

**Colin Greenwood  
and his  
Christopher  
Dean guitar**

*Photographs:  
Antony Moore*



**W**hat must it be like, as a member of a young rock band, to go from playing to tiny audiences in village halls and pubs to touring the USA and performing for audiences of 500 or more – with even more fans queuing around the block? And all in a matter of weeks.

Multi-instrumentalist and composer Colin Greenwood, bass player with the iconic Oxford band Radiohead, knows that thrill.

And it turns out that the USA has been good to Colin in many other ways – as it was where he met his wife, Molly.

So what will Colin want to take to our desert island – and where did his journey to our island begin?

“In 1969, my mother Brenda gave birth to me at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. But, until I was 11, we did not stay in one place for very long,” Colin said.

“My father Ray served in the Royal Ordinance Corps, so the family moved to Germany and then to Didcot, Suffolk, Abingdon and Oakley. I attended five primary schools.”

Where did his interest in music begin?

“At home there was always music in the background. My parents’ favourite records were by Burl Ives, Scott Joplin, Simon and Garfunkel and Mozart’s horn concerto,” Colin, 44, said.

“The important thing our parents did for my brother Jonny, sister Susan and I was to buy each of us musical instruments and encourage us to learn to play. They bought me a guitar when I was seven and Jonny (who also joined Radiohead) a recorder.”

Attending Abingdon School was a life-changing event for Colin and his younger brother.

“The school ran lots of after-school activities. I played classical guitar and so did Thom Yorke. We got to know Ed O’Brien and Phil Selway, who were a year ahead of us. We were soon playing together and called our first band On a Friday because Friday was the day we could rehearse in the school music room,” Colin recalled.

They played their first public gig at The Jericho Tavern in Walton Street, Oxford on August 14, 1986.

“The Jericho Tavern called their Thursday night gig Club Avocado. We shared the stage with four other bands but it felt like the best thing ever – it throbbed with excitement. It gave us the ambition to make a life in music.”

Despite that desire the members of the fledgling band still headed for university.

“I read English at Peterhouse (Cambridge) but I also spent a lot of time playing music with three bands. Every week, I played in college bars or at events like the St Johns and Pembroke college balls,” Colin said.

“The five of us reconvened often at weekends and in the holidays. We played gigs in universities where we had contacts, at LSE, and at Exeter as well as in Oxford and Cambridge.

“In Oxford, we found a promoter. Thirty scouts from different record companies came to see us play at the Jericho Tavern in 1990 and we were lucky to be signed up by EMI. We were probably one of the last bands to sign a traditional record deal.

“We rehearsed for long hours at Nick

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# Strings attached

Sylvia Vetta talks to musician Colin Greenwood about life on the road with Radiohead

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Moorbath's Coldroom studios in Oxford. That is where we worked on *Creep*."

Then came the transformation from On a Friday to Radiohead.

"Having secured a record deal we discussed changing our name. My first favourite band was Talking Heads. Radiohead was the title of a track from their album *True Stories*. We all liked it," Colin explained.

"It was around that time that I bought a classic guitar made by Christopher Dean who set up a workshop in the Cotswolds in 1985. It has a spruce soundboard and finger board of ebony. I love it and it is a must for the island."

The BBC banned *Creep* from the airwaves – generally a sure sign that a song is about to become a smash hit.

Colin said "The lyrics contained a swearword. The Americans call it the 'F bomb'." The version issued for US radio play replaced the offending line.

"In England in 1992, we travelled in a rusty white van and arriving at our destination, the tour manager handed out £5 notes to buy fish and chips and we would usually have three hours to explore, Stoke on Trent, Huddersfield and so on, before a 5.30pm sound check and the start of the show at 9.30pm.

"The Hull Adelphi was a terrace house with a single pool table in a back room and a deaf dog among the small audience. It was bizarre but brilliant.

