

The Underground Story of the John Otway World Tour

Some of the readers of my book 'Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll have asked me:

- **“How did I come to spend £50,000 of my life savings on cult punk rocker and two hit wonder John Otway's World Tour?”**
- **“What did John do with the money?”** and
- **“Is my wife still talking to me?”**



They are indeed good questions, so, I've attempted to write down some of the more interesting parts of the story. It is indeed a 'comedy of errors' - a 'comedy' because some of the things that happened rightly deserve a place in 'This is Spinal Tap' and 'errors' because it is plain that failure was almost built-in to almost everyone I have described the full story to. However, hindsight is a great teacher and these factors only become plain as Otway revealed the true state of affairs, and once the money had long been spent. Ah well, life happens... It has certainly made me work a lot harder! ;-)) If you are not familiar with John Otway, a good digest exists at [Wikipedia](#) and there is some footage of a corporate performance I did with John at Pfizer and at Brands Hatch at [ACADEMY TUBE](#). In brief:

- John Otway is a 50 something cult punk rocker, with two hits to his name across an amazing 30 year career in the music business.
- He was offered ten times more than The Jam in 1977 as an advance by Polydor Records, due to an apochryphal appearance on The Old Grey Whistle Test, where John fell off an amplifier midway through his performance, injuring vital parts.
- John booked the London Palladium one year in advance of having his 2nd hit in 2002 to ensure his fans would support his ambition.
- Came 6th in the BBC's best all time rock lyrics, beating Bob Dylan.

Otway's great strength is his staying power in an industry where longevity is usually measured in months. His inventive powers have however meant that many of his ideas to extend his career have failed, sometimes with dramatic effect. As such it is possible to see John Otway as a great inventor but rather less of an innovator, with many ideas that failed to succeed. However, his notoriety enabled him to develop a cult following who put him into the UK music charts at No 9 for his 50th Birthday with a comic remake of the hit Disco Inferno. This boosted John Otway's confidence to take on something much bigger. This became the idea to circumnavigate the world with his cult following.

There is sometimes much more to be learned from a great business failures, and this series of articles will unravel the story of this 'comedy of errors'. There is a cameo section on John in '[Sex, Leadership and Rock'n'Roll](#)' plus features on the Beatles, Bill Nelson, Be-Bop Deluxe and David Bowie etc. as well as some great advice on how to lead successful enterprises!

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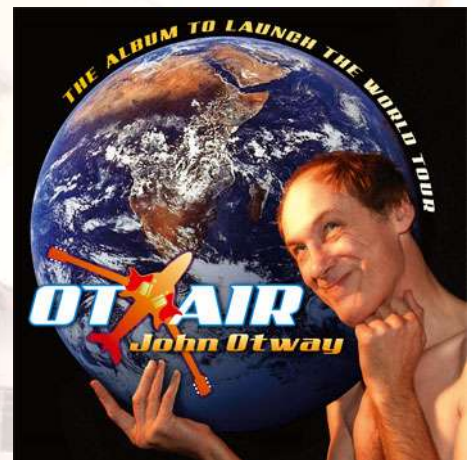
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JOHN OTWAY THE APPRENTICE OF ROCK

The business concept behind the World Tour may be expressed as a formula:

**Take one fading rock star
Add a big idea
Execute the idea well
= Rejuvenate the star's fortunes**

In this case, the big idea was to charter an A340 Airbus, fill it with adventurers and take them on a once in a lifetime trip round the World, performing at the Sydney Opera House, Caesars Palace, Madison Square Gardens and visiting China and the 7 Star Madinet Hotel in Dubai. At the same time to make a comic film rockumentary to rival classic spoof movies such as This is Spinal Tap, Wayne's World and The Blues Brothers. This was to be the real Spinal Tap tour for 300 thrillseekers who wanted to live the Rock'n'Roll dream on a record breaking two week circumnavigation of the World. The project had a budget of £1.5 million and promised to deliver nearly twice this investment for those involved. So far so good. However, like so many entrepreneurial projects, the venture failed with less than half the seats sold by departure date. Hindsight is a great teacher, and there were a number of turning points that could have transformed the fortunes of the tour.



LESSONS FROM THE GREATEST ROCK'N'ROLL TOUR ON EARTH

Here are some of the 'astonishing facts' of the tour - somewhat incredulous though they are. Only John Otway is capable of such things.

What NOT to do to have a record breaking World rock tour

Lesson 1 – HIRE A TRAVEL SHY TRAVEL AGENT

A travel agent (we'll call him Hilary) was found by John Otway. Hilary was rather work shy in terms of selling the tour concept (that's seats in plain English). It turned out that the travel company excelled at losing sales (that's a very John Otway approach to success!). Hilary had grabbed the World Tour as a money making exercise and then found he had bitten off more than he could chew. At that point, Hilary's interest in actually doing anything to make the tour happen waned and he became an obstacle to success. It was only when

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we acquired an unemployed drummer - Al (with no travel industry experience) that the fortunes of the tour started to pick up seriously – we discovered that passion was more important than a post graduate degree in tourism! ☺ Unfortunately Al was judged as 'too successful' by Hilary. John Otway claimed he could not afford to pay his expenses and Al had to leave. The rest is history. Morrissey would point out 'We hate it when our friends become successful - and it's even worse if they're a drummer!'



