

CULTURE

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The Babyshambles frontman seems to hold an irresistible attraction for people from privileged backgrounds seeking experience of a seedy slice of life

Sheila Blanco calls Pete Doherty the Pied Piper. "He leads the easily impressionable; he has this act of being a pseudo-Bohemian, when in fact he's just posing," she says in a measured voice, one that belies a maelstrom of emotions within.

Blanco's anger towards the Babyshambles frontman came rushing back last week following the death of a young female filmmaker who, like Blanco's son, Mark, had become part of Doherty's scene, with tragic consequences.

Robin Whitehead, 27, was, according to tributes paid last week, popular and caring, a thoughtful person loved by friends. Like Mark Blanco, Whitehead had come from an enviable background: He had attended an independent grammar school on a scholarship and read philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, while she was a member of the ultra-rich Goldsmith clan (her mother, Dido, is a cousin of Jemima Khan and Zac Goldsmith).

Like Mark Blanco, Whitehead had come from a creative family — her father is the filmmaker Peter Whitehead, who documented much of the counterculture of the 1960s; Sheila Blanco is a classical music teacher.

And also like Mark Blanco, Whitehead was drawn to the most depressed hinterlands of east London, where industrial warehouses and high-rises provide a refuge for the artists, musicians and hangers-on who orbit Doherty.

Paramedics answering a 999 call last Sunday night found Whitehead dead in a flat in Hackney where Doherty had once lived. It is understood that drug paraphernalia was found at the address, which is currently home to one of Doherty's closest friends, a musician with whom he has often collaborated: Peter "Wolfman" Wolfe.

Doherty was seen at the flat, owned by Gill Samworth, a middle-aged woman often described as his "surrogate mother," the day before and the day after Whitehead had died. Wolfe, a self-confessed addict, said Whitehead had not taken drugs in the hours before her death, but police are waiting for the results of toxicology tests.

The police are likely to question Doherty but a police spokesman said Whitehead's death was "not being treated as suspicious."

Mark Blanco fell to his death three years ago from the balcony of a first-floor flat in Whitechapel where a party was being held. The party was attended by Doherty and hosted by the star's self-appointed literary agent, Paul Roundhill, a one-time crack cocaine user whose squalid flat, known as the "Hotel of the Sky," briefly became a mecca for fans keen to catch a glimpse of the ex-Libertine.

Sheila Blanco hopes the police will receive more help in the Whitehead case than Doherty provided following the death of her only son in mysterious circumstances at the party in December 2006. She is still seeking answers from the rock star, who was one of the last people to see her son alive.

On the night of his death, Mark Blanco had arrived at the party in a state of excitement. He was putting on a play, *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, in which the main character falls from a window to his death, and had been keen to persuade Doherty to attend. But the singer was not interested. "When Mark wanted to talk to him about his play, the inquest heard, Doherty was only interested in getting drugs," said the Blanco family's lawyer, Michael Wolkind.

Blanco was known to have left the flat after a confrontation with Roundhill, Doherty and the star's minder, Johnny "Headlock" Jeannevol, only to return a short while afterwards. Seconds later he was lying dead on the ground outside, having fallen from a first-floor balcony. All three men have denied any wrongdoing and have been interviewed by police only as witnesses.

CCTV footage shows Doherty and his then girlfriend, 19-year-old Kate Russell Pavier (again, another Doherty acolyte from a privileged background — her father composes scores for television and films) running away from the scene and past Mark's body. Doherty and several friends then went on to a hotel in Clerkenwell, central London, where they wrecked a room and disturbed a wedding party.

Sheila Blanco would dearly like Doherty and his friends to account for their actions that night, as would many others. A friend of her son, who is also close to the Whitehead family, sent her an e-mail last week, expressing anger at the actions of Doherty and his cohorts. The e-mail read: "It's the sick, the mediocre and the corrupt who live on ... while the talented, the truly beautiful lie asleep, lost to the world."

One question thrown up by the two tragic deaths is why bright, well-off young people are drawn to Doherty's squalid world. Part of the fascination, it seems, is Doherty himself.

Whitehead, granddaughter of the late Teddy Goldsmith, founder of the *Ecologist* magazine, and a great-niece of the late financier Sir James Goldsmith, had become part of Doherty's circle while working on a documentary about the musician, *The Road to Albion*.