"We were noticed by the music press but we did not fit the image they wanted. We were from a private school, played our first gig in a beautiful city, and had signed a record deal. We had worked hard – but in their eyes we were privileged and rock was about working class boys from industrial cities trying to break out."

While *Creep* was crawling up the UK charts, in the US it was rocketing. The band embarked on their first US tour – six weeks of magic memories.

"Luck was on our side – *Creep* was being played widely in the US so, in June 1993, we toured in a luxury 12 bed bus which slept both the band and the crew.

"It was a great way to see the country and witness its diversity from the beautiful Fox Theatre in Boulder Colorado to downtown Detroit and Pittsburg. We would park in the centre of the town and trawl the book and record shops and enjoy meeting local people."

"The tour bus felt like luxury – we had made it! *Creep* reached number two in the US modern rock chart," Colin said.

"It validated all the hard work we had put into practising, composing, rehearsing – and

the invaluable experience gained performing in village halls.

"The consequence is that nowadays, when we tour, it is with 40-50 people in four buses followed by six articulated lorries!

"Some commentators in the music press suggested that our debut album, *Pablo Honey*, was a one-hit wonder. Often they had not bothered to listen to it. In the music press, we were not fashionable. From experience we realise that is a good thing, because if you are not desperate to be moulded by the current fashion you are less of a target so more likely to survive," Colin said.

"It felt easy in the States – people are genuinely supportive of success. In the UK, it feels less positive," Colin said.

By late 1995, Radiohead had released their

**Radiohead  
with Colin  
Greenwood,  
far right**



second album *The Bends* and recorded one song that would make their next record. Called *Lucky*, it was released as a single to promote the War Child charity's *Help* album.

This emerged from a session with Nigel Godrich, a young audio engineer who had assisted on *The Bends*. The band chose him to produce their next album, *OK Computer*, which was to bring the band international acclaim.

On their next tour of the US in 1996 they appeared on the David Letterman show performing a live version of *Karma Police* and were seen by an amazing 16 million viewers.

There was quite a contrast when the band returned home to Oxford.

Colin said: "A journalist from ITV's regional Central News programme – who sounded rather like Alan Partridge – rang to make us an offer we could not refuse. If we co-operated with him, he would get us a slot at 2am just before Job Finder!"

Colin has a special reason to recall the band's next tour of the USA in 1996. The band went to see U2 in New York, performing at The Tibetan Freedom Concert, supporting the cause of Tibetan independence.

At an after-concert party he met his wife-to-be Molly McGlann. At that time the poet and literary critic was studying for a Masters in creative writing.

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"Shortly afterwards she came over to Oxford. When I took her to the Aziz restaurant on the Cowley Road she decided she liked Oxford," Colin said. They married in December 1998 in the Oxford Registry Office and have three sons, Jesse, born in December 2003, Asa, born in December 2005, and Henry, born in December 2009.

Colin and the other members of Radiohead are all grounded family men. I wondered if their decision to stay in Oxford had anything to do with that. "We had an idea that it was important to have roots," Colin revealed.

As well as his family, there is his younger brother Jonny.

Colin says that they are still friends and have not argued even after working so closely together for so long and despite the pressures that come with touring the world. They are also close to their sister Susan, who works as a computing consultant in Bath.

On July 7, 2001, Radiohead returned to Oxford to do a live concert in South Park. As news spread, the 40,000 tickets were soon sold out.

It was an emotional experience for Colin and the rest of the band.

"Even my mother was there. We erected search lights and she said they reminded her of the searchlights over Biggin Hill during the Second World War when she was a child.

"At 11pm on the evening before the concert, I climbed onto the stage and looked across the empty park while the lighting designer rehearsed the light sequences. It was magical, like watching a private fireworks display.

"Nearby was the Cowley Road where we had filmed the video for *Creep*, not far from Ridgfield Road where the five of us had shared a house between 1990-1991," Colin said.

"I was living in Southfield Road at the time of the concert and I could walk from my front door to the stage in five minutes. As well as Radiohead there were Beck and Supergrass – a really good line-up."

