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FROM THE SUBLIME...

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... TO THE VERY LAST WORD

So that, my friends, was **FROM THE SUBLIME...** A doomed attempt to try and make a popular culture magazine with a broad brief, wide appeal, paid contributors and not be beholden to the PR guff you see in the few newsstand survivors of the same genre.

Four issues for a new magazine isn't bad - it's one more than a lot of failed titles get, and the feedback from readers was never less than enthusiastic. Which, if nothing else, makes the whole venture worthwhile.

When I wrote in the final printed edition that I wasn't sure what the future held, that was kind of a fib. I did, really. Or at least, I suspected that was it for the mag. Increasing print costs, postal costs going through the roof - not least because our utterly screwed mail service on this damp, miserable little island has been, like so many once great public services, utterly shagged into uselessness by privatisation and corporate stupidity - and, sadly, just not enough readers arriving quickly enough to sustain it.

The original fanzine version of **FTS** that inspired me all those years ago in Aberdeen, barely lasted the same number of issues - although they admittedly took much longer to come out so, in that, I can take some small solace.

The one regret, though, was a lack of online presence for the mag and its content. Somewhere that visitors could browse through the sheer volume of articles, and admire their breadth and depth. With the sales portal - and its few choice teasers - offline, the work of all those great writers was in danger of being lost to the ether.

And so, here we have the last hurrah. A final compilation of the best bits of all four issues, reformatted and tidied up to be an at least vaguely screen-readable edition.

Not everything has included. A couple of articles which have long since been outdated, superseded or just generally don't quite work have been cut - as have, thankfully, some of the more desperate page-filling jokes. But everything else is here, pretty much.

So, for those of you who encountered **FROM THE SUBLIME...** during its print days, a warm welcome back and thank you. And for those of you coming to it for the first time, here's what you could have won. May whoever follows in our footsteps have more success, but at the very least the same amount of love and support, that we enjoyed.

This magazine is free to read, as befits its status as a celebration rather than a commemoration. With that in mind, you may find it in your hearts to follow, praise and support the contributors who fill its pages. You can find their details in the back.

You might also, if you feel so minded, want to make a charitable donation since this isn't costing you anything. But there's no pressure to - times, especially around this end of the year, are tough for everyone (except US healthcare provider executives currently in their panic rooms) and we know how that feels.

Either way, with aye fond Glasgow kiss we'll sever, so please enjoy this best of the best of **FROM THE SUBLIME....** Hopefully there'll be something in its pages, to amuse, inform, entertain or at least distract you while on the cludgy regretting that extra helping of sprouts.

Oh, and if anyone wants a free **FTS** badge give me a shout. I've still got dozens of the fucking things left...

Red Dwarf 8 saw the biggest - and most controversial - reboot in the show's long and storied history. **ANDREW MOIR** braves the depths of the Tank to ask exactly what went wrong…

… TO PIECES OF EIGHT

Illustration: HappyToast for FTS

It's been a quarter of a century since Red Dwarf VIII first arrived on our screens.

As the final run on BBC 2, it was designed to wrap up all the loose threads and give them a proper send-off, with the crew finally winding up back on Earth in the final episode. On top of all that, these eight shows would take the episode count to 52, one for every week of the year, making it easier to sell into international syndication. After that, the franchise was supposed to continue with a movie which was set to film the following year.

None of it quite worked out that way. Instead, we ended up with stories stretched out to two and three-parters, some of the most questionable content the show's ever had, and characters pushed to the sidelines for much of the run. And you might have noticed, we never did get that movie either.

While heralded as a critical triumph at the time, it's a series that's always had a difficult reputation among the fans. And that unease has only grown over time. So after 25 years, now seems the perfect time to reflect and ask, was **Red Dwarf VIII** actually good? And if not, why not?

Red Dwarf has always existed in a slightly odd place in the critical sphere. It's a show that's hugely popular, it was often the top-rated show on BBC Two, but there's this idea that it's something only watched by teenage boys in black T-shirts lacking in social skills. And while that's definitely true (I was one of them), if you've ever attended a **Dimension Jump** convention, you'll see a diverse group of people, who just happen to like science fiction and comedy.

For **Red Dwarf VIII**, The *Daily Telegraph* highlighted this in its review saying:

"Red Dwarf is often praised as a cult series. It shouldn't be. It's a lot better than that."

That's pretty nice. The sci-fi press (remember them?) including *Dreamwatch* and *Starburst* had positive things to say but none more than the excellent Dave Golder in *SFX*:

"The new format was like the best of the glory days of the early years, and yet not a slavish reconstruction of them. British viewers as a whole should be proud of this show; truly imaginative, sharply written, and with gob-smacking production values."

It seemed that there was consensus. **Red Dwarf** was now a part of the establishment, beloved by the public, the press, as well as its fans.

For its first six years, **Red Dwarf** had been written by its creators, Rob Grant and Doug Naylor. They collaborated on 36 episodes, many of which featured science-fiction ideas that would rival anything in **The Twilight Zone** or **Star Trek: The Next Generation**. But Rob and Doug had a bit of a tiff following **Red Dwarf VI** and never worked together again.

With a contractual obligation to produce two more series, Naylor continued as writer on series VII, bringing in a number of collaborators to share the load.

Red Dwarf VII felt like a bit of a weird blip. It was filmed in the single-camera style as a trial run for the movie, so there was no audience giving a different rhythm to the performances. There were some major cast changes with the departure of Chris Barrie and the arrival of Chloë Annett as Kristine Kochanski, a parallel universe variant of Lister's ex-girlfriend and the last human in her own universe. After years of the same voice, there were new writers too.

Red Dwarf VIII was an antidote to that, a return to the sitcom roots. Doug was writing it solo, but retaining the input of script editor Paul Alexander. Norman Lovett was back as Holly, having left after two series over an argument about actually turning up to rehearsals. Chris Barrie was back as Rimmer, having enjoyed his abbreviated run on the audience-free series VII. And the show was set back on board the mothership, albeit now in CG form, and it was to be filmed before a live studio audience. The only creative element not in place was Rob Grant.

It should have been a great return to form. It should have been so much more. It's like they took their level playing field and decided to dig it up.

The situation of **Red Dwarf**'s comedy was people trapped together who didn't want to be there. To make it easier to digest for people who might not understand a man who was frozen in suspended animation for 3 million years and then forced to spend eternity with a computer simulation of his dead bunkmate, a life form that evolved from his cat, and a senile computer, people would say: "It's like **Porridge** but in space.", but with the eighth run of the show, they made that idea a lot more literal.

Red Dwarf's creatives have never been afraid to innovate its format, from the character-driven conversation-heavy episodes of the early days to a broader science-fiction palate, and then later adding ongoing narratives, changes of setting, and adding more action and drama. But the changes between series VII and VIII were deliberately bold.

Starbug exploded in the opening episode, quickly establishing **Red Dwarf** as the new setting. But more than that, it brought back the crew of Red Dwarf, the crew who were killed off midway through the show's opening episode. That's a pretty fundamental change to the whole show and a huge deal. **Red Dwarf** is supposed to be about the last human. Now there were hundreds of them.

Could you do the show set on a populated ship? Sure, why not. But then where do our heroes fit in? Can they still be the leads without free rein around the ship? Well, you put them on trial for stealing a Starbug, enlisting the newly revived Rimmer to assist, and then find them guilty of using confidential files and throw them in jail for two years.

There you have it, a brand new format - **Porridge** in space.

But that wasn't the new format. The team of Lister, Rimmer, Cat, Kryten, and Kochanski would join the Canaries, a suicide squad convict army who would be sent to investigate all the weird space things that would normally make up the plot of a normal episode of **Red Dwarf**. Does that all make sense? We finally reach that paradigm in episode 4, and that's the real nub of the problem.

Structure is important, wouldn't you say? Really, it's foundational. No, wait, that might be foundations. Anyway, **Red Dwarf VIII** lacks structure. Or it has structure, but it's the wrong one. Like an octopus with the skeleton of a dinosaur.

There was supposed to be a special called Back in the Red to open up the show and set up the new format. That might have been a Christmas special or maybe just a nice extended way to start the series. It would then have been followed by six more episodes, mostly standalone, ending on a two-parter that would eventually bring the crew back to Earth following a trip to a mirror universe.

For budget reasons, the season took on a very different structure as Doug Naylor explained in **Red Dwarf VIII: The Official Book**.

"The budget seems to have dogged us every step of the way. The one-hour special of Back in the Red had to be turned into three episodes because of money and scheduling. I'd now lost my final episode, and Pete had to become a two-parter instead of the intended single episode. Only Cassandra and 'Krytie TV' had come out as I had intended."

That was a problem. Naylor explains that **Red Dwarf**, which incidentally for this series had the same budget as Victoria Wood's **dinnerladies**, is always a step into the dark, and that it's never known what things will cost until they're shot. That is wholly understandable. But the most frustrating thing about series VIII is what might have been.

If it was supposed to be the end, it seems crafting an ending should have been the priority. It is clear to anyone watching that this is clearly **Red Dwarf** with its biggest ever budget. The costume budget alone must have been huge. There are hundreds of extras, more sets than ever before, a bigger regular cast than ever before, plenty of locations that add depth to the ship, and an extensive range of visual effects.

There's a CGI dinosaur and a dancing Blue Midget, a sequence that added nothing to the plot but plenty to the balance sheet. If money was being spent, then why couldn't it have been spent on the right stuff?

The content isn't great either. You can probably just about get away with stretching Back in the Red to 90 minutes, even if it basically becomes a sketch show at points. But Pete...

Of all the episodes of **Red Dwarf** that could have been extended, this wasn't it. If anything, it would be better if it was a bit shorter. At the time, Pete Part Two was generally considered to be the weakest instalment of **Red Dwarf** ever made. And that's a little sad.

Of the episodes that did turn out as intended, Cassandra is the closest to classic **Red Dwarf**. It features a guest appearance from Geraldine McEwan as a computer who can see the future, which plays with the idea of inescapable fate just like Future Echoes from the first series. In this episode, the inescapable fate is that Rimmer and Kochanski will have sex. Hmmm.

And that's not the only hmmm.

Questionable sexual politics abound in **Red Dwarf VIII**. A major plot strand in Back in the Red revolves around the sexual magnetism virus, which Rimmer uses to sleep with half the crew (although this all turns out to have been a virtual reality fantasy induced by psychotropic drugs), and Krytie TV features a reprogrammed Kryten filming women in the showers in order to broadcast to the men's wing. Ah, such japes.

For the first time, the show actually had women in the cast, but they weren't given a voice, point of view, or agency. Instead, they pretty much existed for the sexual gratification of the men.

Of all the series of **Red Dwarf**, this one has aged the worst, but none of this was great at the time either. It was the era of lad culture, and an accusation of laddishness has something that's often been aimed at **Red Dwarf**, but it wasn't really true until this point.

But beyond that, there's a bit of a lack of balance. Lister and Rimmer become such a double act and the spine of most of the stories that the other actors feel like they're only there because of contractual obligations.

Danny John-Jules always makes his moments count, even if they are incredibly rare, and Robert Llewellyn has just about enough, but Chloë Annett barely has any presence or real characterisation. Norman Lovett comes back as Holly but more or less disappears after the opening three episodes, showing up only to deliver a zinger, never to be seen again.

Even though **Red Dwarf** has had multiple series since, **Red Dwarf VIII** has never been resolved. It's an untold story, a cliffhanger without a solution. It was right to move on, but that doesn't make it any less annoying.

Even if the show never took our characters back to Earth, what about the revived crew? Why were they alive? What happened to them? It feels like that's the story they were telling, but somehow that just got forgotten.

And yet... despite all of that, there is plenty to love in **Red Dwarf VIII**. The ideas are there; resurrecting the crew is genuinely a fascinating thing to play with. Mac McDonald is brilliant as Captain Hollister. Chris Barrie is rejuvenated as this new version of Rimmer, and the chemistry between him and Craig Charles is the best it's ever been.

Some of the model and effects work done by Jim Francis and Bill Pearson is absolutely wonderful. The sets look lovely, blending the aesthetics of designers Mel Bibby and Paul Montague to create something more cohesive.

There are also plenty of strong guest performances - especially Jake Lloyd as the recurring Kill Crazy, who demonstrates outstanding comic timing, and Graham McTavish as terrifying but camp prison warden Ackermen.

The rate of jokes is also good and actually carries you even when the plots somewhat disintegrate.

The fact that **Red Dwarf** never had a proper ending, and never made it to the big screen, was a blessing in disguise.

It would return to TV a decade later on Dave with the special Back to Earth which aired over three nights. In 2012, there was another series, also beset by massive budget issues. But with **Red Dwarf XI** from 2016, it was the return to form that we'd all been waiting for. It didn't take long really.

Red Dwarf VIII may not have been the best, and fan polls in the years since suggest that it's the least loved run. But it is worth examining what went right, what went wrong, and how science-fiction sitcoms can get consumed by their own lore.

Someone should really make a podcast about it...

- ***The Garbage Podcast* episodes covering Red Dwarf VIII can be found now on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts.**

With Russell T Davies returning to helm Doctor Who through new global channels, **MATT GREER** cautions against fans thinking the grass is greener elsewhere…

… TO NOT KNOWING WHAT YOU'VE GOT (TIL IT'S GONE)

Illustration: Thomas Brown

Being executive producer and head writer of Doctor Who is perhaps the biggest off-screen role in British television.

Is it as important as the Director General of the BBC? Maybe. Were folk as universally outraged over Chris Chibnall's Timeless Child plot as they were over Tim Davie suspending Gary Lineker? Ok, if you're a **Doctor Who** fan, the Executive Producer and Head Writer job, known as the "showrunner," is the most important off-screen job in television.

So why does the incumbent always seem to be unpopular in some quarters of the fandom? Especially when the show, in the modern era, has been one of the most successful shows of this century.

I'm sure the instinctual yearn for change has been analysed on a much more grandiose scale by people much more clever than me, but here's my two cents on why fans can't help but have a go at who's in charge.

When Steven Moffat took the reins from Russell T. Davies, his appointment was widely approved by viewers. Off the back of writing Blink, amongst other hit episodes in seasons one to four, the Scot's popularity was at its highest. That popularity unquestionably waned throughout his seven-year tenure.

As a card-carrying Moffat stan in 2024, I can even admit to having mixed feelings about some of his era while watching live, specifically seasons six and seven. The main issue among fans seemed to be the complexity of the stories, arching across several seasons and years. On rewatch today, plotlines like the identity of River Song, the crack in Amy's wall, and The Silence feel a lot slicker than they did in the early 2010s. The splits in seasons six and seven left their plots and cliffhangers feeling incongruous at the time, and although were out of Moffat's hands, certainly didn't help him.

By the time Peter Capaldi rocked up in Moffat's fourth season in charge, the writer appeared to give up on telling stories that would last longer than a single season. The development of the Twelfth Doctor, and his relationships with Clara and Missy certainly developed brilliantly over multiple years, but story arcs were limited to one season.

Everything has a shelf life though, and when Moffat announced his departure, generally viewers seemed excited for the show to be taken in a fresh direction, despite season ten - Moffat's last - being arguably his strongest.

Viewers excited for the show to be taken in a fresh direction? Is that what you wanted? Well, that's what you got. Chris Chibnall came in and rocked the boat. First female Doctor, three new companions, new sets, new directors, and a whole new writing team. Barely a mention of anything that had come before in season eleven.

This felt like **Doctor Who** on the rebound from a long-term relationship, going for something as far away as the ex as possible.

Did it stop #(InsertShowrunnerNameHere)OUT trending online? Absolutely not.

You'll perhaps realise by the time you finish reading this that this piece of writing is as much me telling myself off as anything else. I can't deny, during Chibnall's run, I would find

myself counting down the episodes until his time was up. In a show as diverse in its stories as **Doctor Who**, not everything is for you, and it felt like not a lot in this era was for me.

The Timeless Child, unlike some of Moffat's work, has not yet aged kindly in my eyes. I could go on about season twelve's finale all day and the problems with it, but I'm not here for that. Not in this issue anyway. Again on rewatch though, I find myself warming to chunks of this era. It Takes You Away is a stone-cold classic, an episode I probably shrugged at once the credits rolled in 2018.

Chibnall's second season was a complete tonal shift from his first, appearing to take some criticism of his first on board. No returning monsters? Here's The Master, Cybermen, and a return to Gallifrey. Underwhelming finale? Here's the wildest conclusion to a season ever. Too many standalone stories? Here's a two-part opener and a set-up to the final plonked halfway through.

It still didn't win too many dissenting voices online over. Chibnall departed after a COVID-disrupted third season and some specials, and the cycle of fans salivating over more fresh direction began again.

That fresh direction came in the shape of Russell T. Davies, the modern era's reviver-in-chief. This is Davies' second crack at captaining the ship. I didn't touch on his first go-around earlier because social media was still in its infancy then, and to be fair, popularity never seemed to be an issue for him. His second stint is only four episodes old at the time of writing, but already there is an element of the same old patterns repeating themselves.

Though admittedly a controversial issue, The Giggle's "Bigeneration" has already caused the first big online stooshie of the Welshman's newly begun tenure. There was already a narrative that the sixtieth anniversary specials were victory laps for Davies, bringing back David Tennant and Catherine Tate, rather than celebrating the show itself.

In failing to kill off (as much as a time-travelling alien can be killed off) Tennant's fourteenth Doctor only added fuel to this fire. Fifteenth Doctor Ncuti Gatwa debuted next to Tennant, rather than after him. Again, those fans craving the new felt Gatwa was overshadowed, something I don't think could be argued if you watched the closing minutes of The Giggle.

It's a sign of the times, but the micro-nitpicking of the start of Russell T. Davies's era II (Electric Boogaloo), is synonymous with how his predecessors' eras were discussed in the world, sometimes cesspit, of social media. It doesn't matter what they do. They can try to cater to the demands of the viewer, or stick to their guns, there will always be a degree of opposition to their version of the show. I don't think I've cracked in this piece why we, the fans, are like this.

It sometimes feels like it's built into our DNA to assume that the grass is always greener. I feel it all the time, personally, professionally, and following Partick Thistle.

The Office's Andy Bernard rounded off the US run of the show with the quote "I wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've actually left them."

For **Doctor Who** fans, the good old days should be whenever the show is on. And it's on now.

I don't want to begin my appreciation for what's about to come several years down the road. I don't want to spend the next few years of the show waiting on what's to come after that. Sure, Russell T. Davies might do some unhinged stuff while he's in charge, and the BBC could always spoil his run with some unhelpful scheduling.

This has turned into a plea. A plea to myself, guilty in the past of being an over-analysing, critical dweeb. A plea to you if you are so inclined. Enjoy this run of **Doctor Who**. It won't be perfect, but it won't be on forever.

WARRIOR

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER!

SARAH MANVEL braves a visit from the Peking Blinders to wax lyrical about the best martial arts show you've (probably) never seen…

Warrior is, perhaps, the most kick-ass tv show ever made.

Built around a concept by the late Bruce Lee and executive produced by his daughter Shannon Lee and Justin Lin (best known for **The Fast and the Furious** franchise) under the auspices of showrunner Jonathan Tropper (né **Banshee**), it's set in San Francisco in the 1870s and is more or less about three different groups of people trying to survive:

- The Chinese people segregated into Chinatown and largely reliant on a network of gangs, or tongs, to provide work and protection,
- The viciously racist white political players who will happily use any violence to protect their own interests and prevent the Chinese from fair treatment,
- The entirely white police force attempting to keep the mayhem under control.

Every episode features at least two, usually more, physical fight sequences, almost always filmed without body doubles. It is, in my objective professional opinion, completely fucking awesome.

The show's first two seasons were made for Cinemax in 2019 and 2020, with a third season made for HBO Max in 2023 before being cancelled.

However, it has been available on Netflix since February this year, raising fresh hopes that there may yet be a fourth season.

So let's go through the cast to figure out who is the best fighter! If you've seen the show, it's up for debate, and if you haven't yet, this is what you're missing...

