used to listen to the Peel programmes when I was a kid – there would be stuff where you thought 'that's alright', 'that's ok', 'that's laughably bad'... and then a song comes along where you just think, 'that's an amazing record'. You just hope that for every hour's worth of radio that you do, one of the songs will be talked about the next day."

“  
The NME would be much, much better if the people who wrote for it actually had to go out and sell the bloody thing

”  
His comment is welcome, not only because it is a comprehensive and highly quotable answer to my opening question, but also because it is delivered in the trademark Lamacq tone; a deep-voiced, Essex-accented roll, not unlike the sound of an engine turning over. The voice conveys to his radio listeners an immediate sense of gravitas, trustworthiness and humour. It also betrays his slight build and overall uncelebrity-like appearance, which later leads him to comment, "I just don't look like someone in a band, I'm just not cool enough."

He obviously feels that trust between a DJ and his audience is something of great importance. Back on the subject of John Peel, a colleague and friend from his time at Radio 1, he suggests that the DJ had "built up a level of trust over many years." He sounds slightly disparaging about some of today's new DJs, who try to emulate, to some extent, the achievements of Peel. "A lot of people have tried to do radio

shows that are vaguely Peel-esque in their eccentricity or eclecticism,” he says. “But I think that it’s very hard to do unless people will buy into you as a trustworthy figure.”

This is the aspect of presentation that Lamacq feels is missing from the numerous other sources of new music that have flourished in the age of websites such as Myspace. “I don’t think other places have the quality control that some of us have because we’ve heard so much music. Anyone could find these bands, but you would have to be listening to music all day, and even then you might not find what you want. You need people to lead you through this maze.”

Championing little-known bands is clearly something that Lamacq gets a kick out of. He smiles as he mentions how he managed to get a hip-hop band from his small hometown to number one. The only previous hit from a Harlow group was one that sounded like Haircut One Hundred, and Lamacq wasn’t satisfied with that. “I set out to get a Harlow band into the Top 40, and ‘Eat My Goal’ by Collapsed Lung became the second ever,” he says, obviously pleased with himself. It is commendable that the DJ had enough civic pride to try and improve the fame-status of his local area but despite Nihal, the rapper on ‘Eat My Goal’, going on to get his own show on Radio 1, these musical achievements can only be of scant relief to an area of Essex now known as the home of Jade Goody.

Of course, Lamacq was around the last time that Britain’s media blew up around a group of new indie bands: the golden age of Britpop. After finishing a journalism degree, he served a stint at The NME whilst presenting part-time at the fledgling XFM, then a pirate radio station called Q102 where “all the DJs had to pay about £10 a week to go on air because Ragga FM would come along and nick our aerial once every couple of weeks.”

“  
I was so annoyed by how bad The Twang were when I saw them. It’s like having Frank Skinner fronting Flowered Up

”  
As if this wasn’t enough, in what could be a wake-up call for anybody wanting to pursue a career in music journalism, he also says: “I got into the habit that for every job I was doing, I got another job as a hobby.” At this point, he made time to establish Deceptive Records, whose most notable signing was mid-90s indie-favourites Elastica. Lamacq left the label after the release of Elastica’s first album to avoid accusations of partiality on his radio show, but reveals that it wasn’t a long-term career prospect for him anyway: “It was brilliant for a time, but it’s a very easy way of haemorrhaging a lot of money. As an A&R man I wasn’t really hard enough. I just liked the people I was working with to the point that the biggest row I ever had was with Justine (Frischmann, of Elastica) about what the single was going to be before the first album. It went on for about three weeks and I got my own way, but she never forgave me.”



With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see that Britpop, like any scene, became diluted over time. Lamacq agrees: “The first wave was brilliant, but when they went to record their second albums there was a big gap, and the record companies thought ‘people are buying this stuff, so we’ll get something that sounds like it’, but it’s not as inventive.” However, he also suggests that the scene may have been a victim of its own popularity. “We’d find a band like Gene (a Smiths-esque band of the mid-90s) and Radio

I would stick it on the playlist the next week. We'd only just found them and it felt like the music had been taken away. I think that's one reason why Britpop eventually collapsed in kid's minds, because what's the point of being into a band if your younger sister or younger brother likes them as well?"

Record label short-sightedness is something that he feels continues to cloud the music industry today. Last week, during the promotional whirl for the release of their new album, a member of The Cribs criticised the state of popular music, describing it as a scene with only a handful of really good bands, surrounded by a large quantity of copy-cat groups, signed up by labels because they are guaranteed to sell records.

Lamacq agrees to an extent, but sees the problem as being more specific: "It's a really strange time at the moment. We've arrived at the point where the media and audience are so single-led that it's only big songs that matter. Some bands these days... I want to hear five tracks, tops."

Coming in for particularly scathing criticism are The Twang, who receive more than their fair share of attention from The NME and other publications: "I was so annoyed by how bad they were when I saw them. One of the NME writers said 'it's like Mike Skinner fronting Oasis'. It's not, it's like Frank Skinner fronting Flowered Up."

This isn't the only way in which commercialisation has increased over the course of his career. After he left Q102 the station received its licence and became XFM. Recently, the station has taken a path of increasing musical safety, betraying its experimental, cutting-edge past. This, of course, is all about money because money, in the world of commercial radio, comes from advertising. "It's difficult because you have to sell advertising, and to do that you need figures. For figures you seem to have to play very familiar music when we're just asking 'can't you just be a little bit more inventive?'"