The late Humphrey Lyttelton also performed at the concert after playing with his band on a track on Radiohead's *Amnesiac* album.

The photographer Pennie Smith photographed Radiohead in Oxford – and Colin is a fan of her work and suggested one of her famous images as a desert island choice.

"Whenever we tour, I look for photography in books and magazines. In Toronto, I bought a nice copy of Pennie's famous image of The Clash, so that may be an option for the island. Another possibility is a photograph by Susan Derges. She employs unusual techniques to get her landscape images."

Colin has recently taken on a new role as global ambassador for the Children's Radio Foundation (CRF) which does most of its work in Africa.

"I met Charlotte Bannister Parker (president and UK chair of CRF) through our children who are friends. She is hard to say 'no' to!"

Charlotte is the Bishop of Oxford's adviser for overseas programmes and associate priest at the University Church, St Mary the Virgin.

With more than 50 youth radio projects across five African countries, the CRF works with radio stations and youth organisations to create opportunities for youth dialogue, leadership, social engagement, and action.



**Faces in the crowd at Radiohead's memorable homecoming concert at South Park in 2001**

CRF has 260 community mentors in Africa who train street children and Aids orphans to be radio reporters.

Through their broadcasts, these young people speak about the difficulties in their lives and reach out to their peers and wider audiences about those issues. Colin said

"Charlotte knew I had a chunk of time off from Radiohead and that I was a big fan of radio particularly programmes like the BBC's *From our own Correspondent*. When she asked me to be the charity's global ambassador, I looked at their website and liked what I saw. I was excited and flattered by the idea."

Colin explained what being CRF's 'global entails.

"The title is just a way of including me in their work," said Colin. "It gave me the chance of a trip to South Africa in July, 2012. I met Mike Rahfaldt and Nina Callaghan who do all the day to day work and so I try to stay in touch with them and support them however I can.

"It was my first trip to South Africa. In two weeks I visited Capetown, Limpopo, Kuruman, Taung and Johannesburg. It was fantastic.

"My first experience was of a training session in Cape Town. The charity adopts groups of children in townships and rural areas around the country and helps them to produce a radio programme each week," Colin said.

■ Charlotte Bannister-Parker is taking part in the 10k Great Ethiopian Run to raise money for CRF's Ethiopian Project which is helping make toolkits for media and radio training and support vital school curriculum development across the country.

The run takes place in Addis Abba on November 26, 2013. Support Charlotte by visiting the website: [www.justgiving.org/childrensradiofoundationuk](http://www.justgiving.org/childrensradiofoundationuk)

"They are taught to make audio stories, to do interviews, how to set up a debate and make public information programmes on health and education.

"They tackle issues like bullying in school – as well as HIV/Aids and domestic violence. But there are fun things too.

"It is all about giving these marginalised young people a voice with which to interrogate their community. It gives power and validity to these children's voices," Colin added.

"It is a society in which priority is given to older people. As the community hears these children, it does change perceptions. They now ask young people's opinions. It gives the young people confidence to speak up and know they will be heard."

CRF was chosen by the village of Kennington to be their 2013 fundraising project. They hope to raise £24,000 for CRF this year.

Colin will be opening a fundraising concert on September 21 at Kennington Village Centre when the Kennington Band, Charity Opera and the children's choir, Music Mayhem will come together to entertain the village.

We had come to the point where Colin had to choose which of his items he would take to our island.

"That is easy," he said. "It has to be the Christopher Dean guitar. I will be able to play it and maybe even float away on it!"

■ To book tickets for the Bandwaves Concert at Kennington Village Centre at 7pm, on September 21. E-mail [sylviaavetta@gmail.com](mailto:sylviaavetta@gmail.com) or call 0780 9054969. Tickets are £8 to include drinks and a bring and share buffet. If you are interested in CRF call 01865 200118 or visit the website: [www.childrensradiofoundation.org](http://www.childrensradiofoundation.org)