Penelope Blake (Joanna Vanderham)

JOB: Mayor's wife, factory owner
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Family money
STRENGTHS: Wealth, feminism, open-mindedness
WEAKNESSES: her sister, being a woman
Penelope is an anachronism, but positioning her as a factory owner and the mayor's wife enables some fierce criticism of how women were treated then, and enables her hot alliance with Ah Sahm. Of course, god forbid women succeed at anything. Penelope's exit from the show was under incredibly cruel circumstances, and its ramifications were under-explored.

Kong Pak (Mark Dacascos)

JOB: Tong leader, then tong member
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: his bare hands
STRENGTHS: being able to kill everybody with his bare hands.
WEAKNESSES: friendship, only being in the show for one season.
Kong Pak ranks so low because of his short amount of screen time, but Mark Dacascos' fighting skills and screen presence could not go unmarked.

Father Jun (Perry Yung)

JOB: Tong leader, then retired tong leader.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: a limitless supply of hatchetmen.
STRENGTHS: being able to literally brand his employees.
WEAKNESSES: old age.
His complex, not always pleasant relationship with Young Jun, and his surprising skills in "A Soft Heart Won't Do You No Favours" – he speaks German! He's good with a shotgun! – keep Young Jun and Ah Sahm alive another important day, but no one stays young forever.

Hong (Chen Tang)

JOB: Hatchetman, then Young Jun's third in command.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: bare hands, his necklace.
STRENGTHS: his good cheer and attention to detail.

WEAKNESSES: homosexuality, not having nearly a big enough part.
A friendly super-assassin, delighted to kill in service of the tong which accepts him exactly how he is, Hong is the most modern male character on the show.

Dylan Leary (Dean Jagger)

JOB: Bar owner, mouthpiece for the Irish workingmen, terrorist.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Massive racism, dynamite, his bare hands (you won't soon forget the scene where he shatters a man's skull with one punch).
STRENGTHS: built like a tank, friendly with Bill O'Hara.
WEAKNESSES: Massive racism, political ambitions.
Leary is a brute, treated with contempt by the city's wealthy white people and really nasty to everyone who isn't Irish. He personifies the smugly unbreakable racism of the time. He is also a bare-knuckle boxer capable of defeating two opponents at once, and handy enough with dynamite that he can easily blow up a bridge because the builders wouldn't give jobs to his friends.

Richard Lee (Tom Weston-Jones)

JOB: Policeman
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: His badge and his gun, later his awesome bartender girlfriend Abigail (Gaosi Raditholo)
STRENGTHS: forensic policework, general Dudley Do-Right attitude
WEAKNESSES: drug addiction, massively racist family members
At first, Richard was the modern stand-in until Zing cracked his skull in a street fight. Then he started smoking opium in Ah Toy's brothel, and suddenly became wholly part of the city. A backstory involving his family's murder of his black girlfriend, prompting him to go on the run, gave him depth, and his position as a policeman and outlaw both means he's an unpredictable wild card.

Zing (Dustin Nguyen)

JOB: Tong leader
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Terrifying facial tattoos, bare hands
STRENGTHS: a real appetite for murder, excellence at blackmail
WEAKNESSES: as he's Mongolian, the other Chinese characters treat him with contempt
Zing's tong runs gambling dens and is so successful at working them that Bill O'Hara is briefly one of their debt collectors. His capacity of rage and/or torture is even more scary because of the contempt with which the other Chinese characters hold him.

Young Jun (Jason Tobin)

JOB: Heir apparent, then tong leader
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: throwing knives, an enormous sexual appetite
STRENGTHS: he's a good friend and not too psychotic
WEAKNESSES: hair-trigger temper
Young Jun is probably the most fun part of the show. He has a weakness for prostitutes, is an excellent friend to Ah Sahm and Hong, tells Mai Ling to her face that he admires and respects her, and is – for the most part – a fair leader of the tong. But he's still a gangster, and a very good one: unpredictable when angry, happy to personally collect overdue protection money, and not always able to see the bigger picture the way Father Jun and Ah Sahm can.

Walter Franklin (Langley Kirkwood)

JOB: Deputy mayor, then mayor of San Francisco
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Political power, occasional blackmail
STRENGTHS: He is the city's political machine, secret alliance with Mai Ling
WEAKNESSES: Unpleasant personality, a massive racist, physically disabled (he walks with a cane), and his new girlfriend Catherine (Dominique Maher) is trouble.
Franklin is a difficult character – he's disliked by absolutely everybody but is the centre of the city's mainstream power structure, and is willing to get his hands dirty indeed (look at what he does to Penelope) in order to maintain his position. His alliance with Mai Ling gives him a tactical advantage, but he doesn't yet have the social capital to make the most of his significant political power.

Bill O'Hara (Kieran Bew)

JOB: Senior policeman on the Chinatown beat, tong debt collector
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: the best overall knowledge of San Francisco, shotgun, fists
STRENGTHS: Decency, friendliness, generally not exploiting his position.
WEAKNESSES: gambling, his wife Lucy (Emily Child), and circa six children.
Bill is the white character who knows Chinatown best and, while not exactly a friend to the Chinese, is not an enemy either, despite his friendship with Leary. He and Chao, who occasionally work together, have the broadest social networks on the show,

giving him the most to do. One time, he even breaks his boss's jaw in a brutal boxing match in a jail cell, but normally, he allows his position of authority to fight for him. But despite the gory brutality of his job, Bill's work ethic and love for his family make him one of the most likeable characters.

Li Yong (Joe Taslim)

JOB: Mai Ling's boyfriend, later husband, and main enforcer.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: being the most feared fighter in Chinatown.
STRENGTHS: his composure (when it cracks, you're dead).
WEAKNESSES: Mai Ling.
Here we have a man who strikes fear into the heart of everyone, but who is incredibly in love with his equally fearsome partner. His ride-or-die willingness to protect her is actually really sweet, and when that's at risk, it's so painful. Joe Taslim is also the best fighter in the cast, and just watching him scrap is a pleasure.

Wang Chao (Hoon Lee)

JOB: Smuggling and procurement, Chinatown tour guide, translator, informant.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: charm, good manners, knowing everything about everybody.
STRENGTHS: power broker.
WEAKNESSES: rarely fights, white women.
Chao is not in the tong network and therefore able to sell his guns and information to everybody, meaning he knows more about Chinatown than nearly everyone. His linguistic skills also mean he's in demand from the white characters as he's the only one they can talk to. But he has more than his share of secrets – a past as a slave in Cuba, a white daughter – and is very aware of the isolation and vulnerability of his position. Plus the final cliffhanger!

Mai Ling (Dianne Doan)

JOB: Tong leader.
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Li Yong, sexuality, cunning.
STRENGTHS: ability to make alliances with white people, feminism.
WEAKNESSES: impulsive, stubborn, short-sighted
*For all Mai Ling is a feared tong leader, that is due to Li Yong's reputation instead of her business acumen. That said, her ability to speak English enables her to work beyond Chinatown, selling information to Franklin and opening her home to white lady tourists in order to identify opportunities across the city. But she is absolutely ruthless – the **Godfather**-esque wedding night is the prime example – and her willingness to kill just about anybody means she cannot be underestimated.*

Ah Toy (Olivia Cheng)

JOB: Madam, businesswoman, occasional assassin
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Beautiful clothes, a dao, her employee Lai (Jenny Umbhau)
STRENGTHS: a fearsome fighter, wealthy and connected enough to hold real influence, friends with Ah Sahm
WEAKNESSES: being a lesbian, being a woman
*When her white business partner tries to double-cross her, she beheads the two assassins he sends to take her out, then brings the heads to his house and threatens to kill his children if he doesn't meet her terms. (He meets them.) Ah Toy was a real woman (though active 20 years before **Warrior**'s setting) and in Ms Cheng's depiction is utterly awesome. Her workers are well looked after, she often rescues sex workers from disgusting exploitation, and she's very happy to kill racists without a second thought. Also thanks to her job she knows quite a bit about everyone's predilections, and usually doesn't take too much advantage.*

Ah Sahm (Andrew Koji)

JOB: Tong member, brother, hero of Chinatown
WEAPONS OF CHOICE: bare hands, nunchucks, anything he can touch
STRENGTHS: he's the best fighter in the city, so good even Leary has to admit it
WEAKNESSES: the ladies
Ah Sahm is an incredible hero – he only came to America to search for his sister with a tragic past, joined the Hop Wei because he had no choice, and then immediately set out building as honest a life for himself as his

circumstances allow. He is such a good fighter that he has to join tournaments to keep in practice, and he is so handsome that practically every woman he meets flings herself at him. And he is a good guy – genuinely best friends with Young Jun, warm and caring with Ah Toy, and prepared to put himself in danger to help not only his girlfriends but also random strangers, especially if they are children or disabled older people.

Interestingly, Andrew Koji's [above] work on his show is astonishing. He has taken the Bruce Lee part and made it his own so much that the show works best when you aren't thinking about the Bruce Lee connection.

It's not just his fighting skills – he's capable of doing a midair somersault and landing with an outstretched leg on an opponent's neck – but also his acting ability, whether making doe eyes at the ladies, becoming very calm before a fight, or snarling with anger at one of the massive racists.

It's this incredible performance that makes **Warrior** unmissable.

Honestly, a show built around its fight sequences did not need to be a nuanced exploration of the brutality of racism and how the power structures of the past continue to impact the present. But this is a show that refuses easy answers, generally swerves cliché, and understands the nuances of multi-ethnic city life from top to bottom. Most importantly, all the actors are smoking hot.

Bring on season four!

Iain Hepburn finds Scotland's greatest TV export still belies its punchline status to be the hardest hitting cop on the box…

…TO REVISITING NO MEAN CITY

Sharp-eyed readers may have spotted a sly little dig in a previous FTS at the announcement of a new Rebus adaptation heading to Viaplay, the home of second-rate rugby, the Old Firm, and pretty much fuck all else.

I say dig - I actually quite like the ITV adaptations (which, depending on your point of view, are either one version or two), even if – as he himself admits – John Hannah was entirely wrong in the lead role.

But the new version, with Richard Rankin apparently even more miscast in the title role, is the third stab at making the Edinburgh detective series into a TV thing in this millennium – and it's not like there aren't other great Scottish detectives crying out for a shot at small-screen glory.

Stuart MacBride – ironically, a contributor to the original incarnation of **FROM THE SUBLIME...** in its 90s Aberdonian days – and his acclaimed Logan MacRae series would make for grimly excellent television. Or the books of Peter May, no stranger to STV himself.

Or **FTS** favourite Chris Brookmyre, whose Parlabane novels would not only make great TV – particularly the most recent post-Leveson trilogy – but would make up for the utterly dreadful James Nesbit adaptation of **Quite Ugly One Morning** 20 years ago.

Then there's **Laidlaw** – long trapped in development hell, the trilogy of Glasgow-based detective thrillers by William McIlvanney was the spearhead of the Tartan Noir movement.

So it's not like there's a shortage of excellent, new material to draw from.

And of course, there's **Taggart**.

You might not know it, given how surprisingly little coverage there was this year, but September marked the 40th anniversary of Mark McManus' gruff, no-nonsense polisman barging onto screens in the show's pilot story, Killer.

Britain generally, and Scotland specifically, has had a really weird relationship with **Taggart** over the years. Perceived as a gritty Glaswegian whodunnit in the 80s, then a slightly overlooked series mocked for retaining its name after McManus' untimely death in the 90s, before being shunted about the schedules in the 00s, and wrapping up amidst contractual disputes between STV and ITV at the end of its run in 2010.

These days, thankfully, it's had a more than deserved reappraisal where - like the Proclaimers – the inherent need for Scottish cringe has been shaken off and instead the clear talent and brilliance of the show is being celebrated.

There are so many highlights from **Taggart**'s near 30-year run to enjoy. The tightly-plotted, often viscerally nasty murders. The cameos and guest appearances from young Scottish actors making their telly debut - everyone from Bobby Carlisle to (hello to) Jason Isaacs, Alan Cumming to Anneika Rose (although famously not David Tennant, much to his chagrin) got their early TV chance on the mean streets of Maryhill.

The show itself also charted the evolution of Scotland's real first city, from the grimy no-mean-city days of the early 80s, through the reinvention via the Garden Festival (around which an entire story was set) and the City of Culture, and into the vibrant modern metropolis of the 21st century.

You can watch bus liveries, fashions, phones and even the skyline change between stories – an ongoing snapshot of Glasgow's growth captured like few other places.

But at its heart was the writing. Edinburgh public schoolboy Glenn Chandler managed to capture the gallusness of the city and its ain folk on screen in a way which felt authentic to natives without alienating audiences not just across the UK, but across the world.

The tone, of dark Glasgow humour and dogged grittiness survived through various production changes, cast member changes and audience shifts.

So with the anniversary looming, we've picked out three of the best stories to dig into.

Let's start close to the beginning, and **Taggart** really finding its feet, with the second season opener *Knife Edge*.

Famously grizzly, with future series lead Alex Norton as a butcher suspected of cutting up a murder victim and scattering their limbs across the city, it brings together Hells Angels, a dodgy hypnotist, offshore oil workers, and legendary Glasgow nightclub Panama Jax.

A ridiculously young Iain Glen and Siobhan Redmond pop up, as does perhaps the most famous pay-off line in the show's history.

Meanwhile, *Football Crazy*, from the year 2000, is a weird and enjoyable romp - not least for the shoehorning in of Partick Thistle to the story, albeit disguised as Strathclyde FC.

From that weird and wonderful middle era of the show, when nobody –especially STV – seemed quite sure what to do with it, it's a twisted tale of flashy footballers (no, really, at Firhill and everything) and petty jealousy, starting with the death of a referee and managing to combine Denzel from **Only Fools and Horses**, Scottish comedy legend Tony Roper, and most of the 2001 Jags squad.

Indeed, it's worth watching alone for the unplanned scene where Chic Charnley properly domes an actress walking behind him up a hill with a carefully placed free kick.

Finally, right at the other end of the show's run, the first episode of its final series from 2010 – *Bad Medicine* opens with a scene of torture so grizzly it remains baffling how it got by the ITV censors, but is all the better for it.

Effectively resetting the show - sadly, something that wouldn't be continued beyond the season - for the 2010s, it's a slick, slightly meta commentary on the show's own format while still retaining the tropes which kept **Taggart** going.

Reece Dinsdale and Steve John Shepherd, both big names in their own right, guesting as dubious Cockney cops outside their own beat, make for an excellent set of sparring partners for Jackie Reid and Robbie Ross, while **Spooks** director Bill Anderson brings a refreshed house style for the visuals.

Really, watching that final season feels like a what-if?

What if ITV and STV hadn't fallen out? What if Alibi had coughed up more for another season after this? The irony, of the show reestablishing itself as a must-watch just as the proverbial axe is falling, isn't lost.

It remains a weird anomaly that **Taggart** continues to be a ridiculously popular programme in the public consciousness, yet had virtually zero visibility during its anniversary year. Particularly given the wall-to-wall episodes of the likes of **Midsummer Murders** and **Minder** on rotation elsewhere on the ITV channels.

You'd think someone, somewhere, could have found a spare three hours to repeat *Killer*, or stick on an old classic episode.

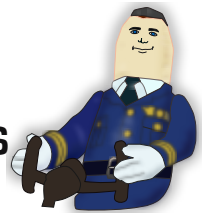
These ones would have been our picks - but undoubtedly you'll have your own. The reptilian nightmare fodder of *Nest of Vipers*. The creepy *Gingerbread*. The humorously bonkers *Fatal Inheritance*... It's a show which, if you're of a certain age, will have crept into your consciousness and embedded itself there.

And if you're not, now's the time to get stuck into it...

- **All episodes of Taggart are available to watch on the STV Player, and selected episodes can be found on other streaming platforms.**

OTTO'S PILOTS

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO THE TV SHOWS THAT FAILED TO LEAVE THE TAXIWAY...



NAME: 17th Precinct

FIVE WORD PITCH: Harry Potter: Law & Order

CREATED BY: Ronald D Moore

STARRING: Jamie Bamber, Tricia Helfer, Stockard Channing, James Callas, Matt Long, Esai Morales, Eamonn Walker

PREMISE: Detectives working an Earth run by magic, not science, investigate unusual murders with even more unusual methods.

PRODUCED: 2011

WAS IT ANY GOOD?: Surprisingly, yes.

Magic and policing was all the rage at the time. The Ryan Reynolds film **RIPD**, based on a 90s comic book, was in development, the first instalment of Ben Aaronovitch's **Rivers of London** series was topping the book charts.

Also treading a similar path to **17th Precinct** was low budget schlock **Paradox**, starring Kevin Sorbo (more on him later in the issue....)

Into that world comes Moore's take, which fuses procedural gruffness with enough genre-twisting weirdness to stand out.

The backstory for the idea of this universe – where magic took hold instead of technology, power plants are literally energy supplies generated from plantlife, and investigation of murder can include communing with the victim – is well sketched out without being a horrendous info dump.

The characters are easily relatable archetypes – the grizzled veteran and her rookie partner, the likeable double act – that would have fitted straight into the world of **L&O** with barely a swish of a magic wand.

Indeed, Jamie Bamber had just finished up doing the UK version of **Law and Order**, and basically plays the same character there – albeit with magical powers rather than the ability to put up with Bradley Walsh.

The twin investigations do a good job of setting up the lore, too. One sets up the obvious season arc if it had gone to a show – with the Stoics, a group of terrorists dedicated to destroying magic and introducing reason to the world, murdering someone using an unstoppable weapon alien to this world... a gun.

One of the central arguments of the Stoics is that justice in this world is entirely arbitrary, depending on the whim of a judge rather than statute, and that punishment is equally arbitrary.

That fits into the second case, where the brutal stabbing of the city's chief prophet is carried out by someone wrongly convicted of murder on his testimony more than a decade before.

The horrific nature of the accused's punishment – and the restitution made to them – doesn't half make the Stoic's point for them, something it's hinted that former Stoic hunter and DCI Wilder Banks might agree with.

SO WHAT HAPPENED? Despite critical acclaim when the pilot was leaked (something that happened a lot back in the early 2010s...), NBC decided they'd rather take a similarly magical procedural – the appropriately named **Grimm**. Moore went on the following year to start work on **Outlander** – thus keeping frustrated middle aged women and the Scottish newspaper industry suitably aroused for the next decade.

VERDICT: If nothing else, we sadly missed out on an obvious Detective Mutch crossover. Unlucky to miss the takeoff slot.

STEPHEN WOOD finds himself getting sucked into Albert Square like it was Doctor Who. Just don't mention THAT charity episode ...

... TO HAVING A SQUARE GO

After I cremated the roast potatoes and opened some presents, there was only one big highlight of Christmas Day to come: settling down in front of the TV for the latest, hotly anticipated instalment of the BBC's long-running flagship drama.

However, for once in my life I wasn't thinking of **Doctor Who**. Not that I wasn't thrilled to see Ncuti Gatwa in action, having been a fan since growing up on Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker video tapes in the 90s, but over the course of 2023 I'd become a fan of **EastEnders**.

Predictably, the soap opera got this sci-fi fan hooked with a timey-wimey twist — a flash forward, aired in February, that teased a dead body on Christmas Day. Of course, as with Steven Moffat's series six opener that saw the Doctor being gunned down by an "impossible astronaut", there was a bit more to it than first appeared. But it was wonderful to watch the story unfold, heading towards tragedy, for ten months.

And that, I realised, was the beauty of the soap opera as a format. I'd dismissed it all these years, but living with these characters in real time is a narrative experience like no other. Who fans know that Rory's dedication to Amy saw him guard the Pandorica for 2,000 years, and it's the length of time that's impressive. The Doctor can keep watch over something by popping in and out with time travel, but living in real time with something is the foundation for tragedy here. **EastEnders** proved it with the character of Lola, who by the time I joined the show was suffering from a brain tumour and facing a few months at best.

There's no skipping ahead to the tragic end for Lola or us, as viewers spent week after week living with the uncertainty of when she would succumb. That the festive flash-forward had featured a memorial to her on the bar of the Queen Vic only heightened things. In his invaluably revealing book **The Writer's Tale**, Russell T Davies is practically evangelical about this aspect of the soap opera as a format, referencing **Coronation Street**'s long-running character Ken Barlow: "No fictional character has ever existed in such everyday detail. Not ever. Brand new form of fiction!"