At least one gossip column reported that they had been lovers, but Samworth says they were not. Nevertheless, there seems to have been an intense relationship between the two. Whitehead's Web site shows pictures of Doherty with his body encased in plaster, lying in a crucifixion pose. It is a familiar pose to fans of Doherty, who plays up the image of the tortured genius. Dabbling as an artist, he has produced garish canvases made with his own blood. He has also been filmed self-harming. As with Amy Winehouse, the car crash nature of his life makes him an object of fascination, and that helps shift records.

Sheila Blanco has her own theory as to why her son was drawn to Doherty's world. "He wanted to experience lots of things," she says. "Mark had a great thirst for knowledge and living. One of his great loves was Thomas de Quincey [the cult 19th-century author of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*] and several friends had said that perhaps he wanted to see what this life was like, and so he entered this underworld."

She paints a picture of a brilliant young man whose inquiring mind could be a hindrance. "Mark had always been a free spirit; he was a person who couldn't be told what to do. He was incredibly bright, but maybe not to his advantage; he could be quite boring to people his own age."

It was this thirst for new experiences that may explain why Mark, like Whitehead, sought to distance himself in a culture far removed from his upbringing. Sheila Blanco says: "He felt he had come from a privileged, elite background and wanted to experience all sorts of different people and cultures." But unfortunately, his desire to immerse himself in this counterculture may have blinded him to some of its dangers.

Little good, for example, comes to those who encounter Roundhill. Fiona Russell-Powell, a writer and former member of pop group ABC, once remarked: "He is only interested in drugs and will sell anyone down the river to fund his habit."

Certainly Roundhill's actions on the night of Blanco's death seem callous. He admitted at the inquest, which recorded an open verdict, to setting fire to Blanco's hat and to punching him three times in the face in the minutes before his death.

Roundhill, who rejects allegations that he is or has been a drug dealer, says he has nothing more to tell the police about what happened to Blanco. "It's a tragic mystery," was all he would say when contacted by this reporter.

"I was interviewed by Robin a year ago for her film," he said. "She was a lovely girl; I was very shocked to hear about it [her death]." When asked whether she used drugs, Roundhill said: "Absolutely not. I'm really surprised."

He also denies knowing anything about singer-songwriter Paul Cunniffe who, in 2001, fell to his death from outside Roundhill's former flat in Whitechapel, London, the same place where Mark died. "The police went round three or four times but nobody answered," said Johanna Hardy, Paul's girlfriend. "I asked them: Is that it? They said there was no case to pursue as far as they were concerned."

After Blanco's death, Roundhill was evicted and lived in a shelter. Today he cuts a frail figure, exhausted by drugs. He continues trying to make money by selling Doherty's blood paintings. But many people have it in for him, it seems: His flat was reportedly firebombed in 2008. Jeannevol, Doherty's minder, suffered a stroke in the months after Mark Blanco's death. He had confessed to pushing Blanco over the balcony, but later retracted the claim. In a statement given to the Blanco family's lawyers, a friend of Mark's claims Jeannevol told her: "I'm going to get done and they have reason to do this." Police sources claim none of what Jeannevol says can be taken seriously.

Doherty's former girlfriend, Russell Pavier, has gone to ground, while Wolfe has just left rehab and claims to be trying to stay clean. The only one of Doherty's circle doing well is the singer himself, whose regular appearances in court on drug offences simply add to his renown and promote his rock star image. Last week, the 30-year-old had his latest brush with the law when he was given a \$750 (US\$1,200) fine after admitting "stupidly" walking into a court with 13 wraps of heroin in his pocket.

His arrogance dismays Sheila Blanco who, angry at what she calls the police's "incompetent" investigation into her son's case, is pursuing her own inquiries at great personal cost.

Independent tests that she commissioned concluded that "given the nature of his [Mark's] injuries, the two most likely explanations were that he was backed into the railing and pushed over, or that he was not conscious, and was dropped over the railing."

Either way, the tests indicate his death was neither accident nor suicide, and stiffen his mother's desire for answers from Doherty. Now, after last week's tragedy, Whitehead's parents are likely to have their own questions for him.