Lesson 2 – JOHN LENNON AIRPORT - ROTHERHAM - JFK

Many decisions about the tour were delayed because we had lost many passengers at the hands of the travel company. Amongst them was the itinerary. Although the tour was due to leave from Liverpool John Lennon Airport for JFK, it was common knowledge amongst the tour team that it was not possible to land an Airbus at Liverpool Airport - yet the passengers had booked hotels etc. and this made it rather difficult to change the itinerary. Otway had acquired an associate (we'll call him Del) who handled charter jets, yet, sadly, he too came with some baggage. If anyone asked him how things were going he would say things like 'Do you like hospital food?' John's description of him was 'Nutter'. Because of the threats of being dropped from Motorway bridges nobody liked to challenge Del about the impossibility of taking off from Liverpool Airport until one day, when I confronted him the problem and under some pressure to give an answer Del told us.

“The plane CAN take off from Liverpool provided we have no passengers or luggage”

Now, you can see where this would have made a great spoof movie ... People get absolutely slaughtered at the Cavern on the first night of a jetlagged fortnight, go to bed, are then woken up at 2.30 am to get a bus to Rotherham Airport (Sheffield International I should say) to catch the plane, after it 'symbolically' takes off from Liverpool. We thus have a 'first' in Rock'n'Roll itineraries: 'John Lennon - Rotherham - JFK'. Although this is mildly amusing, it illustrates how problems were systematically avoided along the way, leading to the ultimate meltdown of the project.

Lesson 3 – THE COMPUTER SAYS NO....

The third appallingly amusing anecdote concerns the travel agent's webmaster, we'll call him Peter Playstation, although Al the Drummer had some less pleasant names for him.... Peter P really did not like appear to like work, and to ensure that work did not interfere with playing Solitaire etc., He built the 'spam protecting walls' in the company so high that requests to buy tickets etc. were sometimes thrown out as 'junk mail'. Peter P is obviously the kind of guy every company needs in charge of business development! A cameo part in 'The Office' for him I think! Sir Alan Sugar would have had a different answer!

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Lesson 4 – HIRE A TRAVEL SHY TRAVEL AGENT

It's obvious that selling your product matters a lot. In this case however, Hilary (the Travel Agent John Otway chose) managed to lose sales from fully paid-up passengers. Some might say this somewhat careless! However, the ability to choose people who are genetically unlikely to succeed is one of Otway's 'secret recipes' and part of his 'charm' if you are not that familiar with him! Otway is a kind of 'Reginald Perrin' of the punk rock world. So why and how did this bizarre situation occur? Hilary had been drafted in half way through the project after John could not afford to pay his regular manager, Jim, who had already sold half the seats to the fanbase. Hilary took the project on to protect his travel company from the internet invasion. It quickly became apparent that he did not understand the unique qualities of the John Otway fanbase. Hilary's first move was to e-mail paid-up passengers with a £1000 price hike and no explanation of the reason. Many people cancelled at this point and the fanbase turned against the travel agent since they rightly understood that he was simply in it for the money. We would never really recover from this decision. It seems obvious in hindsight, but the lessons are plain:

- If you are to raise your price and you only have to tell 150 people, choose a two-way personal communications method (phone etc.), rather than an impersonal e-mail.
- Give people a good reason for the change and some encouragement to stay on board.

I eventually installed an unemployed drummer with no travel industry experience but excellent relationship skills. 'Al the Drummer' revolutionised sales and even brought back some of the passengers Hilary had lost. Needless to say Hilary found Al to be an irritating contrast to his own performance, thus proving that, in a service industry, attitude may be more important than knowledge. As we learned earlier, reasons were eventually found to 'release' Al - this serves to demonstrate that it is possible to be too good at your job in an unhealthy business climate.



Lesson 5 – THE COMPUTER SAYS NO AGAIN

Hilary's IT person Peter Playstation did not share Al the Drummer's liking for work. A typical day for Peter P would involve playing solitaire and installing firewalls and other interesting gadgets. Over time we discovered that this had the effect of ensuring that Peter P would not be troubled by the 'threat of work', since he had built the company's 'IT walls' so high that requests to spend £4000 / £7000 on a World Tour were frequently thrown out of the company's system as junk mail. You don't have to have a business degree to see where this is an impediment to success!

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Worse still, when passengers wrote in to complain about service, Peter P banned them from the chat rooms, thus ensuring that, for some time, most people were unaware of the lost sales opportunities. Again, this might seem ludicrous, yet I have met people with similar characteristics at work. Somewhat annoyingly, Peter P was rather good at personal PR and made sure he was joined to Hilary at the hip. Inspiration must of course be

matched by an even greater level of perspiration if ideas are to turn into profit and Peter P never revealed a single bead of sweat throughout the project. It is probably unprintable to say what various other team members wanted to do to him! So, what are the lessons?