RTD cut his teeth on soap operas at ITV's Granada franchise, the birthplace of Corrie, so it's hardly surprising to find him enamoured with the concept. And it was hard to miss the soap tricks imported into his vision of **Who** in 2005, with the kitchen sink backdrop to Rose Tyler's life and her family turning into recurring characters.

Across RTD's first tenure as showrunner, the 'contemporary Earth' supporting cast and concepts — such as Torchwood, Sarah Jane Smith, and Harriet Jones — functioned like soap, with viewers checking in on them routinely.

But while Doctor Who may have taken a few leaves from the soap opera book, it's **EastEnders** that is left flying the flag for the way that the classic series was made. It can be a tough ask to watch some of the early 1960s adventures, even when they're more accessible than ever on iPlayer.

When BBC Four recently aired a colourised and rescored version of The Daleks, what couldn't be disguised was the basic facts of its production on a stretched budget, in a cramped studio, and with a multi-camera set-up. In other words, how EastEnders is made today.

While it was once commonplace for British television shows to be shot multi-camera (i.e. several cameras recording the same scene, cutting between their angles 'live', rather than filming each half of a conversation separately), it's really only soaps (and the occasional sitcom) that still stick with it. And so watching contemporary **EastEnders** really illuminates the challenge of the production in classic **Who**, and makes it easier to swallow any shortcomings.

When I forced my boyfriend to watch Peter Davison pointing at models of Concorde in Time-Flight, he struggled to understand how it could look cheaper than an Emma Peel outing of **The Avengers** when it theoretically had about twenty years' more sophistication to it. I told him to wonder why Enders doesn't

look as slick as, say, **Hijack** on Apple TV+. But it's enriching to see that, in Albert Square as in old Who, sometimes you just need a couple of cameras and a couple of actors to make gripping drama. It's much easier to understand early **Doctor Who** in the context of its soap-like production, not least how every episode used to end in a cliffhanger. If Who fans ever find themselves mourning that old staple, then **EastEnders**' conic drums herald a shock revelation four times a week.

Of course, it isn't just behind the camera that there's plenty of crossover in the productions. Long-running British shows are hard-pressed to avoid using the same cast members as each other. *The Time Warrior* may provide the first sighting of Sontarans, but you also don't need to be an Enders fan to recognise the raspily iconic June Brown even out of costume as Dot Cotton — the only soap opera character to ever do a 'single-hander' episode without any other actors. Imagine Heaven Sent, but with cigarettes instead of shepherd's boys.

Beyond simple curiosity, it's validation of the performer herself, seeing that she really did have range and was putting effort into the role of Dot day in and day out. More recently, Russell T Davies himself was gleeful in his video commentary for *The Church on Ruby Road* as he pointed out that he'd put Anita Dobson (and her fan-baiting destruction of the fourth wall) back on screen for the biggest thing on Christmas Day — referencing her part in the 1986 **EastEnders** cliffhanger that was watched by 30 million Brits.

I didn't watch **EastEnders** back then — it was difficult, not having been born — but digging into the show's rich history has been an enlivening part of my growing appreciation for the show. Some would be intimidated by all that baggage and the sheer impossibility of catching up on it all, but that's a piece of cake for **Who** fans.

We've got nearly 100 episodes that can never be watched, so jumping into a long-running show and assembling an impression of the past is practically a hobby. It hardly matters that I can't easily watch Ian Beale's debut, just as you can enjoy a Dalek story without ever having heard of Thals. Partly, because both are iconic enough to have seeped into Britain's cultural landscape by osmosis, but also because good writing for well-defined characters is engaging on its own terms.

That said, I did have to read up on who Cindy Beale was before she made her shocking return to Albert Square last summer (though

not Michelle Collins, as I recognised her from the David Tennant story *42*), but that's no different from firing up the TARDIS Wiki upon hearing that the Toymaker was due to make a return. And let's just pause to note the synchronicity of both Collins and Tennant being tempted back to shows where they had been thoroughly killed off, in two independent but spectacular bits of headline-chasing by showrunners looking to make their mark, and who invested the decision with really solid storytelling potential.

Yes, that's right — **EastEnders** fans can get just as rabid over different 'eras' of the show as **Doctor Who** fans, with the current executive producer, Chris Clenshaw, being hailed by some as a saviour after a rough patch steered through the even rougher demands of Covid by Jon Sen.

It's hard not to draw comparisons with the similar dynamic of the much-maligned Chris Chibnall stepping down after the Jodie Whittaker era, although the demands of soap opera meant that the show never missed a beat, continuing on its impressive schedule during the changeover rather than **Doctor Who**'s sizeable rest. (In fact, Clenshaw's first credited episode in the role featured royal cameos from Charles and Camilla, a sign of **EastEnders**' importance that makes a mockery of the Whoniverse's Elizabeth II lookalikes in *Silver Nemesis* and *Voyage of the Damned*.)

For all their long and shared histories, though, **Doctor Who** and **EastEnders** have rarely had a chance to literally crossover.

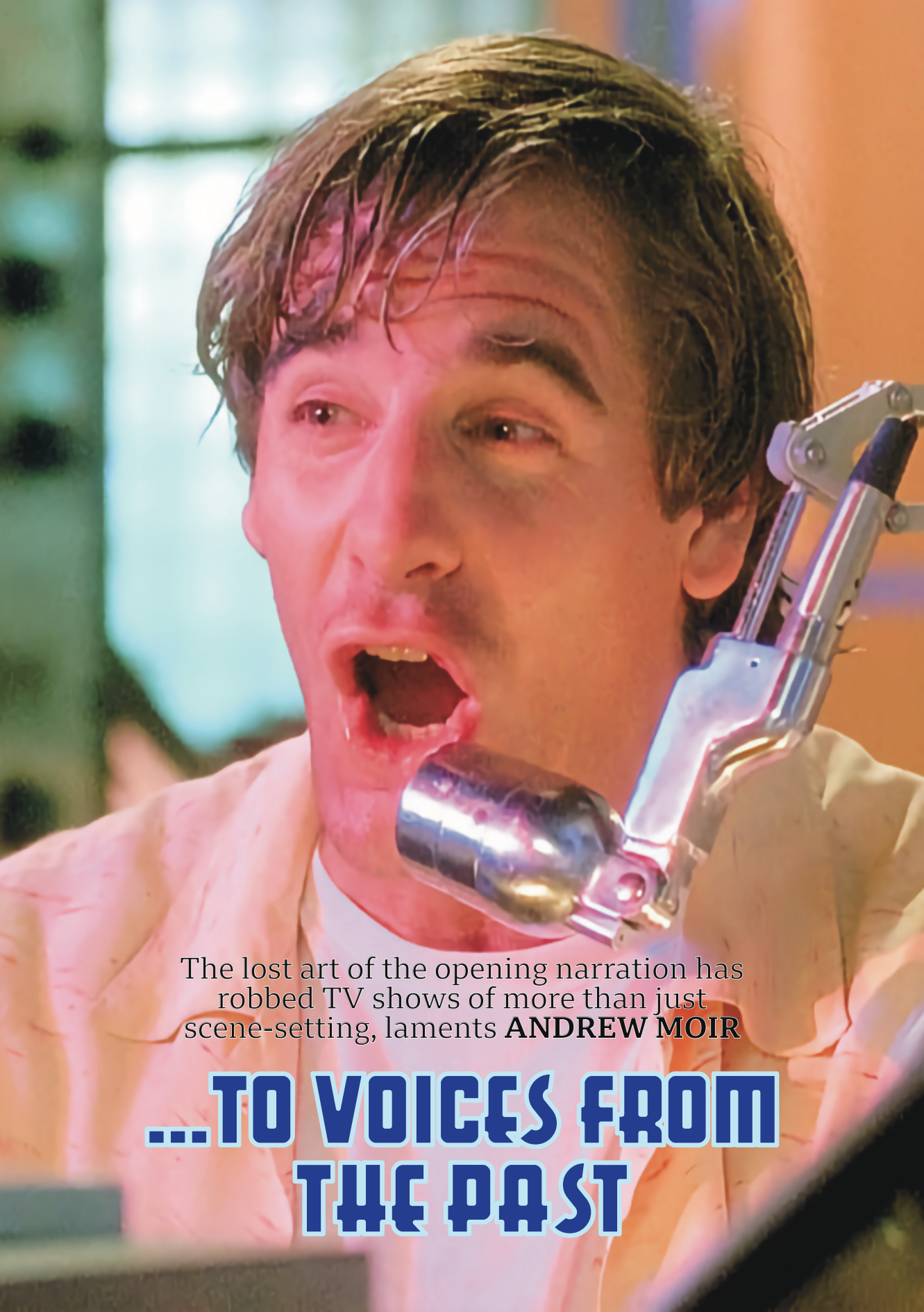
They are mutually fictional, a phrase which here means that they both watch each other as the lynchpin of the BBC One Christmas schedule. The Doctor quips that "This is going to be the best Christmas Walford has ever had" is one of the unluckiest phrases you can say in *The Impossible Planet* and only a few episodes later he's watching Peggy Mitchell encounter a ghostly Cyberman as evidence to neatly communicate to the viewer how common the occurrence has become.

Over in Albert Square, two characters once visited a Doctor Who exhibition, while an end-of-year pub quiz in December asked which anniversary **Doctor Who** had just celebrated. (Linda, a relapsed alcoholic traumatised by the Christmas Day murder, lost my sympathy by interjecting: "Who bloody cares?! Boring!")

Except that in 1993, the two shows did invade one another. Long regarded by Who fans and myself as something of a low point of the Wilderness Years, the 20-minute **Children In Need** sketch

Dimensions In Time seemed to simply put **Who** stars in Albert Square because then they didn't have to build any sets. The embarrassing spectacle sees a variety of Who stars bravely donning a straight face as they mingle with **EastEnders** regulars in varying time periods.

I recently rewatched it, this time as an **EastEnders** fan, and if there's anything that can unite both shows, it's gawping in equally baffled horror at Jon Pertwee and Bonnie Langford chatting to Wendy Richard and Gillian Taylforth...



The lost art of the opening narration has robbed TV shows of more than just scene-setting, laments **ANDREW MOIR**

...TO VOICES FROM THE PAST

I know these words off by heart and typed them from memory:

"Theorising that one could time travel within his own lifetime, Doctor Sam Beckett stepped into the quantum leap accelerator and vanished. He awoke to find himself trapped in the past, facing mirror images that were not his own and driven by an unknown force to change history for the better.

"His only guide on this journey is Al, an observer from his own time, who appears in the form of a hologram that only Sam can see and hear. And so Doctor Beckett goes leaping from life to life, striving to put right what once went wrong, and hoping each time the next leap will be the leap home."

They were etched onto my mind before I turned 10, and for anyone who doesn't know, they form the opening narration to the latter seasons of the brilliant US time-travel TV show **Quantum Leap**, and were delivered by Deborah Pratt as Ziggy, the show's supercomputer.

It is a great piece of writing; both poetic and full of exposition, and sums up not just what **Quantum Leap** was about in terms of content but also in tone. The beautiful score by Mike Post has a timeless, all-American feel, a sense of longing and nostalgia but also of hope. And Pratt's delivery is pure romance, a voice that you want to fall in love with tinged with sadness.

Those of the Netflix generation might ask what the point of this is, as they reach swiftly for the skip credits button. Obviously, it's a nice way to tell new viewers what the show is all about, setting up the format so you can decide if you want to watch. But it's also so much more than that.

The familiar sounds and visuals are a way to ease the viewer into the world of the show, shutting off reality and preparing you for what's to come. It's a visual and audio association that helps your mind leave the real world behind and fully become fully immersed in what's about to unfold.

A television show isn't just 45 minutes of time-killing; it's a whole universe, and a perfectly crafted opening is your portal into it.

Of course, **Quantum Leap** wasn't the first or only show to take this approach. The opening narration, or the 'saga sell' as it's called in the industry, dates right back to the earliest days of broadcast. With no pictures, these introductions were essential on radio, and television adaptations were more than happy to retain the format that worked so well.

Straight-laced police procedural **Dragnet** began life on the wireless in 1949 before making the leap to the (very) small screen in 1951. Each episode began as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen: the story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent."

It's straight to the point but isn't it intriguing? True stories, with victims who need protection, and as an audience, we're all in on it. On television, the "hear" was swapped with "see," and the rest is history. Even today, you can hear echoes of **Dragnet** in Dick Wolf's **Law & Order,** which begins:

"In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: The police, who investigate crime, and the district attorneys, who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories".

And just to show the lineage, that final line sounds a lot like the closing narration to **The Naked City** (1958– 63), which ended:

"There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them."

Beyond radio and beyond procedurals, there is the anthology. There is no better way to tie your unrelated group of stories than with a voice. Perhaps the best known of these is **The Twilight Zone** (1959–64).

Creator Rod Serling made his presence felt within the show, introducing the stories in person but also providing the opening monologue as you float through space towards another dimension as a scary door opens.

There were a number of versions used throughout the first three seasons, but the one used from season 4 onwards became the most iconic.

"You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension: a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into... the Twilight Zone."

Just like that, you're ready for a new story. From week to week, it may change in tone, substance in setting, but for the viewer, it is part of a piece, united by a storyteller and popular culture's most iconic combination of notes.

The Outer Limits (1963 - 65), another anthology show with a slightly harder science-fiction edge, took the opening narration to a meta level:

"There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling the transmission..."

Well, that's just chilling. These are carefully chosen words. There is a reason that they stick in the mind, and because they do, they have value. There's a reason that **The Twilight Zone** has been revived three times and even been a big-budget movie. The **Outer Limits**' 90s revival ran for years longer than the original. But why bother reviving them when you could just create your own anthology and call it **Unusual Spaces** or **Beyond the Edge**?

It's all because these older shows set a tone, became recognisable, and by reviving the shows, you are making the audience a promise about what it's going to be.

Some anthology shows are united by their central characters, but the setting changes week to week.

Often these featured a lonely man and followed his travels. **The Lone Ranger** (1949 - 57) (another radio adaptation) was described as *"the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early West"*.

The Fugitive (1963 - 67) set up its protagonist as: *"Dr. Richard Kimble, an innocent victim of blind justice, falsely convicted for the murder of his wife, reprieved by fate when a train wreck freed him en route to the death house."*

And taking the lonely man into genre territory was **The Incredible Hulk** (1978 - 82): *"And now when David Banner grows angry or outraged, a startling metamorphosis occurs."*

The best of all of these lonely men introductions is **Knight Rider** (1982 - 86). Yes, really. The show is described as *"a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist."* If you write that sentence, you can take the rest of the day off. In fact, take the whole week.

But perhaps the most famous anthology narration of all is from **Star Trek** (1966 - 69). These words are so good, they've been used on three different shows and many movies spanning from the 1960s to the 2020s. Not a word is wasted, from the first: *"Space, the final frontier..."* to the last *"to boldly go where no man has gone before."* It's so crucial to **Star Trek**'s identity that it's given names to films and television shows.

Interestingly, unlike most of the examples above which were third-person narrators, **Star Trek**'s was in character, with Kirk's voice easily read as part of a captain's log, which formed the in-universe narration of every episode. It is perhaps odd that none of the Enterprise-less spin-offs even attempted their own version of the saga sell, but perhaps even attempting it would result in diminishing returns.

And for some reason, even if it fell out of use across the more down-to-earth programmes, science fiction shows (perhaps because of their distance from our own world) retained this convention well into the 90s with shows like **Farscape**, **Andromeda,** and **Babylon 5** offering their own versions of explaining the mission, even if they never really nailed it with the same clarity of their 1960s counterpart.

It wasn't just a US phenomenon either, with

Gerry and Sylvia Anderson shows emulating the style from the States – **Captain Scarlet**'s "voice of the Mysterons" perhaps being the most memorable.

Early episodes of **Red Dwarf** featured a distress call from ship's computer Holly to establish the premise. More recently, **Life on Mars** and spin-off **Ashes to Ashes** featured the protagonist explaining why a modern police officer was living in a period setting.

It was all rather nuts and bolts until the first episode of series 3 when, breaking the form, Keeley Hawes' Alex Drake stated: "quite frankly, your guess is as good as mine."

Other than the legacies, it seems the time of the opening narration has passed. As runtimes have decreased, broadcast TV shows have mostly foregone credits to fit in another ad break.

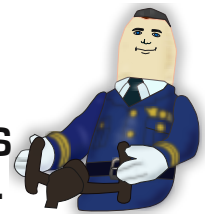
Meanwhile, prestige broadcasters have increasingly elaborate opening sequences listing all 37 executive producers but without anyone there to hold your hand. It's a bit of a shame really because there's something so nice about a familiar voice.

As soon as you hear it, you're ready, so you settle down with a drink and just listen to them because they have stories that you want to hear, a world you want to revisit with people you like to spend time with.

And there's nothing better than spending time with an old friend.

OTTO'S PILOTS

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO THE TV SHOWS THAT FAILED TO LEAVE THE TAXIWAY...



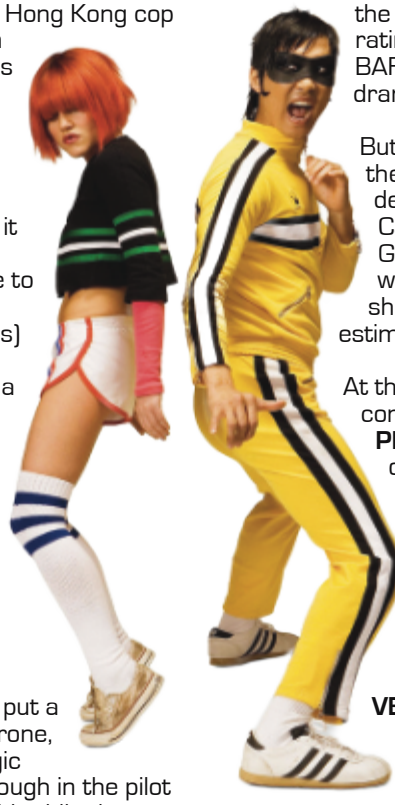
NAME: Phoo Action

FIVE WORD PITCH: Kill Bill meets The Bill

CREATED BY: Jamie Hewlett & Mat Wakeham

STARRING: Eddie Shin, Jaime Winstone, Carl Weathers.

PREMISE: Live action adaptation of The Face's **Meet the Feebles** comic strip, as Hong Kong cop Terry Phoo and police chief's teen daughter Whitey Action join forces to fight mutant gangs on the stylized streets of 2012 London.



PRODUCED: 2009

WAS IT ANY GOOD?: Um... Well, it wasn't bad, but the hyper-stylised direction (Euros Lyn paying tribute to Edgar Wright), quirky script (co-written by **Spaced**'s Jessica Hynes) and big performances haven't necessarily aged well. It feels like a weird attempt to cash in on the success of both **Kill Bill** and the Gorillaz, but both far too late to be relevant to audiences.

The low budget nature of the production - Glasgow unconvincingly standing in for 2012 London - probably doesn't help.

The plot, involving a conspiracy to put a mutated Prince William on the throne, works as a slice of comic book logic but doesn't quite knit together enough in the pilot to convince there's more to be told, while the more whacky aspects of the Whitey/Phoo partnership - I'm not eating those chocolates, thank you - are hard going.

That said, it looks like nothing else on TV at the time, and the cast are trying to give it something. Much like **Tank Girl** - another doomed adaptation of a Hewlett strip - the end result is less than the sum of its parts.

WHAT HAPPENED? Well, therein lies a story - and it's one which remains incomplete as the BBC continue to refuse, 15 years on, to answer questions about what happened, going so far as to block Freedom of Information requests about the show - including one from this magazine.

Phoo Action had already been commissioned to go to series before the pilot even aired, and over the summer pre-production work ramped up at BBC Scotland's studio complex in Dumbarton. Sets were built, costumes created, casting carried out and scripts written, with the aim of starting filming in November 2008. In the build-up, despite the lacklustre ratings of the pilot, it had even won a BAFTA Scotland award for best drama.

But, literally a couple of days before the cameras started rolling, the BBC decided to cancel the entire project. Cast and crew were assembled in Glasgow, ready to start production, when word came through that the show had been binned, at an estimated cost of half a million quid.

At the time the BBC said it was committed to finding a way of taking **Phoo Action** forward, but 15 years on...

Since then cast and crew have been notably reticent to talk about what happened - a book marking the cartoon's silver jubilee was due out this year, but also ended up shelved.