The dangers of stumbling into Pete Doherty's world

BY JAMIE DOWARD
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

THE LIFE OF PETE

BORN: March 12, 1979

PARENTS: Mother Jacqueline is a nurse and father Peter is a retired army officer

EDUCATION: Nicholas Chamberlaine comprehensive school in Bedworth, Warwickshire, where he got four A-levels, two at grade A. Read English at Queen Mary, University of London, but dropped out after first year

MUSIC CAREER: Founding member of the Libertines, frontman for the Babyshambles, now appears as a solo artist calling himself "Peter Doherty"

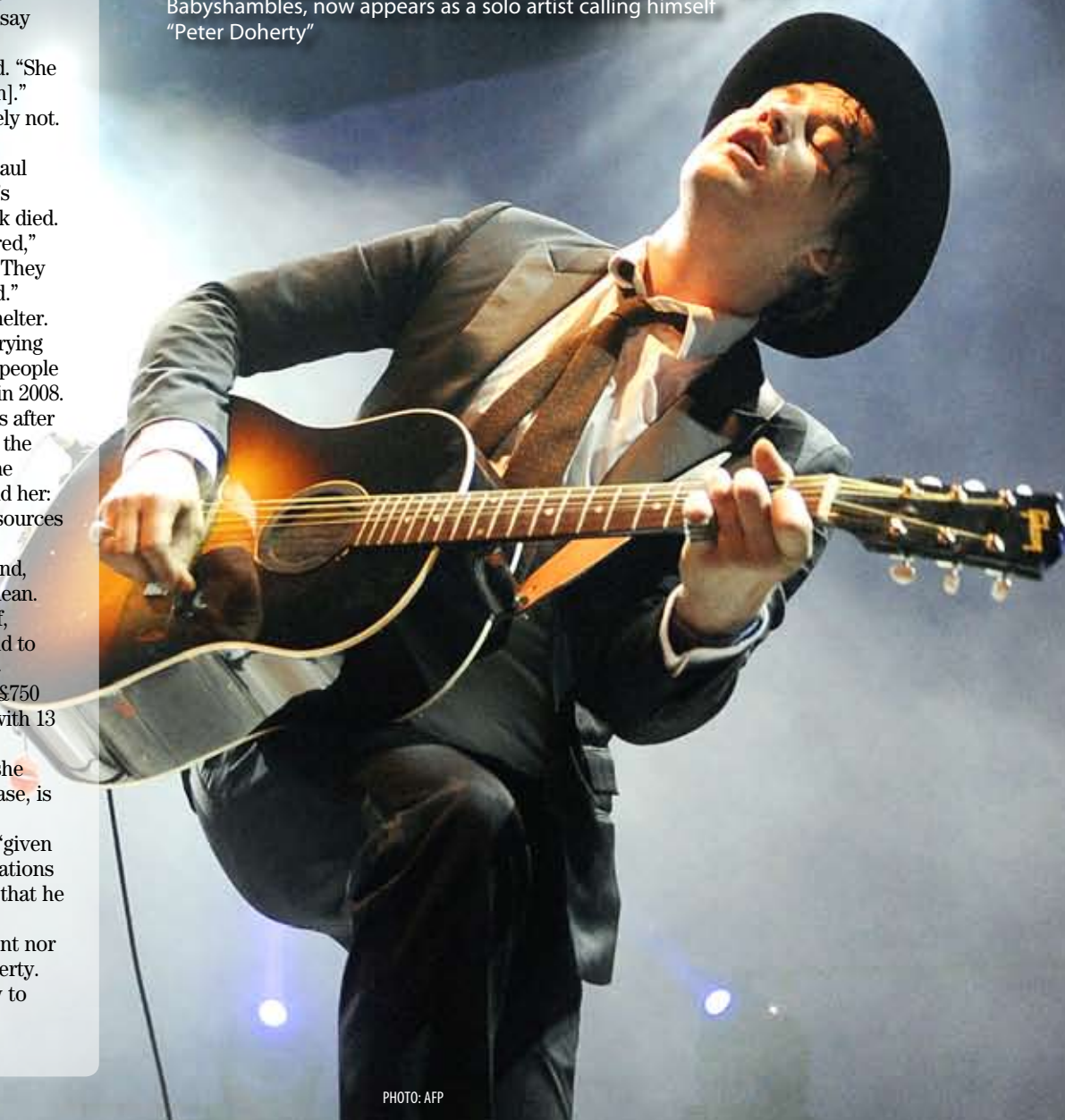


PHOTO: AFP

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JAN. 22 TO JAN. 28



1 Show Luo (羅志祥) and *Rashomon* (羅生門) with **14.81** percent of sales

2 Rainie Yang (楊丞琳) and *Rainie & Love ... ?* (雨愛) with **11.66%**

3 Jeremy Liu (劉子千) and *Mr Why* with **7.71%**

4 Jerry Yan (言承旭) and *My Secret Lover* (我的秘密情人) with **5.32%**

5 Kelvin Tan (陳偉聯) and *Moving Notes* (走唱) with **3.87%**

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP

Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win the best director award from the Directors Guild of America on Saturday with her Iraq war thriller *The Hurt Locker*, a film gathering awards momentum ahead of the Oscars.

The winner of the Guild's top award has gone on to take the best director Oscar all but six times in the last 61 years.

Oscar nominations will be announced tomorrow and modestly budgeted *The Hurt Locker* is expected to garner several nods, including best film and best director.

Bigelow beat out her former husband James Cameron, who had won the Golden Globe for best director this month for his mega-budget blockbuster *Avatar*.

The Hurt Locker tells the story of a US military bomb squad that defuses explosives amid the fighting and insurgents. Many critics consider the film to be the best portrayal of the Iraq war since it began in 2003.

Meanwhile, the music world was celebrating all over Los Angeles this weekend with tributes, rehearsals, parties and, of course, a gift suite or two in anticipation of the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards.

Elton John, Norah Jones, James Taylor, Dave Matthews and more than a dozen other artists honored **Neil Young** as the MusiCares Person of the Year at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

The singer-songwriter and more than 2,000 other guests were treated to new interpretations of 20 of his timeless songs, including *Harvest Moon* and *Cinnamon Girl*, during the nearly four-hour program.

Young was feted Friday night for his decades of philanthropic service, including work