- Whilst IT security matters, IT people must understand that the business exists to make a profit and not as a beta test for hobbyists!
- What matters is what people actually do, rather than what they say they will do. Business is not an out-take from 'The Office'.
- A business which ignores overwhelming customer feedback is heading for trouble!

COMING UP

Lesson 6 – SIR BOB GELDOF NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR JOHN OTWAY?

It became apparent to all but John that we had run out of Otway fans with £4000 or £7000 to spend on his dream. At this point you can either give up or do something different. I had bumped into Sir Bob Geldof and thought there was a chance that we could find a way to involve 'Make Poverty History' and gain a wider interest in the World Tour at the same time. When I approached John on this, his lip curled in embarrassment. Although this seems statistically unlikely, John had previously asked Paula Yates out on a date about 30 years ago – she declined. 'So what?' I asked. John replied 'Er well, I told her it was the last chance she would have to go out with a rock star ... I put this on the back cover of my book some years later when she was living with Bob and she tried to sue me!' Only John Otway is capable of this! Of course the real problem was nothing to do with this. John really did not want anyone better known than himself on the tour, rather like some inventors that do not want to realise their invention for fear that it will be overwhelmed by the competition. To avoid being pressed on the 'Paula love triangle', Otway then suggested that Bob would bring a 'negative element' to the tour as 'poverty was depressing'. I was astonished to hear this – It sounds almost like an excerpt from 'The Office'!



Peter Cook Surprises Sir Bob

The same resistance occurred whenever we picked up other celebrity leads. For example, we got a lead to get the Arctic Monkeys involved. They are big fans of John Otway and their involvement would have meant that we would solve the problem of selling the seats many times over. Once again, John's ambivalence led to a neutralisation of this recovery strategy when he asked 'Who

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are the Artic Monkeys?' – A question which even former Prime Minister Gordon Brown knows the answer to!

Lesson 7 – TWO – NIL: STEVE HARLEY VERSUS THE CHEEKY GIRLS

We had secured the Cheeky Girls involvement in a bizarre burlesque disco punk idea for the Las Vegas gig and they were willing to join in with the fun. They would also provide us with national publicity as 'Cheeky World Tour Air Hostesses' - Most people agreed that they are more photogenic than John Otway. But there was another problem looming on the horizon. John seemed to hate the Cheeky Girls, claiming that they were 'tarts without talent' – an unusual observation from a man who has pointed out on many occasions that he built his entire career on a complete lack of talent.



What then was the real problem? It turned out that Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel had been secured to play at Sydney Opera House. John Otway was in awe of Harley and this made John paranoid that Steve Harley's ego would be offended by a kitsch disco act even though they would be in a different continent. We were told we could not even mention the Cheeky Girls for fear that Steve would go into an artistic rage and drop the World Tour. However, we had not sold any tickets from Steve's involvement due to an Otway management balls-up and were in for a £100 000 bill for the pleasure of having Harley along. The Cheeky Girls offered us a range of badly needed promotional benefits, they were inexpensive and their act would have been an ideal counterpoint for the Vegas glam show. Something needed to change but sadly it did not. John put personal adulation above commercial considerations. We ploughed on with Steve Harley – no tickets were sold from Harley's involvement and everyone lost.

The major business lesson from this comically sad tale is that personal preferences must never be allowed to crush good business sense. If an enterprise lacks the personal touch, admittedly it's not likely to really perform, but if the business is solely run from the heart without using your head, it will never get to the point of performance. Although the World Tour balance sheet looked healthy in the mid term, 'Cashflow Killed the Radio Star'. The impact of decisions avoided and general incompetence meant we eventually ran out of money with a deficit of nearly £250 000 to make the tour viable. What a glorious cock-up! Some of John's other stunts are captured below:

John Otway – The self confessed Patron Saint of Losers

Two hit wonder – 1977 – 'Cor Baby That's Really Free' with Wild Willy Barrett and 'Bunsen Burner' in 2002

Tricked Warner Brothers into signing him even though they did not want to, by manufacturing his own Warner Brothers records

Decided he wanted to be a rock star at the age of nine, when he discovered that you could get 100 girls to watch you in the school playground if you were prepared to drink a bottle of ink!

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Lesson 8 – JOHN OTWAY AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

It eventually became clear that the tour would not go ahead and things got a bit ugly. John was officially declared 'unwell' by his partner, the Travel Agent launched an (unsuccessful) appeal to the passengers to help John in his time of trouble. This 'punk aid' appeal was astutely read as a cynical money making ploy on the Travel Agent's part and ignored. John's ex-manager tried to silence people - a death threat was used at one point – not the normal approach to PR!



In summary, the John Otway World Tour was a glorious failure with a number of turning points which were artfully dodged. Perhaps the biggest lesson for entrepreneurs and leaders is to spot these turning points along the way and do something about them rather than deluding yourself that a 'miracle' is just around the corner. Nonetheless, much valuable learning comes from experience rather than textbooks or University courses and the tour has provided a valuable case study in how NOT to organise a large project.

Peter Cook

Catch some performances of John Otway with Peter at Brands Hatch and at Pfizer at [THE ACADEMY OF ROCK TUBE](#)