VERDICT: A series in the vein of the pilot would have been fascinating, but probably hard going for viewers to stick with - and if the rumours of unusable scripts for the first series are to be believed, it might have ended up a critical disaster. Perhaps no surprise the Beeb went all in on **Being Human** instead.

30 years on, **ANDREW MOIR** considers the legacy of Press Gang's devastating final episode

...TO BEING HAUNTED BY CROCODILES

What makes you who you are? What are those defining moments? How and when do obsessions begin? For a television fan, it can be hard to answer these questions.

Our memories become blurred because of our obsession. The first time gets forgotten after hundreds of viewings. Then there are the moments you remember so clearly that it could have been yesterday; those that are always with you.

The one that haunts me to this day is the series finale of **Press Gang**. How can 30 years have passed? I'm still there, on my own in the living room, devastated by the events unfolding in front of me.

Following the upbeat freeze-frame opening title sequence, Lynda Day, played by Julia Sawalha, emerges from the shadows, lit only by a fire close by, sitting in an armchair, apparently talking to a therapist, and she says the words that still echo in my mind.

'Okay, it's like this. There's a tribe living by a river, and in the river there are crocodiles. The tribe has one particular piece of wisdom passed down through the generations. It goes like this: if you happen to meet a crocodile, don't stick your head in its mouth. Every now and then - and who knows the reason - people ignore this advice. Which is sad. Because they die. But very stupid because they were warned. They had a choice. The moral of the story is this: you can't afford to be stupid. There are crocodiles.'

'There are Crocodiles' was directed by Bob Spiers and first aired on 31st May 1993 when I was 10 years old. **Press Gang** was always something a little different. Shot on 16mm film, every episode was written by a young man named Steven Moffat (whatever happened to him?), based upon an idea by his father, and featuring a cast who would go on to bigger, but not necessarily better, things.

If today's streaming dramas are premium TV, this was premium children's TV, and on CITV no less.

For anyone unfamiliar with the show, it's about a school (later commercial) newspaper called the Junior Gazette, funded by a maverick Fleet Street journalist for reasons that are never made clear. The editor of the paper is Lynda (Julia Sawalha), who exists somewhere on a spectrum between Sarah-Jane Smith and Maleficent. She's brilliant, driven, focussed, difficult, flawed, and performed with nuanced perfection by Sawalha.

The closing episode is one of the most final episodes of all time; a proper ending. The Junior Gazette comes under scrutiny after a staffer suffers an overdose in the toilets, which is somewhat inconvenient since a magazine is writing a feature on Lynda. And these events cause the team around her to unravel. She doesn't trust her deputy editor, Julie (Lucy Benjamin), with what's happened.

She questions whether chief reporter and on-off love interest Spike (Dexter Fletcher) leaked the story to the magazine. Meanwhile, the amoral finance manager, Colin (Paul Reynolds), defects to become part of the sales team after failing to keep the story out of print.

And just to keep things interesting, all of this is told in flashback – as Lynda is interviewed by the manifestation of her own guilt while dying in an electrical fire as the Junior Gazette burns to the ground.

Her inquisitor takes the form of David Jefford (Alex Crockett), a former member of the Junior Gazette team who died by suicide right after she stood up to him for blackmailing

her during the events of the first series.

The episode swings between farce, tragedy, and a psychological evaluation of whether Lynda is a monster or if she's feeling so guilty that she's not trying very hard to stay alive.

So please: Anyone who thinks serious serialisation began with the streaming era, watch some more television – because here we have a children's show from three decades ago with someone on the edge of death referencing events from four series before.

There was never a show like **Press Gang**, but there's not even an opportunity for a show like it anymore. I bet there are no 30–minute broadcast shows being made today that have the equivalent budget. I am now an old man shouting that things aren't what they used to be, but they're not and we're failing a whole generation.

As a culture, we have abandoned older children's needs on TV, or at least abandoned the idea that they required sophistication. The watershed moment was somewhere around 2003, when **Grange Hill** moved to Liverpool under the supervision of its creator, Phil Redmond, and was repurposed from a gritty but entertaining school drama to a kid-friendly show about the hijinks of a bunch of cheeky lads.

On its cancellation a few years later, CBBC controller Anne Gilchrist said: 'The lives of children have changed a great deal since **Grange Hill** began and we owe it to them to reflect this. We have to not confuse our own nostalgia for something that we loved for something that children will want nowadays.'

It's weird, because the show was doing exactly that before it had its teeth pulled out.

I think children should be challenged. It's okay to provide material that's suitable but difficult, that deals with issues but doesn't patronise. Or as Lynda put it with her anti-drugs message:

'Look, I'm sorry you're dead, okay? I do care. But to be perfectly honest with you, I don't care a lot. You had a choice, you took the drugs, you died. Are you seriously claiming no one warned you it was dangerous? ... I mean, have you had a look at the world lately? ... There's plenty of stuff going on that kills you and you don't get warned at all. So sticking your head in a crocodile you were told about is not calculated to get my sympathy.'

By aiming young, we're failing a generation. There's a space for drama that exists somewhere between **Malory Towers** and **Fleabag**. Children's TV shouldn't be for children; it should be for everyone.

The fracturing of the landscape has just made it harder for people to enjoy things together. There shouldn't be a **Star Trek** that has swearing and beheadings for the adults versus a cute cartoony one for kids.

Family entertainment shouldn't be a Dreamworks film with bright colours to entertain young people and subtle wanking jokes for bored parents.

We should be aiming higher.

'There are Crocodiles' ends beautifully ambiguously. Spike sees a vision of Lynda, despite being told she couldn't have survived the fire.

She tells him a wonderful fairy tale about how the insurance money from the fire will actually help the Gazette's finances, that the story of her miraculous escape will cover up the damning profile and how she even got Colin to come back by pretending to be a ghost. Spike will only know he's not dreaming if he kisses her. They lean in... and cut to titles.

Damn you Moffat, you brilliant bastard.

Press Gang exists in this perfect space; an entertaining, comedic, tragic drama that still feels vibrant and modern today. It was the high point of a genre. But we were warned. There are crocodiles, and they killed children's television.

IAIN HEPBURN presents the remarkable true story of how a US TV movie helped bring about the end of the Cold War…

…TO THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT AND I FEEL FINE

It is October 1983. The height of the Cold War.

Two weeks previously, the world came – accidentally – to the brink of nuclear armageddon, after Russian weapons detection systems erroneously mistook some clouds for US ICBM launches. A fortnight before that, a Korean 747 had been shot down by Russia after mistakenly straying into Soviet airspace. All 269 people on board died.

Meanwhile, America was preparing to deliver the first Pershing II nuclear missiles to West Germany. The planet's superpowers were, to put it mildly, on a hair trigger.

And on Columbus Day, President Ronald Reagan sat down to watch a video sent to him by ABC, a preview of something it was going to air the following month.

The contents of the tape were so shocking, it would leave him 'greatly depressed' and would – in part – shape the future of US–Soviet disarmament talks and the thawing of the Cold War.

But what was on that tape that so moved Reagan?

It wasn't a news report, or a powerful new documentary, or a heartfelt story from a guest on a talk show.

It was a TV movie. Starring Steve Guttenberg and John Lithgow, and directed by the man who'd just made **Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan**.

And that TV movie would, incredibly, change the balance of world peace.

ABC had been looking for the next big drama following after the acclaimed, controversial success of **Roots** in the late 1970s.

Following a screening of the Jane Fonda–starring nuclear drama **The China Syndrome**, the head of the network's movie division started kicking around the idea of making a film depicting what would actually happen in the event of a nuclear war.

Experienced TV and film writer Edward Hume – the co–creator of procedurals such as **The Streets of San Francisco** and **Cannon** – was commissioned in 1981 and began digging into the wealth of research material around the topic.

Originally, his focus was on Kansas City itself, and how it would have coped (or not) if the nearby Whiteman Air Force base was hit during a nuclear strike. But on a location visit in the area, they found the town of Lawrence – home to the University of Kansas – while researching places to stand in for a fictional small community in the story.

The town had both the needed locations and was, it was felt, about as close to the centre and the heart of America as you could get. As research and rewrites went on, it was decided to focus entirely on Lawrence and, rather than making it the location of a fictional stand-in, to set the story in the actual town itself.

Several directors turned the project down. Initially, Robert Butler, Hollywood's go-to guy for directing TV pilots – including the first **Star Trek** pilot and the 60s **Batman** series – was brought in to help the project, but after dropping out through contractual obligations as production continued, ABC turned to an acclaimed young director who'd just been responsible for the second **Star Trek** movie – Nicholas Meyer.

Meyer was sceptical the film would even go ahead, because of the subject matter, but eventually agreed to take charge, bringing his experience in special effects requirements from Khan.

His vision was to cast the film with largely unknown or lower-profile actors, figuring the more it looked like a Hollywood star vehicle, the less believable it would be for audiences – although ABC insisted on at least one 'name' to sell the film overseas.

Although many of the minor parts were cast locally, the key roles ended up going to actors who – if not big names – had credible bodies of stage and screen work behind them.

Jason Robards was cast as the nominal lead – Dr Russell Oakes – after a chance

encounter with Meyer on a flight, while John Lithgow had twice been nominated in the previous years for the best supporting actor Oscar.

Award-winning Broadway star John Cullum took the film's everyman role, as farming father Jim Dahlberg, while Bibi Besch – who had played Carol Marcus in Meyer's **Wrath of Khan** – played his wife. Steve Guttenberg had already starred in a US TV series based on **Billy Liar** and came to **The Day After** as student Steven Klein on the back of an acclaimed turn in Barry Levinson's debut movie **Diner.**

JoBeth Williams had already made **The Big Chill** and **Poltergeist** when she took the role of an ill-fated nurse, while the production would also provide early appearances for a bunch of faces who went on to bigger roles, including Stephen Furst, 80s scream queen Lori Lethin, and Amy Maddigan, who would win a Golden Globe award for rising star shortly after filming.

The network had originally envisaged The Day After as an event miniseries, with two two-hour episodes airing on consecutive nights.

Meyer, however, pushed back on this feeling, thinking the material would work better as a single movie-length story.

A fraught shoot, not helped by Meyer's strained relationship with ABC Films vice president Stu Samuels, added to a difficult atmosphere on set.

Producers showed **Hiroshima Mon Amore** to the crew to give them a sense of what they were making. Ellen Anthony, cast locally as the youngest Dahlberg daughter, admitted afterwards that the mood of the town had changed in seeing the horror the production depicted.

Months of rows over edits and changes demanded by Samuels, by censors, and even from the US Government – which said it would only cooperate with the film if it was made clear Russia fired first – dragged tensions out further.

Eventually, Meyer walked off the project entirely, with ABC bringing in different editors to try and cut the film together before conceding defeat and bringing the director back, with an agreement to cut the whole thing down to two hours.

The rows and special effects work required to depict the nuclear explosions – provided by **Star Wars**' Oscar-winning FX artist Robert Blalack and his Praxis visual effects company (a name which would crop up in a future Meyer SF project...) – meant the film missed the originally planned airdate of May

1983.

That delay would ultimately prove a blessing in disguise. It allowed the hype for the film to build for months. ABC sent out their own version of protect and survive pamphlets, designed to prepare audiences for some of the more gruesome scenes and put context to the dramatic trailers that aired ahead of transmission.

If you've never actually seen **The Day After** – not necessarily surprising, for reasons we'll go into in a bit – it tells the story of what happens to a small cluster of people living around the town of Lawrence, Kansas, before, during, and after an all-out nuclear war between America and Russia.

Ostensibly, it is focused on two locations – the University of Kansas' teaching hospital, where Dr. Russell Oakes and his colleagues work, and the Dahlberg dairy farm 40 miles away at Harrisonville, Missouri.

While the Oakes are getting ready to say goodbye to their daughter, who is moving on an art scholarship to Chicago, the Dahlbergs are preparing for the impending wedding of their oldest daughter, Denise, to Bruce, a student at the university.

We also follow the ancillary stories of Airman Billy McCoy, stationed at the nearby Whiteman Air Base, another smaller crop farm owned by the Hendrys next door to McCoy's post, and a group of science students led by Professor Huxley.

Against these domestic dramas, playing out in the background through news reports and barbershop conversations, tensions increase between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, culminating in a blockade and eventual invasion of Berlin by Russian forces.

As things escalate out of control, both sides launch their missiles, and World War 3 destroys their lives.

What follows is the story of attempted survival in the remains of the city as Dr Oakes and his hospital colleagues struggle to cope with the increasing number of casualties, while the Dahlbergs shelter in their basement along with Steven.

This being all-out post–apocalypse, it's safe to say, without fear of spoilers... it doesn't end well for anyone.

Watching **The Day After** now, it's easy and glib to describe it as a Hollywood version of **Threads**, the BBC's own horrific nuclear war drama which would scar a generation of British audiences the following September.

There are undeniable, coincidental similarities – the stories both follow the lives of families in provincial cities, and the war is largely a background event compared to the horrific aftermath it produces.

But where **The Day After** is much more American is not just in the different scope or the more expensive visuals, but in the focus on how communities react in the build-up to, and aftermath of, nuclear armageddon.

Some of that is the highlighting of the military aspects of the war. Meyer made use of footage from a US propaganda film called **First Strike**, which had been made to question American military readiness in the Cold War. This gave Meyer the opportunity to show B52 crews getting their launch orders, and missile silo teams launching their weapons.

The inclusion of William Allen Young's character, Billy McCoy, helps contextualise that further. As he says to his colleagues after the first missile launches: 'The war is over. It's over. We've done our job. So what are you still guarding? Guarding some cotton-pickin' hole in the ground, all dressed up and nowhere to go?'

The other notable difference is in the impact on society itself. **Threads** shows us how authority – in the form of local government – would function around a nuclear strike. Or not, as the case turns out. In **The Day After**, the government, barring one brief delivery of food parcels and a Presidential address on the radio, is completely absent.

The communities are left to sort things themselves, either through choice – as Jim Dahlberg asserts he won't hand over any of his crops or livestock to the authorities in the workprint edit – or because the Republican

vision of America leaves everyone to just get on with it.

The extended cut, originally released in Europe and outside the USA in cinemas, restored a few minutes of material removed from the ABC version – including, much to the horror of network TV censors, a scene where Denise retrieves her diaphragm before heading off with Bruce for the night.

But Meyer wanted to go much further with the film, as a three-hour workprint cut exposed when it surfaced a couple of years ago.

Much of the cut material expanded on the characters in the build-up to the attack, showing more of Bruce's reckless nature, as he cuts up a truck with Denise on the back of his bike while driving to the church.

Kyle Aletter lost most of her scenes as Marilyn Oakes, including a lengthy dinner with her mother who is clearly struggling with the increasing discourse around the potential conflict, and an extended scene with Russ where she explains why she's moving to Chicago.

We see much more of her sheltering with the little girl and her grandfather during the attack build-up too. In the main edit, they go underground, the bomb happens, some pipes explode, and she goes up onto the street where she dies as one of the x-ray figures montage.

In the end, her demise is much more grizzly – having used her art skills to try and calm the girl down by drawing her, the shockwave blows the pressure mains. In the ensuing stampede to escape the boiling steam, the little girl is trampled to death, and as Marilyn reaches the surface, her jumpsuit bursts into flames, leaving her running down the street ablaze before being consumed by the nuclear firestorm.

The fate of the Hendrys was even worse. Although the film briefly shows them being consumed in the fireball, the original edit saw the skin on randy farmer Dennis' arm visibly carbonise and smoulder. Scenes shot, but not included even in the rough cut, showed the doomed family – or convincing dummies standing in for them, at least – combusting and burning in the nuclear fire, a sequence too far even for the filmmakers.

JoBeth Williams' character, Nurse Nancy Bauer, and Calvin Jung's Dr. Sam Hachiya, lost significant character moments that gave their stories more depth. Sam, we learned, had twin daughters about to start school – and his wife was taking them out clothes shopping when the attack happened.

Nurse Bauer had a long sequence cut where she talks to Russ – where it turns out she had only just started at the hospital, and he didn't even know her name, and which makes more sense of her 'I don't have children' remark to an expectant mother before the attack.

Also lost – and indeed not filmed, although storyboarded as an elaborate FX sequence – was a planned birds-eye view of the strike on Kansas itself, seen from the passengers of a plane flying overhead.

Sadly, cut for timing was a brief moment as Oaks recovers in the university 'hospice' after his collapse - where John Lithgow's character meets him in person (see below), the film's ostensibly biggest name stars incredibly never meeting on screen in the finished edit.

there.

It undoubtedly had a significant effect on Reagan, who had been a strong proponent of the nuclear arms race and deterrence since entering office. Almost exactly two years later, he and new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev held their first summit in Lake Geneva, and by 1987, Russia and America had signed a treaty to begin reducing their nuclear arms race.

Reagan, in his 1990 memoir **An American Life**, made a direct link between that first screening of **The Day After** and the beginning of the disarmament programme, admitting a briefing days later from Pentagon officials on what nuclear war would be like 'in several ways... paralleled those in the ABC movie", while his biographer Edmund Morris claims the film left the President brooding and upset for days afterwards.

Perhaps the biggest loss, though, is the original ending. While the rough cut finished per the finished movie, with an ailing Oakes returning to the remains of his home in Kansas City, lost was an entire extra sequence where Steven takes the Dahlberg children back from the hospital to the farm – and as he arrives, realises something terrible (and only briefly alluded to in the finished version) has happened to the other members of the family.

Presumably, having Steven and Denise dying of radiation sickness and Danny permanently blinded was already seen as enough of a downer...

That Columbus Day morning, Ronald Reagan sat down at Camp David with his tape, forwarded on by ABC in advance of the film airing on TV.

He wrote in his diaries for the day: "It is powerfully done —all $7 mil. worth. It's very effective & left me greatly depressed. So far, they haven't sold any of the 25 spot ads scheduled, & I can see why. Whether it will be of help to the "anti-nukes" or not, I can't say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war."

The Day After was also screened for the Joint Chiefs, who were left 'turned to stone' by the experience, according to one official

Kevin Hopkins, director of the White House Office of Policy Information at the time, was sufficiently impacted by the film that he wanted Reagan to make a presidential address before **The Day After** aired, to talk about the White House's deterrence policy.

"This would permit him to reach nearly all persons who are about to watch the movie, yet it would not unduly expand the movie's audience, as a speech earlier in the week theoretically might," he wrote in a warning memo to Ed Messe, Reagan's presidential counsellor – who had led the talks on the 'Star Wars' anti–nuclear defence programme.

To preempt the film, the Administration embarked on a pro-nuclear publicity round - and sent notes to ABC on what they wanted cut from the film.

"The sales department didn't want it to go on the air, the legal department didn't want it to go on the air, the programme department... Management wouldn't talk to me... and Friday night before we aired on Sunday, the White

House issued instructions to ABC - 'we want the following edits'," ABC Films president Brandon Stoddard revealed in an 2007 interview.

"And I said tell them to fuck off."

The Day After remains one of the most watched non–sports programmes in US TV history, and the joint–highest rated drama – tied with that landmark 1977 adaptation of **Roots**.

100 million people tuned in on November 20, 1983 – almost 65% of the US viewing audience, all watching in stunned silence at the same time.

The build-up to the airing had been controversial, to say the least. Although press coverage was huge – with it having the rare distinction of covers on **Newsweek** and **Time** among other publications – it was also poison for advertisers wary of having their products associated with the end of the world or Steve Guttenberg's face peeling off.

"Everyone believed that no sponsors would come near it, and they were right; it was largely done commercial-free." Meyer admitted in an interview last year.
Indeed, the initial airing was largely ad-break-free, particularly after the attack sequence when the horror starts to mount. The few adverts that did air, mainly for a low-rent popcorn company, had been sold cut-price in an attempt to recoup anything from the movie's $7 million budget.

In the end, Reagan did not make a presidential address before the film. Instead, star John Cullum appeared in a piece to camera, where he warned parents that the subject matter would be disturbing for children – something reiterated with text captions during the ad breaks.

ABC would follow the show with a live debate, hosted by the distinguished journalist Ted Koppel and featuring the likes of Carl Sagan, Henry Kissinger, and Bob McNamara to discuss what they'd just witnessed – in front of a traumatised-looking studio audience – and the merits of nuclear deterrence policies.