Kathryn Bigelow beat out ex-husband James Cameron to win the best director award from the Directors Guild of America. PHOTO: REUTERS



with Farm Aid and the Bridge School Concerts, which raise money to provide services for kids with severe speech and physical impairments.

"I'd forgotten how many songs I'd written," the 64-year-old musician said. Elsewhere, **Taylor Swift** performed a rollicking version of her hit *You Belong With Me* as she rehearsed for her big Grammy moment, but she may have provided the most excitement when she came off the stage.

Swift was among a parade of A-list artists rehearsing at Staples Center on Friday, including **Dave Matthews, Maxwell, Green Day, Black Eyed Peas, Sheryl Crow, Steve Nicks, Mary J. Blige, Andrea Bocelli, Drake, Eminem** and **Lil Wayne**.

Several young fans were waiting anxiously as Swift gave a couple of quick television interviews. Afterward, she posed for pictures, and made one young man swoon when she shook his hand.

As of press time, **Michael Jackson** had won yet another posthumous honor,

joining six other musicians including **Leonard Cohen** and **Loretta Lynn** who received Grammy awards for lifetime achievement. The major awards were to be announced last night, Los Angeles time.

An unshaved Cohen, sporting a fedora and bolo tie, wryly noted that he never won a Grammy for any of his recordings.

"As we make our way towards the finish line that some of us have already crossed, I never thought I'd get a Grammy award. In fact, I was always touched by the modesty of their interest," he said to loud applause.

The 75-year-old Canadian poet and singer did receive a Grammy two years ago as one of the featured artists on **Herbie Hancock's** surprise album of the year winner.

In other Grammy news, gay rights groups angry about a Grammy nomination for jailed Jamaican reggae singer **Buju Banton** took out a full page advertisement on Friday, protesting the honoring of an artist they said had "promoted the murder of gay people throughout his career."

Banton, 36, was up for a best reggae album award for his *Rasta Got Soul* release at the Grammys last night. He is currently in jail in Florida



Neil Young was honored as the MusiCares Person of the Year. PHOTO: AFP

awaiting trial on a cocaine charge. In an advertisement in Hollywood showbusiness paper *Daily Variety*, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center urged Grammy organizers to use yesterday evening's televised ceremony to denounce music "that promotes or celebrates violence against any group of people."

The lyrics of Banton's most controversial song *Boom, Bye Bye* in 1988, promote the murder of gay men by shooting or burning.

Banton was quoted late last year as saying he saw "no end to the war" between himself and gay men. —AGENCIES