This is one of the benefits of working for the licence fee-funded BBC – especially if you can bag a role on one of the special interest, music-driven shows, such as those that Lamacq has presented. However, the DJ believes that inventive presenting of music radio should not be left to the privileged few, and that it can be beneficial for everyone. "It's not very good for your short term career to say 'actually, I think the playlist is wrong', but probably, in the end, you'll find that your career is longer. It's better for the soul, but certainly not as good for the wallet."

Of course, all this is changing as the world of music is revolutionised by the unstoppable rise of digital media. These days pretty much anyone can present a music show, be it on one of the rapidly proliferating digital music stations, a podcast or even an online music blog. Rather sweetly, Lamacq links this back to his own experience of producing his fanzine *A Pack of Lies* whilst studying journalism at Harlow College in Essex. "Technology is giving more space to people that previously would have produced a fanzine, but it is better because you can communicate much quicker with people around the country. It's all out there, it's just a case of finding it, really."

What he doesn't mention is that the majority of these outlets have no physical form, unlike *A Pack of Lies* which he describes as "probably very rare now... I do have a box under my bed..." An investigation, using skills honed from a million mornings spent in front of *Cash in the Attic*, placed the worth of an early Lamacq fanzine as literally priceless. Admittedly this was because there were no examples for me to quote from eBay, but a collection of other late 80s magazines is going for a pound, with postage twice that.

Not exactly an untapped pension fund then, but Lamacq is too busy thinking about where to focus his energy next to consider an early retirement. "I've thought about a music publishing company. It's all about rights these days. I think there is a new blueprint to be had for publishing companies given the new technology, and I don't think record labels are evolving quickly enough." His eyes glaze over before a more practical side suddenly takes control. This is not a project we can expect to see the fruition of anytime soon, I realise, as Lamacq reminds me of his current commitments: "At the moment, doing seven radio shows a week is enough to keep me busy." Not a project he will be starting anytime soon then.

And busy he is. The show in Vanbrugh last week was a prelude to a sold-out 6 Music showcase for The Maccabees at Fibbers the same night, part of the 'Lamacq in the City' tour, which takes his radio show to a different city every few months. He is one of The Maccabees' biggest celebrity fans. Describing the moment when he first saw them live, he reveals, "I was very tempted to go into the moshpit for the first time in a long while."

Somewhat flatteringly for those of us who have adopted it as our local live-music haunt, he describes Fibbers as "one of those classic venues". He's also enthusiastic about the area as a whole. "We've never done anything round this neck of the woods, and that transpennine axis of music is really important. A lot of the industry stuff has come from here over the years, partly from the rise of the scene in Sheffield, the BBC Raw Talent scheme and Sandman magazine, which has really galvanised local music scenes." It is clear that it is the grassroots end of the music business spectrum which interests him the most, something that he wishes more of the media would concentrate on: "I maintain that it would do a lot of people in London-based media a lot of good if they got out of town and found gigs, if they went to Nottingham or York and actually watched some bands." The complacency of the media is something that he keeps returning to, stating controversially that: "The NME would be much, much better if the people who wrote for it actually had to go out and sell the bloody thing."

This is evidently a reference to the hours he spent on his fanzine, an endeavour which he says almost ended in disaster. "I very nearly got chucked out of my digs at the time, because my room was above the landlady's front room and she'd be trying to watch Coronation Street while I'm stapling a thousand copies of a fanzine. She's sitting downstairs watching TV and I'm going... " At this point he hammers his fist on to the table, re-creating a loud fanzine-stapling sound that would indeed make watching Corrie a less enjoyable experience than it obviously already is.

However, the years of strife paid off, something that even his landlady eventually recognised: "She emailed me about six years into my career at The Evening Session. Some years earlier her friend who was also a landlady had Mark Knopfler from Dire Straits when he studied journalism, and this was quite legendary. I think when I was on Radio 1 she could boast back. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a plaque up outside my bedroom."

'Bigger than Mark Knopfler', then; not a bad result for a music journalist who got here with the mentality that "anything's a progression from the news desk at the Harlow Gazette."

*Steve Lamacq came to York courtesy of **University Radio York (URY)**. Listen to URY online at <http://ury.york.ac.uk/>*



Most Read Discussed

1. [The World's Rudest Word](#)
2. [Fresher Initiations](#)
3. [The F\\*\\*k it Philosophy](#)
4. [Life behind closed doors: the hidden York sex trade](#)
5. [On the Frontline of social work](#)
6. [The great white rescue](#)

Write for Nouse Features

[Get in touch with the editors](#)

### More in Features

[York: The UK's Human Rights City](#)

[Q & A with Mark Smith](#)

[Heartaches and Pain](#)

[A Quirky Christmas](#)

[Extinction Rebellion Q&A](#)

[That \(Not So\) Festive Feeling](#)

- [About Nouse](#)
- [Who's Nouse](#)
- [Website Credits](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Advertising](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Student Discounts](#)
- [Print Editions](#)
- [Mini-Sites](#)
- [Nouse on Twitter](#)
- [Nouse on Facebook](#)
- [Nouse on Google+](#)