However, Reagan was still sufficiently perturbed by the film that he sent his Secretary of State, George Shultz, to appear on the programme and argue the case for the administration's nuclear policy.

Koppel introduced the debate: "There is, and you probably need it just now, some good news. If you can, take a quick look out the window.

"It's all still there. Your neighbourhood is still there... Lawrence is still there."

Reaction to the film was mixed, with right-wing critics accusing Meyer of doing Russia's work for it and spreading anti-American propaganda, despite the film taking care to not definitively say who fired first and to show, ultimately, nobody would win a nuclear exchange.

But in the aftermath, it was clear it had had an impact - not just on policy, but on audiences. Discussion groups spread across the country, and anti-nuclear campaigns across the US saw a huge spike in sign-ups. Reagan himself would note in his subsequent State of the Union Address about the need to avoid nuclear conflict. Within two years, he was in talks with Gorbachev about reducing their respective nuclear arsenals - including those Pershing II missiles which the film narrowly predated.

The Day After would be shown around the world after its successful US transmission - either as a TV special or, in some countries, a big cinema release – such as Japan, where it was shown in Hiroshima, a screening attended by survivors of the 1945 nuclear bombing of the city.

It would prove no less politically charged in the UK, where it aired shortly before Christmas 1983. Michael Heseltine, then defence secretary, demanded – and was granted, via an interview on the debate show that aired immediately afterwards – a right to reply to the film, which drew 15 million viewers on primetime Saturday night.

Meanwhile, in a sign of the nature of the debate here, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament had been banned by the IBA from running any adverts during the film's

commercial breaks.

Viewers in London were treated to an added bonus - as late-night topical revue show **After Midnight** opened with John Sessions doing an impression of Heseltine's response to the drama.

"The film you've just seen is no better than propaganda... well, it's better than our propaganda, which is why I'm worried about it..."

The film was nominated for 12 Emmy awards at the 1984 ceremony – including best single drama, best director for Meyer, best supporting actor for Lithgow, and best screenplay. In the end, though, it only won two – both technical awards, for special effects and sound editing – though Hume's script would later win the Writer's Guild of America award for drama.

40 years on, **The Day After** remains a notably difficult film to get hold of, let alone watch.

Despite its importance and legacy, the show remains distinctly absent from Hulu in the USA or Disney+ globally, even though an episode of the 2010s spy drama **The Americans**, which is centred around – and features clips from – the drama and the characters watching it, is freely available on those platforms.

Much like **Threads** taking an age to arrive on Britbox after its original announcement, the controversy around **The Day After** – and the timing of the Russia–Ukraine War – appears to have made potential homes for the movie twitchy about uploading it.

Even the 2018 Blu-ray is difficult to track down these days. It occasionally pops up on the obscure end of the Sky EPG if you look hard enough.

Curiously, on this side of the pond, and despite the controversy on its initial airing, **The Day After** has not had the same impact as elsewhere. Indeed, in the last couple of decades, it has been increasingly overshadowed by the large mushroom cloud–shaped discussion and occasional memes generated by the reevaluation of **Threads**.

But as we pass the 40th anniversary of **The Day After**, that impact is worth re-evaluating, especially given the current, troubled world condition.

The legacy of **The Day After** cannot be underestimated. There are not many television dramas that can claim to have a whole file around their contents stored within a presidential library, let alone be cited as a cause for changing an entire defence policy.

While **The Day After** may be hard to find these days, it remains even harder to watch — an unflinching vision of an apocalypse that thankfully never came. As a result, it has entered US television folklore in the way few other TV movies managed.

Indeed, an entire generation can, arguably, point to its transmission as a factor in them avoiding their own particular nuclear armageddon.

... TO BEING BURIED IN THE BOX

We all love great TV, and it would be simple logic to assume that TV executives love it too, but that would be a mistake, *writes Stephen Lepitak*.

TV executives love viewing figures, which tends to mean quality moves to the back of the queue in the requirements for ongoing programming (you just know I'm thinking about **Mrs. Brown's Boys**, don't you?).

If no one is watching, then what's the point of making it? A fair question to ask, but that doesn't mean some short-lived series don't deserve to be celebrated despite their lives being cruelly curtailed before the world really got to even learn of their existence.

There are so many to pick from: **Police Squad, A League of Their Own**, **My So-Called Life**, **Freaks and Geeks,** and **Firefly**...

So let's take a look at a few shows that are worth revisiting even if they don't have a lot to revisit, having not made it beyond season 1. In fact, they didn't even make it out of production before being canned. And then let's remember one that just wouldn't go away despite itself...

Eerie Indiana

The best kids' shows don't know they are made for kids. And America's answer to **Round the Twist**, **Eerie Indiana,** was a terrific example of a series that would be watchable across generations.

With a different sinister tale to tell each week, it focused on the weird things happening in the town of Eerie and to its newest inhabitant, Marshall Teller, and his best friend, Simon Holmes. Every episode would tackle a horror trope such as werewolves, mummies, cults, and organ transplants gone wrong but with a lot of humour thrown in alongside the chills. It was

a hoot - and you would expect just that considering Joe Dante served as a creative consultant.

There were just 19 episodes produced, although it took years for them all to air, with the first episode going out in September 1991 and the finale on December 1993 (a year and a half after the previous episode)

Star Cops

Who doesn't want to watch a police procedural featuring astronauts? The BBC was mad to think they could produce a credible drama set in space that would be taken seriously on the usual budget it afforded science fiction in the 80s. That this even got commissioned in an era when no one wanted to watch sci-fi is pretty mind-boggling, and yet **Star Cops** is (mostly) fantastic.

Broadcast on BBC 2 in 1987, the cast was led by the always very serious but brilliant actor David Calder (who even staged his own slow-motion movements to appear as though he was moving in zero gravity). He placed Chief Superintendent Nathan Spring, who reluctantly (after the murder of his wife) agrees to lead the Star Cops orbiting above the Earth.

Created by former **Blake's 7** script editor Chris Boucher, the scripts are largely much better than anyone has a right to expect from the late multi-camera era. It's highly reminiscent of the Sean Connery in space film **Outland** as it takes itself very seriously in the main. Directing duties split between Graeme Harper and Christopher Baker, who both have differing visions, leaving the overall tone quite schizophrenic across the eight episodes (it was sent to be 10, but two were dropped during the final block of filming due to industrial action).

The mysteries are mainly intriguing if you ignore one pretty poor episode involving a Japanese conspiracy, which is "of its time," shall we say.

And while the main theme song (yes, it has a theme song) from Justin Hayward was universally panned at the time, it's actually a heck of an earworm today.

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip

This is the series that proves that the late Matthew Perry could have had an amazing post-Friends career. And had people actually watched this thing, he might just have gone onto better things.

It's actually incredible this show failed.

Created in 2006 and lasting just 22 episodes, **Studio 60** was actually cancelled before the end of the first season had finished filming. And yet it is filled with quality from its creator Aaron Sorkin and Co-star Bradley Whitford, fresh off of **The West Wing**, featuring alongside Perry and a cast filled with talent. Sarah Paulson is a surprise addition and shows she can be funny - even if her character admits she cannot tell a joke to save her life, not a helpful trait for a comedy actress.

It tells the ongoing shenanigans of what happens behind the scenes of a weekly topical sketch story that is Saturday Night Live in all but name.

Perry and Whitford are the lead producers and have terrific chemistry together, while the dialogue is delivered at machine gun speed. The energy from each episode is infectious.

Far more entertaining and less smug than Sorkin's next series, **The Newsroom**.

Murder One

For fun, here's a show everyone agrees should never have gone beyond its first season (I say "season" because it's from the U.S., and they're insistent on that sort of thing over there.

In the 90s, it was mind-blowing to everyone that one story could run over 23 episodes of television. Binge-watching was impossible back then because DVDs hadn't been invented yet, and you couldn't get more than three episodes on a video tape. Aaah, physical media.

And despite being told he was crazy, **Hill Street Blues** creator Steven Bochco put together a murder mystery that ran through the first half of 1996 and captured audience attention across the U.S., led by the oddly but effectively cast Daniel Benzali as defence attorney Ted Hoffman.

The first season sees Hoffman take on the defence of Neil Avedon, who is charged with killing his 15-year-old lover (!!!) during a hedonistic evening. Clearly written in the wake of OJ Simpson's acquittal, it still holds up as a gripping murder mystery.

And because it was hit, it came back for more, only without its lead actor, who apparently proved difficult to work with (but

claimed to have moved onto better things).

Season 2 was a disappointment. It failed to stick to the same format, choosing to use shorter story arcs instead, probably because no one had time to figure out a gripping idea that could repeat the trick, coming just over a year later. Even the cast has admitted it was a mistake since.

So with all that in mind, how about one show that should never have been allowed to go beyond the initial pitch...?

First of the Summer Wine

We all remember **Last of the Summer Wine** and wondering just who watched it every Sunday evening to make it popular enough that it would be renewed year after year after year. It ran from 1973 to 2010 with 295 episodes across 31 episodes. And I challenge anyone to point out a single laugh from any of them.

This was the show that wouldn't end, even when its main cast were croaking it as the Grim Reaper began to enact revenge upon them for their cruelty to comedy.
Creator Roy Clarke also made **Keeping Up Appearances** and so must be treated with hostility as a repeat offender here.
And to make matters worse, there was a prequel spin-off show that lasted two series.

Yes, there were two more series of this god-awful thing sneaked onto the airwaves in 1988/1989. Here we see how **Last of the Summer Wine's** main characters, Compo, Clegg, and Seymour, faced the prospect of World War II as they came of age as adults.

Sounds hilarious, right?

As a TV-loving youngster, I watched the first episode on BBC 1 when it went out, not realising the connection to the parent show, and I was left bewildered by what I'd just seen. It wasn't funny, just boring.

I'm not sure how well remembered it is that this show even existed, but clearly someone realised that there was too much of a bad thing after the second series, but somehow that scrutiny failed to extend to **Last of the Summer Wine** itself when it was just the same idea but with a younger cast in a period setting.

It's a stain on British television history that this nightmare took place. Let's learn from these mistakes and not allow the same thing to happen to **Call the Midwife**. Please, God.

To kick off our special Star Trek coverage, **ANDREW MOIR** looks at the chaotic past - and troubled present - of the franchise

... TO THE STATE OF THE FEDERATION

Illustration: Kaede

In the 20th century...

In 1996 **Star Trek** was at the height of its success. **First Contact** established that the cast of **Star Trek:The Next Generation** could carry a movie on their own. It's a film that incorporates elements of every incarnation of the franchise: Cochrane from **The Original Series**, the cast of **The Next Generation**, the Defiant from **Deep Space Nine**, and a cameo from the Doctor from **Voyager**.

On TV, there were two shows on the air – with **DS9** breaking **Star Trek**'s episodic mould and **Voyager** continuing the great storytelling tradition. The original series marked 30 years, and both series kept it alive with episodes revisiting their television and movie eras. **First Contact** itself became a nexus for **Star Trek** with events and characters spinning off into Voyager, Enterprise and even resonating into today's **Star Trek** on both **Lower Decks** and **Picard**.

This was the peak. Gene Roddenberry had passed the torch and Rick Berman and Michael Piller had built an empire. For a while, it seemed **Star Trek** was there to stay.

But within a decade **Star Trek: Nemesis** had killed the film franchise with a poor box office and critical reception – and more significantly, **Star Trek** disappeared from TV after 18 years following the limping ratings of prequel-series **Enterprise**.

It was over, and it didn't seem like there was any way back.

In the 21st century...

From cold ashes, a phoenix rose (see, it really is all about **First Contact**). JJ Abrams' Bad Robot were going to produce a new **Star Trek** movie, with a script from TV veterans Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman. For the first time, a **Trek** film would feature a cast assembled for the big screen and with a budget to match. While the film franchise had begun with a big investment and a proper director, lower budgets meant every subsequent film had been made with TV producers and TV movie budgets, and with directors who probably wouldn't have been given a shot at films under any other circumstances. This new movie was to be a proper blockbuster, designed to appeal to a mass audience in a way **Star Trek** never had before.

It would take **Star Trek** right back to the start, with a young Kirk and Spock meeting for the first time and serving on the Enterprise together. But because this is science fiction, and people can't let go of the unhelpful idea of canon, we needed some explanation as to why things looked cooler than they did in the 1960s and why everyone was better looking. So there was a fairly neat plot involving time travel and Leonard Nimoy returned as Spock to pass the torch to the next generation... or the last generation... the same generation?? Whatever.

This series would go on to have three films, hitting a creative high with the first, and a box office triumph with the second, and then a complete loss of momentum by the time **Star Trek Beyond** came out for the franchise's 50th anniversary.

But it was always intended to be more. The team at Bad Robot wanted to control all of **Star Trek** media and that meant a clean slate. They wanted an end to media featuring the classic lineups. That meant no more Shatner and Nimoy gracing the covers of novels and comic books. Why should they compete with themselves? Captain Kirk was now Chris Pine, and Spock was Zachary Quinto. The more these actors became associated with the roles, the more the brand would grow.

And that wasn't all. They wanted to bring **Star Trek** back to TV, first in an animated

form and then, perhaps, with a new live action show. Of course, none of this happened. At the time, **Star Trek** rights were made complicated following the split of CBS and Paramount into different parent companies.

So when one of the finest TV production companies in the world offered to manage the brand, of course, they were laughed out of the room.

Why would they stop their licensing cash cow to breathe new life into **Star Trek**? No, it was much better to keep scraping the barrel until they started digging a hole in the floor.

And while another film has been burning in development hell for the best part of a decade, back on TV, **Star Trek** was about to come back with a bang...

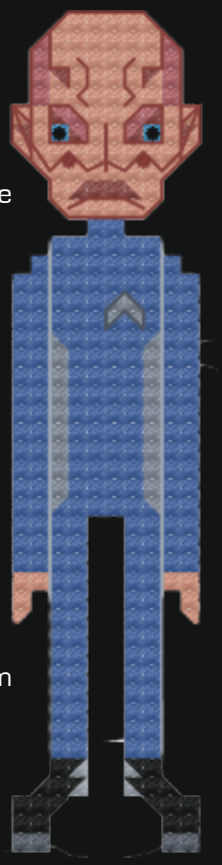
In the 21st century... but a bit later

Star Trek suddenly became relevant again in 2016 as the streaming wars began with every media company looking for IP to exploit.

CBS All Access, essentially a catch-up service, was going to start producing original content and new **Star Trek** was top of the agenda. Alex Kurtzman, co-writer of the first two Bad Robot films, was brought on as executive producer through his Secret Hideout brand, and Bryan Fuller was tapped to be the showrunner and co-creator of a new show. As CBS's streaming platform was only US-based, Netflix would distribute the show internationally, taking it to the widest possible audience, and footing most of the substantial production costs.

While there were already five live action **Star Trek** shows out there and an animated series, the new era would be a departure. **Star Trek: The Next Generation** had been created by Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry (with plenty of input from Dorothy Fontana and David Gerrold). Every one of the spin-offs still had a lineage related to the self-proclaimed Great Bird of the Galaxy, producers and writers who had worked closely with him, most notably Rick Berman. And while the films had not had his direct involvement following **The Motion Picture**, it was still his cast. Even the reboot films were following the same basic template of **Star Trek: The Original Series**. But now, we had something new.

Bryan Fuller was perhaps best known for his TV adaptation of **Hannibal** but genre fans knew and loved him for the short-lived fantasy shows **Wonderfalls** and **Dead Like Me**. It was somewhat reassuring that he had started his career on **Deep Space Nine** and later became a staff writer on **Voyager**. Further to this, saviour of the **Star Trek** movies Nick Meyer was brought on board as a consulting producer, and Joe Menosky, formerly a writer on **The Next Generation**, **Deep Space Nine** and **Voyager** joined the show as co-executive producer.



It is fair to say that **Star Trek: Discovery** had a difficult beginning. It was to be set a decade before the world we knew from **The Original Series**. Fuller wanted the show to be an anthology, not unlike **American Horror Story.** So season one would show how the world we knew from **Star Trek** came to be following the Federation/Klingon war. It would then jump to a different era with new protagonists on a

Illustrations: 8bitnorthxstitch

different ship.

The idea was perfect for streaming. It meant you could introduce new viewers to each era of **Star Trek**, its aesthetic, antagonists and goals. Then when they want to see more, they can start watching one of the older shows. Once all of that was re-established, new worlds could be created.

However, world building costs money and time, and it seemed Fuller was spending too much of both in pre-production while also working on another show, **American Gods**, for another network.

It was all too much and in October 2016, Fuller was asked to step down, with two of Fuller's long-term writing collaborators Aaron Harberts and Gretchen J. Berg taking over under the supervision of Kurtzman. Much of the original plan was thrown out, including the anthology idea as well as some of the more classic **Star Trek** allegorical storytelling but Fuller's roadmap remained in place.

While much of the production design would have echoes from the classic show, completely new uniforms and advanced technology would be seen on screen, surpassing anything previously viewed in **Star Trek**'s fictional future, all things that might upset certain factions of fandom.

The first season of **Star Trek: Discovery** is, to borrow a Vulcan word, fascinating. Quite rightly, it felt no obligation to repeat the same kind of stories as the previous eras. It focussed on Michael Burnham played by Sonequa Martin-Green, a first officer who ends up starting a war and is jailed for mutiny, but somehow finds herself on board Starfleet's experimental starship. British actor Jason Isaacs sat in the captain's chair as the complex Gabriel Lorca with a supporting cast including the excellent Doug Jones as Saru, Broadway veteran Anthony Rapp as scientist Paul Stamets, and Mary Wiseman as naive cadet Sylvia Tilly.

While it was new, it was also weirdly also bogged down in T**he Original Series**, with Burnham revealed to be Spock's adopted sister, appearances from Sarek and Amanda, and Harry Mudd as a recurring villain. The show would also explore the Mirror Universe, just as **TOS**, **Deep Space Nine** and **Enterprise** had before, but as something more interesting, it would tell

more of the story from a Klingon perspective. While some sides of fandom thought it was too dark to be **Star Trek**, broke canon, and was ultimately a very good looking show with fine actors hampered by awful writing, others believed it to be the best **Star Trek** had ever been. There are enough die-hard fans as well as deep academic writing about the show to suggest it was the right show for the time.

Discovery is shortly coming to an end after five seasons, and it would be hard to argue it has been anything other than a success. It's spawned a spin-off in **Strange New Worlds** with another coming in the form of the **Section 31** TV movie. However, **Discovery** will always be defined by what it could have been rather than what it is. With the departure of Fuller, it almost became a show nobod wanted to make, trapped in **Star Trek**'s past but wanting to be about the future. Meyer quietly disappeared at some point during the first season, Menosky left to work on The Orville, and Harberts and Berg were sacked during the second season over alleged verbal abuse.

It's a show that has constantly reinvented itself. The second season saw it attempting to lighten and fall more in line with **Star Trek** of old with the inevitable appearance of the Enterprise and Spock. At the end of that year, the good ship sailed into the distant future, out of the way of canon so it could face galactic threats in its own time with Michelle Paradise taking the reins. Arguably, it has become less interesting as it has become more settled and conventional. Its strength was the bold, chaotic, frustrating madness in the storytelling and characters.

But that's just part one of the story. Before season 2 of **Discovery** had even aired, the world of Star Trek was expanding. In August of 2018, it was announced that Patrick Stewart would be returning to **Star Trek** in a new show focused on **Picard**, aptly named **Star Trek: Picard**. Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Michael Chabon was to be showrunner, with the show described as a "psychological character exploration".

A couple of months later, **Star Trek**'s first animated comedy show, **Lower Decks**, was announced from creator Mike McMahan, known for both writing **Rick and Morty** and the very funny **TNG** Season 8 Twitter account.

The rand would continue to expand with **Star Trek: Prodigy,** the first **Star Trek** show aimed directly at children, ordered in mid-2019 from renowned animation writers Kevin and Dan Hageman. It would see Kate Mulgrew reprise her role as Kathryn Janeway... you know, for kids. It would be a partnership between Nickelodeon and the newly rebranded Paramount+.

Completing the lineup was **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds**, an Enterprise-set spin-off from **Discovery** with Anson Mount, Ethan Peck and Rebecca Romijn reprising their roles as Captain Christopher Pike, Spock and Number One. Of course, these were **Star Trek**'s original characters from the original rejected pilot 'The Cage' which meant that this was the purest **Star Trek** ever made, a pilot picked up after more than 50 years. Unlike the serialised single-story seasons of **Picard** and **Discovery**, this would take **Star Trek** back to its roots with more episodic

storytelling alongside more serialised character arcs.

Never in history, had there been more than two **Star Trek** shows in production. Now there were five, and the goal was to have **Star Trek** on all-year around, 50 episodes a year, so every side of fandom could always be a little bit annoyed. The franchise managed this just once with 2022showcasing six episodes of **Discovery** season 4, 10 of **Picard** season 2, 10 of **Strange New Worlds** season 1, 10 of **Lower Decks** season 3 and 15 episodes of **Prodigy** season 1.

Pretty cool, but it was not to last...

The human adventure is just beginning... or it's already peaked

All good things must come to an end, and after two years of being a complete narrative mess, and one of being a lovely big S**tar Trek: The Next Generation** reunion, **Star Trek: Picard** completed its mission in 2023. It was always planned to be three seasons, and that's probably as far as they could have taken it.

It was also announced that **Star Trek: Discover**y was cancelled following its fifth season. And while five years is a good run, it was cancelled rather than ending through anyone's creative decision, with additional filming taking place to make the final episode more of a series finale and than a season finale. Now, some of this might have been to do with the launch of Paramount+. Following the reunification of CBS and Paramount, the streaming service went global. This meant scorching the deal with Netflix for **Discovery**, a show which reportedly did pretty well for the streamer. That meant, for contractual reasons no one has ever explained, **Discovery** was only available internationally on ad-supported live streamer Pluto TV, and probably lost a whole chunk of funding.

As studios realised that the streaming bubble was bursting, **Star Trek: Prodigy** was the victim of budget cuts and was cancelled and the first season removed from Paramount+ in June 2023, despite the second season being close to completion. After months of speculation, the show was picked up by Netflix and should appear there in 2024, but a third season would seem somewhat unlikely.

That leaves just **Strange New Worlds** as the sole live action show, with season 3 in production now following the lengthy delay of the writers' and actors' strikes, and it probably won't make it to air before 2025.

Star Trek: Lower Decks has been the most reliable of the shows, producing a new season every year since its debut in 2020. And despite it appearing to be the most radical departure for **Star Trek**, it's actually the closest thing we have to the 1990s shows, both in aesthetic, structure and plots, and it's lovely. While both **Discovery** and **Picard** ploughed through showrunners, cast members and writers. **Lower Decks** has been extremely settled and long may it continue.

Strange New Worlds is the 21st century's answer to classic **Star Trek** and they've been working their way through every classic episode format, perhaps in a slightly shallow way. The first season was, arguably, more successful than the second which took some pretty big swings with both a musical and animated episode, as well as some fairly tedious relationship plots.

There is a point where you just need to actually embrace having a format, especially with just 10 episodes to play with. It does seem clear that there's a bigger plan in play with this show. They've introduced a new Kirk, joining Uhura, Chapel and Spock who are series regulars, and a young Scotty put in an appearance in the season 2 finale. That just leaves McCoy, Sulu and Chekov until you get the whole classic lineup together. Could they remake classic **Star Trek**? Or perhaps do some lost missions, even jump ahead and do a post-**Motion Picture** Phase 2 series? Who can say, but it'll be somewhat interesting to find out.

The Secret Hideout era of **Star Trek** has produced close to 200 episodes in just seven years, so it has clearly worked, but it seems unlikely there will ever be five shows in production simultaneously again. Might we see a shift to more traditional production models? Could **Strange New Worlds** up its episode count to 15 or even 20 per season? That remains to be seen. None of these shows have had the same impact of **Star Trek** at its peak. Kirk and Spock, and Data and Picard are household names. Are Burnham or Boimler?

With the way the media landscape has fractured, perhaps that's impossible and that's why we're probably going to get another Kirk on the Enterprise doing the same things **Star Trek** has done for 60 years.

All of this era of **Star Trek** has been caught up with its own legacy; shows fronted by Stewart and Mulgrew, one set on board the Enterprise and another that makes more references than you'd find with a day spent on Memory Alpha. **Discovery**, with its jump to the future, despite its reference-heavy origins, became the most original show in the whole lineup.

But new content is coming, with a **Starfleet Academy** show (the least inspired idea of all time) in pre-production and a **Section 31** TV movie, starring Academy Award-winner Michelle Yeoh as an evil mass murderer that we're supposed to love, ready to shoot. It's incredible that there haven't been **Star Trek** TV movies to date, but it seems to be a model that could work.

There are sets, uniforms and crews already up and running, which should keep production costs to a more manageable

level. Patrick Stewart has expressed a desire for one last ride, despite doing that already. And it would seem there are plenty of characters that would be worth revisiting.

There are still worlds to explore, new characters to love and an inexplicable number of Starfleet uniforms to be designed. But going forwards, it seems there will be less, and there should be less. One show at a time really doesn't seem like a bad idea. We've already seen shows repeating ideas with both **Discovery** and **Picard** dealing with a scary artificial intelligence.

So perhaps the one thing **Star Trek** really needs to work is... space.

Autism campaigner and *Star Trek* fan **MARION MCLAUGHLIN** explores the show's long-standing commitment to inclusivity

... TO INFINITE DIVERSITY IN INFINITE COMBINATIONS

I am disabled AF.

I have a long list of disabilities including, but not limited to: being autistic, situational mutism, fibromyalgia, arthritis, and I'd also argue that menopause can be pretty damn disabling too. I also have some other disabilities I don't choose to share – it's good to set boundaries.

But being autistic isn't just a disability, it's also an identity. We have a culture and a vibrant community. Of all my disabilities it's the one I think about most, and arguably influences my life more than anything else. As an autistic person the world has very often been confusing and, at times, actively hostile. Many autistics describe feeling like an alien beamed down on to a strange planet. Standing on the periphery rather than truly belonging.

Is it any wonder so many of us are drawn to **Star Trek**, where aliens of all species can thrive together?

I grew up in the 80s immersed in the original series. My dad (likely also autistic, also otherwise disabled) loved **Star Trek**. If it was on TV we were treated to free lectures on **Trek** while he gleefully watched it, seemingly never tiring of it – something I very much relate to. Like most other autistic people, I get great comfort and joy from the familiar and rewatching favourite shows definitely counts as this.

TOS was undoubtedly my dad's comfort show, and like me, Spock was his favourite character. His penchant for logic, his masking emotions, all while deeply caring about those around him – definitely autistic coded. He was one of few alien crew mates but he was - for the most part - not only tolerated, he was accepted. Celebrated even.

Oh, the allure of a world where being different was ok was strong, naturally we watched it often. In true autistic style, my dad's passion for the show quickly rubbed off on me. I'd see his eyes light up, his grin widen, and I couldn't help but be drawn in. His unadulterated autistic joy was infectious. Autistic empathy is often sensing and sharing someone else's strong love for something else. It was inevitable.

Being a Trekkie was a genetic predestination.

TOS is hard for me to watch now given Shatner's support of the hate organisation Autism $peaks. His actions have actively harmed a community which arguably represents a significant number of his fans. I am forever grateful for Uncle George and other **Trek** actors for remaining firm as allies. Becoming blocked on X/Twitter by Shatner is something of a badge of honour in the autistic advocate community. While many autistics love **Trek**, our relationship with Shatner's Kirk can be complicated.

My dad's excitement when **Next Generation** was announced could barely be contained. New **Trek**. New characters, new stories. Not only that but there were more disabled and alien characters. Data is another obviously autistic coded character and someone dad and I loved. Observing crew mates, attempting to emulate their behaviour, needing someone to explain when it wasn't quite right – that was the story of my life!

I may not have a positronic brain, but I knew what Data was going through. The difference was people were patient and understanding with him. There was an obvious reason why small talk and other unwritten social rules were a mystery to him. Less so with me. So, of course, I watched the show repeatedly – these on-screen friends maybe would have seen and accepted me the way they did Data. And their explanations of the unwritten were actively helpful at times too - a social handbook in many ways, and one I did my best to learn from.

Data wasn't the only character I am strongly drawn to – Geordi is also highly relatable and not just because an argument could be made that he's autistic too. You could see Geordi's disability right away, the same way my walking stick or hand braces are (sometimes) right there too. Blending in as non-disabled wasn't an option with his visor but his complete acceptance of his disability means the world to me. He knows there's nothing wrong at all in being built the way he is, and at times actively took offence when others suggested he would be better off being just like everyone else. In The Masterpiece Society, when it's suggested

that someone like Geordi would have been genetically screened out, he tells them in no uncertain terms that nobody should get to decide if someone like him has anything to offer society before they are even born.

Disability remains still highly stigmatised today. If I were to share all the ableist comments, micro aggressions, and and outright discrimination I've faced in the last 6 months alone you'd be here all day, and there are other articles you need time to read. The world consistently, relentlessly tells disabled people that we are wrong, others us, but Geordi's refusal to be shamed for his disability helped me on my journey to disability acceptance and pride. Autistic acceptance and disability acceptance are the essential first steps in making the world a better place for us – and having that out loud and proud on TV matters.

When my dad lost his battle with cancer in 2005, I began using **Trek** as a way of remaining connected with him. I genuinely love **Star Trek**, but its close associations with him are akin to quantum entanglement. Forever linked. Through **Trek** my relationship with my dad – the only one in my family who I felt truly understood me growing up – remains strong.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that I started watching **Deep Space Nine** and **Voyager** when I became a parent myself – I was strengthening my connection with my dad to help me grow as a parent. **DS9** became an immediate, passionate interest of mine. I watched it when my own infant child was napping and, having never taken the time previously to watch it, devoured it the way only an autistic can. It was so different to any other **Trek** before, yet so familiar.

The characters were strong, from many different races, and there was active conflict everywhere. It was utterly fascinating, and I couldn't get enough of it.

The father figures we have in Sisko and O'Brien likely helped too, supporting me explore my own values as a parent. It quickly became a comfort show, one I still watch on a regular basis.

When the pandemic hit I watched all seven seasons through three times within the same year. It provided enormous comfort and stability. As the world was melting down, **Trek** helped me stay regulated – it was my anchor. I don't think I will ever tire of watching Trials and Tribbilations, or In The Pale Moonlight. Even the Garak heavy episodes? Especially the Garak heavy episodes.

I strongly related to Odo's experiences too. He was entirely unlike the others in that he didn't come from the "two-arm, two-leg variety" and yet presented as humanoid every day to avoid rejection. This is remarkably similar to autistic masking. Odo doesn't always show off his shape shifting prowess in the same way I didn't always show off my memory in school or flapped my hands around others. Too risky, rejection lay that way.

This is strongly explored in Chimera when fellow changeling, Laas comes along all unmasked, shape shifting all over the promenade. While Laas is hardly the most personable character, his openness and comfort in being a shapeshifter leads to direct conflict pretty damn quickly. No wonder Odo felt the need to conform.

His sharing of his true self with Kira is a beautiful metaphor for when we choose to start unmasking around a safe person. It takes enormous courage to be that

vulnerable.

While only in one episode of **DS9**, Melora's experiences of being disabled tackling of the social model of disability is unmissable – even if Bashir should most definitely have lost his job for unprofessionalism.

The social model of disability posits that there is nothing wrong with being disabled, but there is something very wrong in having to navigate a world where your disability is not recognised or supported. Reasonable adjustments are enshrined in both national and international law yet they aren't readily given, especially to those of us with so called "invisible disabilities".

Disabled people should be involved in all decisions about our support at every step of the way, something that does not always happen for Melora. In a low gravity environment she thrives, even saves the day. She only experiences issues when barriers such as pointless raised doorways block her path. As she states, there is no Melora problem until people create one.

While treatments to allow Melora to walk without her aids are tempting, she would never be able to return to her low gravity home planet again for anything more than a short trip. The sheer enormity of that sacrifice ultimately leads Melora to choose to remain as she is. As an autistic person I found this utterly freeing. In rejecting Bashir's "cure" she is embracing who she is, her culture, her heritage, her identity in much the same way autistic people can come to embrace our culture, our heritage, our identities.

Trek took on a new meaning to me after I discovered I'm autistic. I found that community, made my way to the autistic version of Odo's Omarion Nebula. There were other **Trek** fans whose enthusiasm matched mine. Some may have preferred **Voyager**, over **DS9** – and it's ok to be wrong – but I could make connections with others through our shared passionate interests. We could talk Trek for hours, swap memes, empathise relating to Trek plots, share random bits of merch with each other, and all without worrying about boring the other person! And this came at a time when Nu **Trek** was coming out. **Discovery**, **Lower Decks**, **Prodigy**, new comics, new books, so many new stories to explore. So many connections to make.

And what about the future? Those Old Scientists, the recent **Lower Decks**/**Strange New Worlds** crossover episode had Boimler marvelling that the crew of the Enterprise get to meet aliens that are still alien. In his time aliens are seen as every day in his time, part of his normal. In his recent memoir, **Making It So**, Patrick Stewart talks of **Star Trek** presenting a future where "inclusivity is a given rather than an effort".

That's what I want for disabled people - for us to be seen as just every day, and not regarded as alien or other, and definitely not inspiration porn. I want our differences to be recognised, respected, and supported. We don't overcome our disabilities. We accept them, work with them, celebrate them even.

Infinite diversity in infinite combinations includes disabled people. We should be treated as the valuable members of society we are.

Just like **Star Trek** taught us.

... TO THE DIE IS CAST

Award-winning Star Trek author DAYTON WARD takes a closer look at the way fans are making their own strange new worlds...

So, there you are, reading this article. I'm hoping it's because you're a Star Trek fan and the title lured you here.

Like many fans, perhaps you're all caught up on the latest episodes of the various **Star Trek** series, and now you're sitting there wondering when we might see new the seasons of **Discovery**, **Strange New Worlds**, **Lower Decks**, and **Prodigy**. Maybe you've also bided your time by binging episodes from one of the older shows in a bid to fill "the void." Now you're once again curious about what we might see when the new **Starfleet Academy** series launches, or when Michelle Yeoh finally returns as Emperor Philippa Georgiou in **Section 31**.

What else might you do to pass the time while you wait? A lot of fans turn their attentions to the broad spectrum of **Star Trek** novels, comics, and other books, all of which have been a part of the franchise since the original series was still in active production nearly sixty years ago. There are also a variety of video games which allow you to take on all sorts of missions in the final frontier, including several recent releases which might be to your liking, but what if you wanted to take things a step further? What if you could create your own "stories" and "episodes" with a group of likeminded and enthusiastic fans, constrained only by the limits of your imagination...and perhaps a few chance rolls of the dice?

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) enjoy their own rich history, dating back more than fifty years. There are likely precious few people who haven't at least heard of **Dungeons & Dragons**, after all, and there probably aren't that many **Star Trek** fans who are unaware RPGs based on the various series have been around for nearly the same amount of time.

The first such effort, **Star Trek: Adventure Gaming in the Final Frontier**, was released by Heritage Models in 1978. By **D&D** standards to say nothing of most modern gaming systems, this initial foray into **Star Trek** tabletop gaming is pretty simple and somewhat limited so far as game play.

Still, it paved the way for larger and more complex efforts over the ensuing decades, beginning with FASA's **Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game**.

Released in 1982, this much more comprehensive system allowed players to create Starfleet characters as well as representatives of various familiar **Star Trek** alien races.

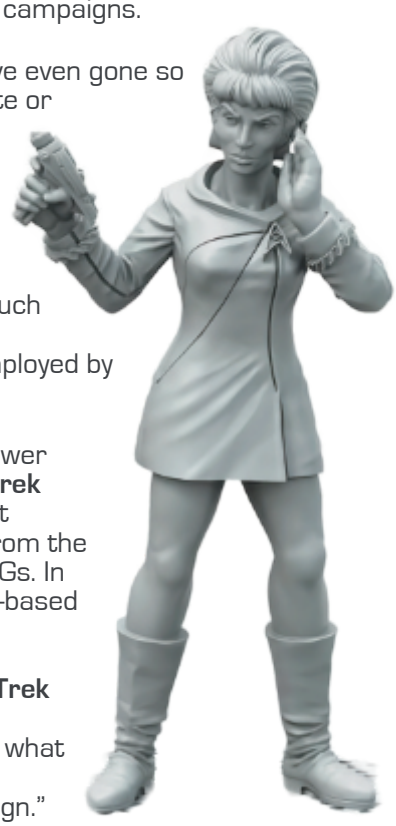
Over the next seven years, the game expanded to include dozens of adventure scenarios and supplemental sourcebooks, to include augmenting its primary focus on the era of the original series with new

information provided by each of the films featuring the original cast. **Star Trek: The Next Generation**'s arrival to the airwaves in 1987 expanded the mythos as well as the gaming potential beyond Captain Kirk and his crew.

Last Unicorn Games and Decipher each released their own official **Star Trek TTRPG**s, respectively, in 1998 and 2002. Both systems took advantage of the expansion the property itself enjoyed with the arrival **Star Trek: Deep Space Nine** in 1993, **Star Trek: Voyager** in 1995, and **Star Trek: Enterprise** in 2001 as well as the continuing adventures of the original and **Next Generation** casts in feature films.

All of these new on-screen exploits provided ever-increasing fodder for game designers as well as gamemasters and players with respect to creating their own characters and adventures.

While these previous gaming systems stopped producing new content years ago, they remain popular and each still maintains its own healthy contingent of gaming enthusiasts who continue to craft new scenarios and campaigns.



Some fans have even gone so far as to update or reconfigure material from one game to work with another, or modifying components such as the dice mechanics employed by newer games.

Speaking of newer games, **Star Trek** certainly hasn't disappeared from the realm of TTRPGs. In late 2016, UK-based Modiphius Entertainment unveiled **Star Trek Adventures**, beginning with what was dubbed a "Living Campaign." Essentially an extended playtest designed to introduce players to the new system, the campaign allowed them to put the game's rules through their paces.

They accomplished this with a storyline set in "the Shackleton Expanse," a largely unexplored region of space between Federation and Klingon territory. Two avenues for game scenarios, one set in the era of the original **Star Trek TV** series with another narrative taking place a century later during the period of **Star Trek: The Next Generation** and **Star Trek: Deep Space Nine**, ran in parallel as players pursued the mystery of the Expanse and the secrets it harbours.

Running for nearly two years, the "Living Campaign" provided the game's developers with valuable feedback from players and other data gleaned from the playtest, which they used to continually update and refine the rules. The game's core rulebook and first standalone adventure scenarios were released for purchase in the summer of 2017, and since then Modiphius continues to

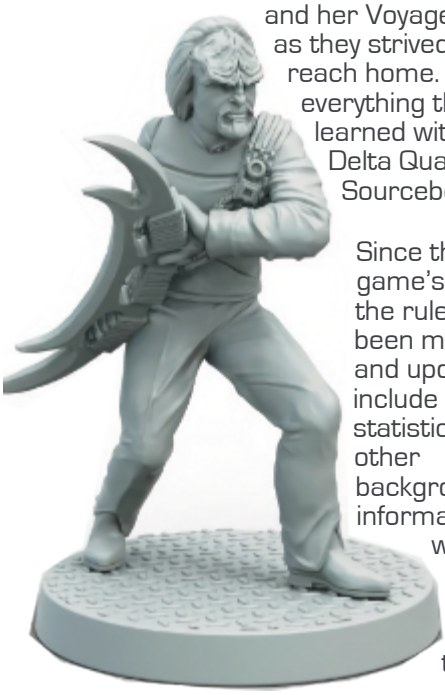
actively expand the game.

Players of the game are invited to create and partake in the same sorts of adventures we've watched our heroes undertake in episodes of any of the television series. Do you want to explore strange new worlds and seek out new life? Discover and investigate mysterious ancient alien technology or unusual spatial anomalies? Make first contact with a newly discovered civilisation? Defend the Federation against adversaries familiar and unknown? All of these and so much more awaits those daring to accept the challenge.

You say you don't want to play the prim and proper Starfleet characters you first imagine when you think of **Star Trek** roleplaying?

Modiphius has you covered, as they issued an entire version of the game's rules that emphasises play entirely from the perspective of the Klingon Empire.

Supplemental sourcebooks offer detailed insight into what players can find if they choose to set their campaigns anywhere in the known galaxy. Want to tackle the Dominion on their home turf? There's a book devoted to the Gamma Quadrant. Maybe you want to explore some of the worlds and species encountered by Captain Janeway and her Voyager crew as they strived to reach home. Dive into everything they learned with the Delta Quadrant Sourcebook.



Since the game's launch, the rules have been modified and updated to include statistics and other background information which allow players to set their campaigns in the era of **Star Trek: Enterprise**, when the galaxy seemed so much larger and unfamiliar to Jonathan Archer and his crew.

Even as I write this, Modiphius is branching out to include material devoted to the latest crop of Star Trek series. Guidebooks based on **Star Trek: Discovery** and **Star Trek: Lower Decks** and even the original animated **Star Trek** series are already available.

Remember that "Living Campaign" I mentioned earlier? The storyline originally developed to drive that extended playtest has been fleshed out and augmented into the Shackleton Expanse Campaign Guide, an extensive sourcebook showcasing the entire setting within the game which players can explore either with the prepared scenarios or instead whatever they create themselves.

After seven years, **Star Trek Adventures** shows no signs of slowing down. There are already enough guidebooks and mission scenarios to keep players busy for years, with more on the way. After all, **Star Trek** itself continues to expand upon the lore it has been building for nearly sixty years, but it's important to remember all of that is merely prologue.

The game's true lure — as is true of any tabletop roleplaying game — is that the rules and settings are merely points of departure for the imaginations of players and gamemasters alike. They're an invitation, welcoming you to undertake your own adventures in the final frontier.

Just remember to do it boldly...

With Doctor Who spin-off talk high on the agenda once again, **JAMES COORAY SMITH** delves back to the first time the show dabbled with an expanded universe...

... TO A SHAGGY DOG STORY

When John Nathan-Turner took over Doctor Who in 1980, he had changes to make.

One was getting rid of robot dog K9, a fixture since 1977. But the announcement of his departure from **Doctor Who** brought about a tabloid "Save K9" campaign, backed by quotes from famous dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse. One little girl even wrote to Britain's highest-ranking dog lover, Her Majesty the Queen, and got "a very nice reply".

In the face of all this — or as he would imply, actually before it — JNT decided K9 should not be axed. He should be promoted! Given his own show! The resources of two episodes of **Doctor Who**'s 1981/82 allocation would be given to a pilot episode, to be made in late 1981 and transmitted more or less immediately and before the rest of the season.

As for future episodes, Peter Davison's other commitments meant that the 1983 series of **Doctor Who** would have a sizeable gap in production between its second and third stories. Five or six 50m episodes could be recorded in that gap, with proper planning.

It was decided that **K9 and Company**, as the project eventually became known, would pair "Voice of K9" John Leeson with Elisabeth Sladen as Sarah Jane Smith. Not long before JNT had asked Sladen, even then regarded as the "definitive" **Doctor Who** companion, to return to the series to accompany Tom Baker's Doctor in his final stories. She demurred, but their contact caused Nathan-Turner to think of her for the **K9** pilot.

Sarah Jane had never appeared with K9 before, leaving the programme before his arrival. The pilot would have to depict their first meeting. Nathan-Turner's solution, detailed in his briefing notes for screenwriter Terence Dudley, was for the Doctor to send her a duplicate K9 as a Christmas present.

Sarah Jane meant a contemporary setting with the dog himself the only science fiction element in the pilot, and presumably the intended series. It would help keep the budget down, if nothing else. Instead, the pilot's story is about witchcraft, with the antagonists a rural pagan group that may (or may not) be kidnapping local people in the vicinity of Moreton Harwood in the Cotswolds, and sacrificing them to the pagan goddess Hecate.

K9 and Company was a success on transmission, watched by 8m people, more than had seen any **Doctor Who** episode for two years. And this despite the BBC's Winter Hill transmitter going down, meaning a large section of the country could not receive the programme at all. This might be in part because it was heavily pushed in the BBC Christmas publicity round, including K9 being interviewed on BBC1's **Pebble Mill at 1** chat show.

This appearance, which can be enjoyed on the Blu-ray edition, is pure nightmare fuel, with a presenter visibly on the sauce, while a department store quality Santa staggers around outside in the snow. While this is obviously meant to be cheerfully festive, Santa is clearly holding his trousers up with his hands, and it all threatens to turn into the first story from **Tales from the Crypt**, where "Santa" turns out to be an escaped sex killer with an axe in his sack. (And when I say "...on the sauce" I don't just mean "drunk", I mean, "drunk, with a glass in his hand he keeps putting down and then looking for while doing interviews and losing his thread because he's looking for his booze.")

Watched now, **K9 and Company** is an odd piece. The storyline is vaguely baffling. But not because it's so fast-paced and full of detail. While not much happens, it does so slowly and through curiously circular plotting. There's not a great deal of obvious cause and effect. Or character motivation. It would be easy to attribute this to rewrites falling between the cracks, as the script was passed between outgoing script editor Antony Root and his successor, Eric Saward, but it would also probably be mistaken. Such plotting is in evidence elsewhere in Terence Dudley's long career in television, although his characterisation is usually stronger.

On the DVD commentary, several people are critical of the work of director John Black, but he deserves credit for much of what works about the production. Good actors scowl in wintry half-light, backed by a splendidly

sinister radiophonic score. And some of them are really good actors: Bill Fraser, Mary Wimbush, and Colin Jeavons, to name just three. Fraser (surprise villain Bill Pollock) was engaged by Nathan-Turner, with the part having been written for him by Dudley.

But the rest of the new cast are Black's choices. Jeavons, as cult member George Tracey, is particularly good, his desperation and panic genuinely unnerving. Neville Barber, as red herring smoothie Howard, is underused, but his partnership with Linda Polan as his wife Juno is hugely amusing, and Polan herself is absolutely delightful — and endlessly imitable. Gillian Martell's deceptively subtle portrayal of High Priestess Lily Gregson has more layers than scenes. Or at least scenes in which she's not wearing a sacrificial goat mask.

It's the closest 1980s **Doctor Who** ever gets to **A Ghost Story for Christmas**, and Black screened 1975's entry in the series, The Ash Tree, just before filming — although the vast distance between it and that rightly praised piece should tell you just how far away from it **Doctor Who** usually is. Perhaps **Hammer House of Horror** crossed with Children's BBC is a better description.

It's a sort of light-but-chilling that is thoroughly seasonal; lovely and spooky in a specific way **Doctor Who** rarely is. Certainly, when Nathan-Turner later reflected that it was his idea the story should be about witchcraft, and that he came to think this was inappropriate for something transmitted at Christmas, he seemed to be confessing to an ignorance not just of the **A Ghost Story for Christmas** strand, but the centuries-old tradition of, well, ghost stories for Christmas, including those involving paganism and black magic.

The pre-Saward draft of the script has extra lines indicating that the coven has existed since antiquity, indicating that the Tracey family are descended from a Roman soldier and that Gregson's are newcomers having "only been here since the Civil War!" Tracey, if not Pollock, sees twentieth-century arrivals as invaders of the land his family have worked for more than a millennium, and scientific farming methods as profaning Hecate's land.

The Roman reference is perhaps a patch for another oddity; there isn't any real tradition

of Hecate being worshipped in rural Britain before the pagan revival of the mid-twentieth century. This is something Dudley and Saward argued about, with the former insisting dialogue the latter had inserted implied the coven was a recent creation, and Saward denying it.

Most likely, "Hecate" is a simple invoking of Macbeth, to which Dudley refers in a bad-tempered memo to Saward. It's always worth acknowledging that the classical Hécate cult associates her with dogs, as shown in the play, which of course makes her an appropriate opponent for K9. (She's also invoked as a receiver of dog sacrifices in Nathan-Turner's beloved **I, Claudius** (1976).)

Delightfully, actors and extras freezing on location while shooting the story's midnight sacrifice sequences started chanting the name of the actors' trade union "Equity! Equity! Equity!" rather than the name of the Goddess they were meant to be invoking. If you listen carefully on the finished programme, you can hear it.

K9 and Company wasn't just a ratings success. It was liked internally too.

Then BBC Head of Drama Graeme MacDonald used it to damn *Castrovalva*, the first Peter Davison serial, by comparison in a memo to David Reid, the Head of Drama Serials, Nathan-Turner's immediate boss. Unaware of this, Nathan-Turner also excitedly wrote to some contributors to tell them that the Controller of BBC1, Bill Cotton, had included it in his "top 6 Christmas shows" of 1981.

Whether this is a typo for "top 5", whether Cotton wrote a "top 10" and JNT wished to emphasise that it was almost in the top half of it, or whether Cotton did something as eccentric as write a "top 6" seems to be lost in time, I'm afraid.

Perhaps MacDonald's enjoyment was the reason it was repeated on BBC 2 on Christmas Eve 1982. By then MacDonald was Controller of BBC 2, in addition to overall Head of Drama. He may even have been prompted to remember it by a memo from JNT to Reid, reminding him that **K9 and Company** was available for repeating, and that for a good chunk of any potential audience it would be a brand new programme.

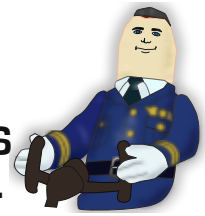
It was seen by an additional 2.1m viewers, including your correspondent, whose Mom wanted to watch a programme about the raising of the Mary Rose that was on immediately after.

That was a respectable audience for BBC 2. Especially against seasonal competition but by then it was already known a series would not be forthcoming. Long after Nathan-Turner's death, Reid would take the blame, saying he had not pitched the series to his bosses aggressively enough, and that he personally had always seen **K9 and Company** as a one-off special.

The dog was just for Christmas after all...

OTTO'S PILOTS

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO THE TV SHOWS THAT FAILED TO LEAVE THE TAXIWAY...



NAME: SPACED

FIVE WORD PITCH: The Spaced Bang Theory

CREATED BY: Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes (originally), McG (remake)

STARRING: Josh Lawson, Sarah Rue, Federico Dordei, Will Sasso

PREMISE: Two disaffected 20-somethings pretend to be a married couple in order to rent an affordable flat in San Francisco

PRODUCED: 2008

WAS IT ANY GOOD? So, here's the thing. Conventional wisdom will tell you no. Pegg and Edgar Wright, director of the original version, railed against the remake. Online critics tore the alleged script to shreds. And for years all we had was their word and a couple of out-of context clips put online by one of the cast for their acting showreel.

Then last year the remarkable happened, and the actual full pilot leaked online. And you know what?

It was shit.

We got an uneasy amalgam of famous bits from across the UK show's run - primarily the first half of the pilot episode, and a loose adaptation of the climax to season two's Gone. Recently dumped aspiring comics artist Ben and quirky would-be writer April fake a relationship in order to rent a cheap but spacious apartment from drunken landlady Marsha. Also resident is tortured artist Christian, while tagging along are Ben's best pal Bill and April's fashionista friend Viv.

They all end up at a late night bakery, where they run into Ben's ex Yumi and her sleazy new boyfriend, and fake a gunfight stand-off to avoid Ben getting the shit kicked out of him.

Yup, it's literally the bits your casual punter can remember of the original series, bolted together with shots of San Fran where something weird happens in the background (like rocket launches or tram cars vanishing), and bad, cheap knockoff versions of David Holmes and 90s big beat on the soundtrack.

The most generous description you can give is that it's the shallowest possible remake - to the extent even the house they move into in San Francisco bears more than a superficial resemblance to 23 Meteor Street's exterior. But generosity can only take you so far, because it's clear the writers have no understanding of what the original was about.

Bless them, Lawson and Rue TRY with the material they've got. Lawson's Ben is more Chandler Bing than Tim Bisley, but he does attempt to bring something different to the role than just rehashing Pegg's mannerisms.

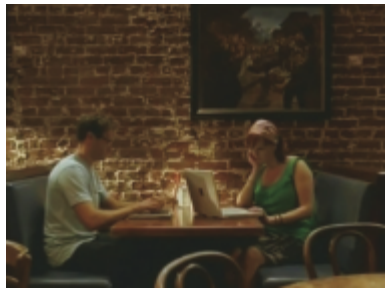
Rue does exactly that - it's like watching a Jessica Hynes tribute act, but that's largely because the script offers April so little

character she'd probably vanish if she turned sideways.

The script doesn't quite seem to know what it's trying to do - we get barely updated versions of Tim and Daisy's meet-cute and flathunting, their biographies, and Daisy snooping round Tim's room. We get shot for shot remakes of Brian's artistic method or Daisy saying goodbye to her squat pals, with their US stand-ins. And then we get weird bastardised, barely contextless bits like the shootout sequence, which falls so far out of context of the rest of the episode it's completely out of place.

The best indication of what you're going to get comes right at the start, with their version of Tim being dumped. While Pegg's 'cried like a child at the end of **Terminator 2**' is meant to show his nerdy. emotional inarticulacy, Ben's version is a full recreation of a scene from **Lord of the Rings**, complete with character voices.

The delay in remaking it also kills something essential to **Spaced**'s success - it's sense of time and place. It's a show which lives and breathes north London in the late 90s - in reference, in look and especially in music. Switching the show to San Francisco a decade later, without anything which actually makes it feel like San Francisco... it might as well be on Mars.



Ultimately, this is **The Big Bang Theory** version of **Spaced** - the references are there to be sneered or cheered at, not be a character trait.

WHAT HAPPENED? There's a reason we keep mentioning **The Big Bang Theory** in this feature - it had started airing on NBC less than a year before the remake was announced, and it's clear from the way **Spaced** was produced that this was Fox looking for its own nerd-friendly sitcom.

Getting an IP with an existing, adoring audience and original creators (well, kind of, see below) who'd become Hollywood names must have seemed a sure fire win.

But despite that, and remakes of UK sitcoms being in vogue at the time the badwill generated towards the McG version from the very same fanbase Fox and Warners thought they could cash in on seemed to spook the channel.

It didn't help they pissed off Pegg and Wright, destroying any goodwill towards it from their fans and celeb pals.

Worse, they'd completely missed Hynes off the credits, despite being the co-creator and co-writer of the whole thing - presumably because she wasn't involved in the Cornetto Trilogy and didn't have the same US profile.

Thankfully, although perhaps unsurprisingly, Fox passed on it. But who knows, maybe with proper **Spaced** celebrating its 25th anniversary this autumn, it might feature on the inevitable box set?

With various multiverses and reboots clogging up comic book timelines, **ALAN BOON** digs into the history of the great continuity resets...

... TO FIGHTING WITH CANONS

I have a friend called Chris.

Well, I have a few friends called Chris, to the point that I've had to add surnames or nicknames to tell them apart. But this Chris?

When I met him, he was the only Chris I knew, and yet he still attracted a nickname. We called him Wrong End of the Stick Chris because, no matter what the current cool craze, he'd always get it slightly wrong.

Here's the thing, though: despite getting the wrong end of the stick on just about everything, something he said to me years ago has begun to ring truer of late, so maybe we should go back and reassess his various choices from the 1990s with new eyes?

That's something to add to the list, obviously, but this one thing, this pertinent point made by WEotSChris all those years ago? That's the reason you're reading this.

This is why Marvel Comics needs to reboot its continuity to how it was at the end of **Secret Wars**...

Continuity is a weird thing. It is both a curse and a blessing – the reason fans continue to stick with a property long after they might otherwise have jettisoned it from their lives, and the reason new fans find it impenetrable to jump in at a random juncture.

And nowhere does this ring truer than in the world of comic books.

It wasn't always this way, of course, and that's as much a consequence of a relatively short history as dedicated watchmen devoted to keeping things straight, but somewhere along the line things began to get out of control.

As comic book characters failed to age in real time, and the eye of the continuity curators was taken off the ball, inconsistencies and anachronisms began to creep in.

The result is a confusing mess of conflicting narratives, all claiming (or assumed) to be the definitive take on a character.

At this juncture, the question of whether it really matters raises its head, and it is a fair point. But let's assume from this point on that it does matter, it's the most important thing in the world, and if you think otherwise, then you are both wrong and welcome to skip to the next feature in this magazine.

Continuity matters because, as a reader, it supports the investment of time and emotion in a character. If nothing that happens has any consequence, the story falls flat. That "clever" bit at the end of **The Usual Suspects**, where you find out that everything Kevin Spacey has told Chazz Palmintieri about over the last ninety minutes is a complete lie? Ruins the film. I have just spent an hour and a half becoming invested in your characters and what happens to them, and then you tell me none of it mattered?

Rubbish. Note: I will take no questions on this diversion...

A reader needs to believe that there will be lasting consequences from the events in a set text. These consequences extend no further than the end of the book, and, in the case of novels, that's not a problem.

Everything can be resolved – or not – by the end of your three-hundred-page story. But comic books? The ones starring our favourite characters? They don't end. They don't wrap up neatly. Because they want you to come back next month and spend your money on the next issue, and the key to that is continuity.

Unlike its competition, Marvel has had a relatively smooth relationship with continuity.

The Marvel Universe as we now know it began in 1961 with **Fantastic Four** #1. This Silver Age quickly absorbed some of the pre-Marvel superhero and monster history from Timely and Atlas Comics, and then proceeded to add a rich pre-history stretching back to the dawn of our universe and before.

Things proceeded from that point and, sure, there had to be elasticity of the timeline to explain how a Reed Richards that served in World War II wasn't sixty-five years old when

he faced trial for not killing Galactus, but these were generally hand-waved away by creators and fans alike.

DC had dealt with this kind of problem by creating a multiverse. The adventures of Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, et al., that took place during World War 2 – DC acknowledged its pre-Silver Age history from the off – were relegated to Earth-2, and so on.

In 1985, however, DC decided that having two Batmans and two Supermans was confusing and unfriendly to new readers, and that the prospect of forty-five – at that point – years of continuity was off-putting to kids picking up the comics for the first time. The resulting **Crisis on Infinite Earths** reset DC continuity with just one Earth. Nothing that happened before could be assumed to definitely have happened in this new timeline – except when it did, and if that meant that the last thirty years you spent invested in the adventures of Supergirl were suddenly thrown in the dustbin of history, then, well, at least she got a nice death scene in Crisis #7.

The problem was that DC could never settle on what their continuity should look like, constantly introducing new revisions through **Zero Hour**, **Infinite Crisis**, **Final Crisis** (it wasn't), **Flashpoint**, **Convergence**, **Dark Knights: Metal**, **Doomsday Clock**, **Dark Knight: Death Metal**, **Generations**, and **Dark Crisis** (told you).

At the time of writing, I believe DC have just undergone another soft reset with **Dawn of DC,** although who knows – and more importantly – cares anymore?

Marvel, though, refrained from such wholesale revisions of their timeline and characters – although they did introduce a multiverse of their own, where alternative takes on boilerplate icons could take place.

They even created a reader-friendly new universe called Ultimate Marvel that rebooted Spider-Man, The Avengers, and more for the edgy 2000s.

This commitment to the shared history of its stories had its drawbacks, especially as the years stretched on into the horrible 1990s and beyond – when unspeakable things were done to popular characters in the name of gritty realism and to feed a speculator boom that left millions of copies of **X-Men** #1 unread and sealed forever inside plastic bags now probably worth more than the comic they contain.

But in 2015, Marvel did the unthinkable and rebooted their universe. Kind of. On the surface, the events of the second **Secret Wars** mini-series pushed the reset button and everything that came before it was just that – history.

Nobody remembered that there even was a previous universe – or universes – except for Peter Parker and Miles Morales. Oh, and the Fantastic Four. And Dr. Doom. And maybe America Chavez or T'Challa? Nobody else, though, okay? All the average denizen of the Marvel Universe is aware of is that something happened, but they can't remember what and, even though it changed everything, it didn't actually change anything.

Unless it did. Clear?

The second **Secret Wars** was a noble attempt by Jonathan Hickman to clean up fifty-plus years of Marvel continuity and did it in the least-affecting – if not least-effective – way. Everything that happened to Peter Parker happened to Peter Parker unless explicitly stated otherwise. Or is it that everything that happened to Peter Parker didn't happen unless stated otherwise?

Because that means something completely different...

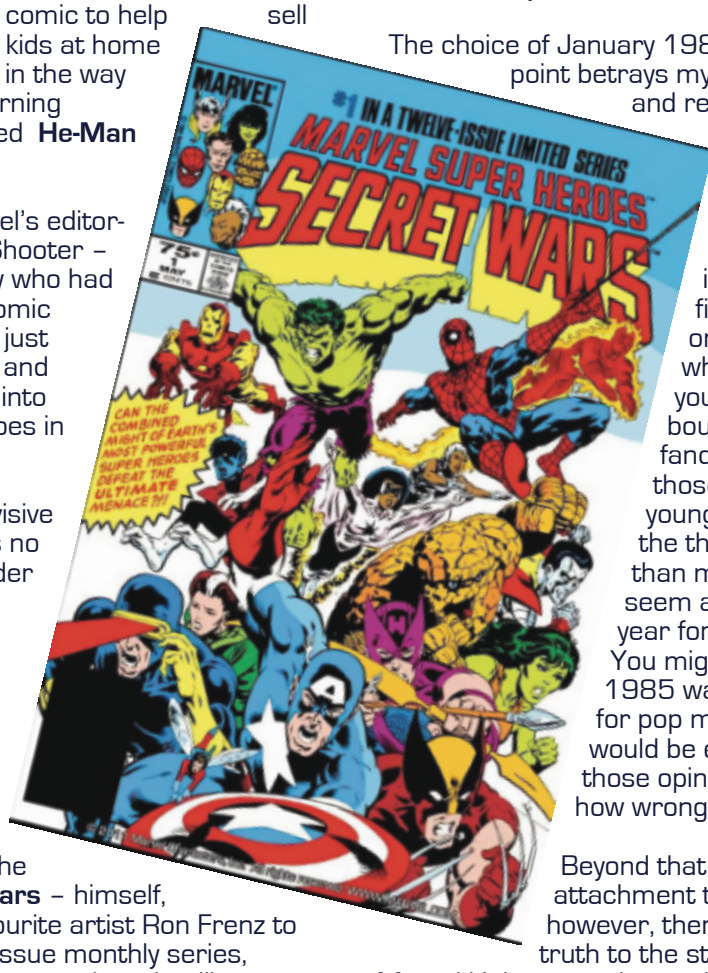
Hickman and Marvel were probably right, though, in feeling that something had to be done, especially with the Marvel Cinematic Universe ploughing its own furrow for far more "customers" than musty old comic books, and – if you listened to WEofSChris, they were right to do it with **Secret Wars**.

They just got the wrong **Secret Wars**...

In 1983, on the heels of an action figure boom started when Kenner made Star Wars toys the must-have accessory for any self-respecting child, Marvel licensed its characters to Mattel.

Mattel had tried to make a deal for DC's properties, only to be beaten to the punch by Kenner (who released the Super Powers line the following year). Mattel quickly signed with DC's biggest rivals and developed a series of figures based on Marvel's most popular characters.

A condition of the deal was that Marvel produce an event comic to help sell the figures, giving kids at home a storyline to play in the way that Saturday morning cartoons promoted **He-Man** or **GI Joe**.



At the time, Marvel's editor-in-chief was Jim Shooter – a teenage prodigy who had written his first comic book for DC aged just thirteen in 1965, and who had stepped into Stan Lee's old shoes in 1978.

Shooter was a divisive figure, but there's no doubting that, under his leadership, Marvel was revitalised. With Mattel making certain demands that had to be acceded to, Shooter opted to write the comic – called, as was the toyline, **Secret Wars** – himself, recruiting fan-favourite artist Ron Frenz to pencil the twelve-issue monthly series, assisted by Bob Layton when deadlines got tough.

Shooter saw an opportunity to shake things up. Quite rightly, he felt that the effects of the year-long storyline should be felt in the wider Marvel Universe, especially with those characters abducted by The Beyonder and taken to Battleworld for one big action-figure fight.

Working with the various editors on his monthly titles, Shooter devised a series of consequences and innovations that would develop from the events of **Secret Wars**, instructing them to be put in place in issues on sale from January 1984, the same month that **Secret Wars** #1 hit newsstands.

What's more, the reasons for these changes would be kept deliberately fuzzy – if you wanted to know how Spider-Man got his new costume, buy **Secret Wars**!

The choice of January 1984 as a reset point betrays my age. I was 11 and reaching that age when stuff matters. This is the age when your personality is shaped by your interests and a firm grip is needed on what you like, what it means to you, and the exact boundaries of that fandom. Thus, for those of you who are younger or – perish the thought! – older than me, 1984 may not seem a particularly key year for comic books. You might also think that 1985 wasn't the best year for pop music, too, and you would be entitled to hold those opinions, no matter how wrong they may be.

Beyond that pubescent attachment to the era, however, there is a purity and truth to the status of the Marvel Universe as it stood in January 1984.

On the heels of its first (almost) line-wide crossover, stood poised to enter an exciting era that would define many of its heroes for decades to come.

Building on what had come earlier in the Shooter era, the changes made by the events of **Secret Wars** were a final touch, readying Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and others for the next stage of their ongoing evolution. As line-wide ground zeroes go, there are few better examples.

So where was the Marvel Universe in January 1984?

Over in the flagship title, the Fantastic Four returned from Battleworld with a change of membership. The Invisible Woman hadn't even gone in the first place because she was pregnant with her second child and obviously very delicate, but they returned with She-Hulk in place of The Thing, who opted to stay on Battleworld, where he could control his transformations between his human and rocky forms.

The Thing's adventures continued in his own title by John Byrne and Ron Wilson, but still included a big dollop of moaning about being a monster for those looking for some consistency.

Back in **Fantastic Four**, the Mole Man returned, Doom was presumed dead, and this was a high point of Byrne's run on the title, coming just months after the trial of Reed Richards and an incursion from the Negative Zone.

Johnny Storm hadn't slept with Alicia (or Medusa), Franklin Richards still had undefined abilities, and Wyatt Wingfoot was about to grab himself some green tail.

The other character majorly affected by the events of **Secret Wars** was Spider-Man, who returned to New York with a new costume courtesy of an alien gizmo found on Battleworld. Responding to his thoughts, and able to transform itself into street clothes as well as the sleek black bodysuit, the new costume was a Marmite moment for longtime fans of the character and would – of course – be revealed to be a Symbiote, an alien species that would corrupt its host and lead to the introduction of Venom (and several other villains with diminishing returns).

Apart from the costume change, Peter Parker was romantically involved with the Black Cat, who had been introduced a few years before, but conflicts over whether she liked him as Parker or Spider-Man (and her feeling that she needed superpowers to be his equal) filled the pages of **Peter Parker, the Spectacular Spider-Man**. **Amazing Spider-Man** concerned itself more with the new duds, having finished the long-running Hobgoblin saga (and with The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man having freshly brought tears to eyes).

Most importantly, Spider-Man and Mary-Jane were not married. She was looking after her aunt in Florida after breaking up with Peter, and that's important because no kid wants to read the adventures of married people, especially when the only people you know who are married are your parents.

Thus, there was no need for Mephisto to wish away their marriage. Gwen Stacey and Norman Osborn were still dead, the Clone Saga was just a bad idea at the back of Terry Kavanagh's brain, and Peter was still broke, just how we like him.

The X-Men went to Secret Wars having just undergone some major changes, all part of Chris Claremont's carefully woven tapestry.

Storm took the leadership of the Morlocks from Callisto by combat, switching to a punkier new look, while Wolverine's Japanese connections were beginning to cause

problems for the team. Cyclops had just married Madelyne Pryor because Jean Grey was dead, and over in **The New Mutants,** the next generation of young heroes were going through their paces, adding Magik and Magma to the team and preparing to tussle with the Hellfire Academy of the villainous Emma Frost. While time-travel had played a vital role in **Days of Future Past,** the convoluted timeline knack that would later plague the title was yet to be put in place, as were Apocalypse, Bishop, and Adam-X, the X-treme.

The Avengers were still getting used to a new roster introduced ten months earlier, which included the new Captain Marvel and (not yet a sex pest) Starfox, enjoying a critically appraised low-key run under Roger Stern and Al Milgrom, which would lead to the formation of Avengers West Coast. Various members had their solo titles, of course, with Captain America caught in a web spun by the Red Skull, Baron Zemo, and Mother Superior, even as Bernie Rosenthal proposed marriage to Steve Rogers! Most importantly, Bucky was dead.

Tony Stark was a drunk, and I**ron Man** depicted his fall from grace, with James Rhodes inside the armour and Justin Hammer waiting in the wings to spark **the Armor Wars**, while Walt Simonson's Thor had just introduced Beta Ray Bill and separated Thor from Donald Blake, having the thunder god adopt the secret identity of construction worker Sigurd Jarlson.

The Hulk, meanwhile, returned from Battleworld as a more savage, less intelligent creature and is given Kate Waynesboro as a chaperone by the government, having just driven Thunderbolt Ross to the verge of suicide over the things he'd done in pursuit of the Jade Giant. Everything in its place.

Not everyone went to **Secret Wars**, of course, but there was a convergence of the Marvel Universe across the line, with Denny O'Neil moving into his second year on **Daredevil** after taking over from Frank Miller, **Alpha Flight** still in its infancy and building Byrne's Canadian superhero world in the wake of Marrina's death, and **The Defenders** adding a " New" to their name after grabbing Angel and Iceman to join the non-team, a title where you could literally see old man Gargoyle yelling at Cloud.

Dr Strange had just wiped out all the

vampires on the planet by killing Dracula, **Moon Knight** was about to be cancelled, **Power Man and Iron Fist** could only dream of whatever a "Netflix" is, and both Rom and Micronauts were still firmly embedded in the Marvel Universe.

What about the staples of the MCU that we haven't mentioned, though? Well, Carol Danvers was Binary, a spacebound Starjammer rebuilding her life after Rogue stole her powers. The Guardians of the Galaxy were a bunch of strange (stranger?) looking dudes later retconned to Earth-691, while Star Lord wasn't Star Lord. Rocket Raccoon was a joke. Groot was the monster from planet X. And Gamora, Drax, and Thanos were all dead.

Black Panther was mostly a background character since his last spin-in, ahem, Jungle Action ended in 1978. As was Nick Fury. Shang-Chi gave up being the **Master of Kung-Fu** six months earlier (and would be out of Marvel continuity until 1988).

Scott Lang had only been Ant-Man for five years, spending much of that time as a supporting character in **Iron Man. And The Eternals** were... look, do you even care where **The Eternals** were?

> It's a fallacy, isn't it, this whole dreaming of putting things right?

The notion that there even is a right is fanciful enough, let alone that you or I – a nobody and a nobody with word diarrhoea, respectively – might be allowed any control over the things we love.

If it was a relationship, it would be called abusive. But isn't this part of our investment in these properties? Isn't the right to feel aggrieved that they're being done wrong part of the entry fee?

I don't know. I'm just a simple man who should have listened to Wrong End of the Stick Chris all those years ago and dedicated his life to ensuring that timeline came about. Fight you for the reset button...

Award-winning bondage model **ARIEL ANDERSSEN** talks Welsh apes, openness and swapping ropes for writing her new autobiography

...TO BEING A LITTLE TIED UP RIGHT NOW

So, how would you introduce yourself to someone unfamiliar with your work?

I always tell people that I'm a BDSM model. People generally don't really know what that means, but it's the truth, and I don't like to prevaricate. I'm proud of my job, and I don't mind explaining if people are curious. If they want to know more, I explain that I specialise in bondage and spanking, and that I'm submissive by orientation.

You've talked with family members on your YouTube channel about the book and writing it, but what's the response been to it from your industry peers?

Most of them haven't read it yet. The very few that have have been very kind. I wanted to do a good job of describing my industry, but I know I can't really speak for anyone other than myself because every performer's path is different. My best friend, who's an ex-bondage performer, said it was hot, which I appreciated immensely!

How cathartic was writing a book like this? Did you find your own view on your journey into the BDSM scene changing at all from writing it?

I know that not everyone finds an experience like this especially positive, but for me, it was an unadulterated pleasure. The act of concentrating on remembering exactly how things felt and forcing myself to be totally honest even if it didn't reflect brilliantly on me gave me an opportunity to fully absorb how lucky I feel to have done this job for 20 years.

Writing about my worst experiences, knowing that anyone who cares to will be able to read about them, feels a bit like letting go of a balloon and seeing it soaring away from you into the sky, no longer your responsibility to hold on to. Writing about my discovery of BDSM made me feel grateful all over again and made me consider how lonely and conflicted I might still be if I hadn't found out that I wasn't alone with my interests.

Presumably, the irony of it being published by Unbound didn't pass you by...?
It is my favourite thing in the world. If I'd created a publishing company especially for my book, that's the name I'd have chosen. Remarkable.

Obviously, with things like your excellent YouTube channel, you've been very open about the bondage work aspects of your life - and early in the book, you talk about filming a scene in front of your niece. Did that openness make it an easier process putting the book together?

I can't imagine having managed to write the book at all if I hadn't already been 'out' to my entire family. Sadly, I know of several performers who've been the victims of blackmail attempts by people who threatened to tell their families about their work. So I always knew that if I couldn't tell my family about it, it wasn't something I should shoot.

It does mean that I delayed shooting some of my harder content until after my niece and nephew became adults, but I'm okay with that. Being open comes with challenges, but I'm a great believer in the armour of openness.

I've got to ask - what's the deal with the ape puppet?

Gareth the Orangutan was my husband's Hywel's purchase during lockdown. I still don't entirely understand what his reasoning at the time was, but we are both blessed with excess

imagination, so once he arrived and announced via Hywel that he only spoke Welsh, we found ourselves incorporating him into our lives.

We speak a lot more Welsh at home because of Gareth. I'm sure many people made some surprising choices during lockdown, and this was certainly one of ours...

You talk in the book about being mean to your dolls when you were young, and that both your father and your husband have connections to the world of physics. So... in which order will you be seeing Barbie and Oppenheimer?

We saw **Oppenheimer** two days ago! We saw it first because we don't have much time together at the moment and thought that **Oppenheimer** might be more in need of a big screen than **Barbie**. But we are both passionately attached to the idea of watching **Barbie**, too!

At times there's still an almost Puritan view of adult work and kink, so how has that impacted on talking about the book in more environments?

I really didn't expect to have a problem, given that **Secret Diary of a Call Girl** was published 20-plus years ago. But I wrote to 77 agents before someone was brave enough to take it on, and the first round of publishers my agent submitted it to all turned it down.

The stigma against adult work is still alive and well. But I've been very encouraged by how much easier it is to get mainstream media interest now that I've got a publisher.

It's one reason that I was determined not to self-publish. I wanted my story to be accepted in the mainstream, and to be seen to be accepted. Sometimes, it only takes one brave person or company to lead the way, and then others follow. That's what Unbound did for my book, and for me.

So what next for you? I know you've talked on social and YouTube about your other outside interests – is doing the book the start of winding down the Ariel side of your life?

Absolutely 100% not! I will never retire from modelling unless age and/or illness takes the decision from me.

One of my inspirations is the beautiful GG Lynn, who sadly passed away last year. She was in her sixties already when I first met her at a convention in Germany, and she was still a full-time bondage model.

I have many interests, enough to fill multiple lives, but BDSM modelling has my heart.

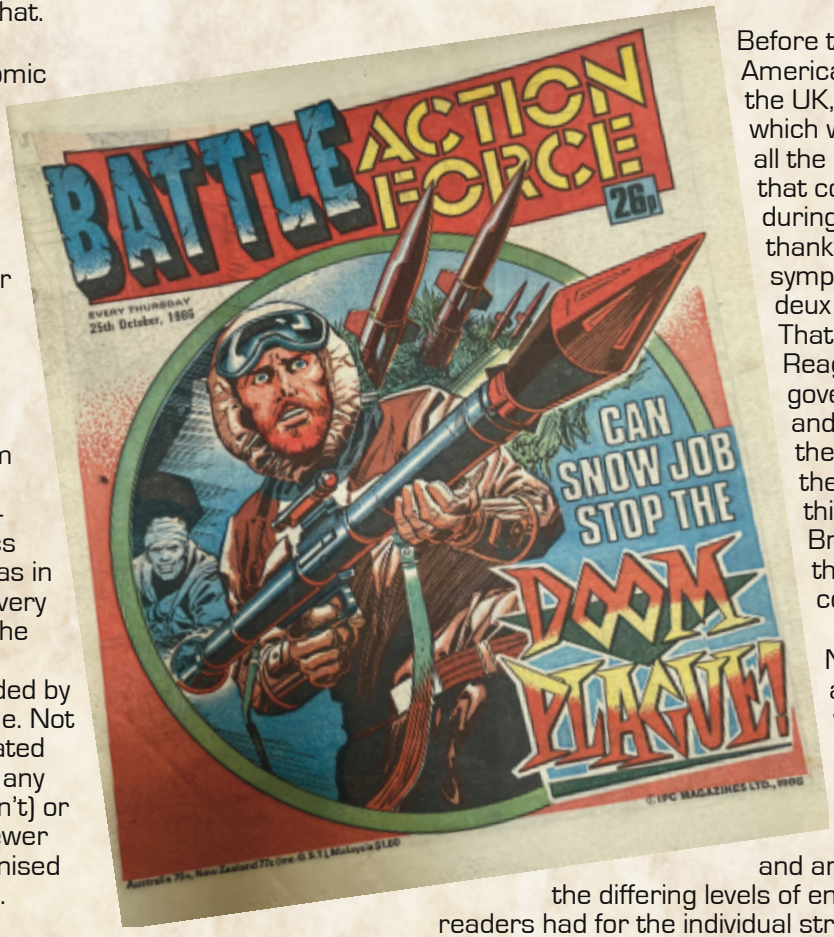
- **Playing to Lose: How a Jehovah's Witness Became a Submissive BDSM Model by Ariel Anderssen (Unbound, £14.99) is available now**

JAMES COORAY SMITH charts a forgotten slice of British social history… thanks to some unexpected charity shop comic donations

Comic books are to the post-financial crash world what pulp westerns were to the immediate post-war period, or long-canceled network television shows were to the years straight after 9/11.

Which is to say, they're the dominant source material inspiration for the highest-grossing films, and people are usually trying to sell you tie-in reissues of old ones or dubious merit on the back of that.

American comic books, that is. But just as I'll go to my grave claiming that British "telly" was for much of the twentieth century a distinct and separate medium from American "teevee", UK-based comics publishing was in lots of ways very different to the American medium divided by a single name. Not in that it treated its creatives any better (it didn't) or that it had fewer links to organised crime (it did).



The main difference is in form. A weekly anthology, in which almost all stories were short episodes of a much longer saga, is a very different prospect to a Marvel or DC comic. This was so even in the days before American comics consolidated behind a model of monthly books featuring a single story (or episode of a story) featuring a single lead character or team.

Yes, those of you well-versed in comics are thinking of counter-examples from across the pond now. The EC anthologies, for example. Or pointing out how DC titles once had second stories in them. You're right. But the difference is that pretty much all UK comics were like this, and they were like this until the late eighties. Until the early nineties, even.

The handful that are still going — such as Rebellion's **2000AD** or, for a different audience, DC Thomson's **Beano** — are like that now. So are any periodic attempts to revive the form, such as **The Phoenix**.

Before the great Americanisation of the UK, the one which washed over all the countries that comprise it during the 1980s thanks to the sympatico folie à deux between the Thatcher and Reagan governments, and whether they'd voted for them or not, this is what British people thought of as comics.

Newsprint anthologies with a sometimes wild mix of stories and of writers and artists. Even the differing levels of enthusiasm readers had for the individual strips were kind of important. There were ones you always read first and ones you usually read last. One of the great joys of them was the ability of an issue to conjure a new favourite out of nothing when a new strip launched.

Each comic too had its own overarching tone. The wild fury of **Action** or the Amicus (not Hammer) inflected horror of **Scream!** The odd mix of pained decency, cheerful patriotism, and War is Hell of much of **Battle**. The cobwebby proto-Young Adult tone of

girls' horror comic **Misty** or the Postmodern Cinderella bleakness of pretty much everything in **Tammy**.

Towards the end of pre-pandemic times, I was able to pick up a huge pile of British Boys comics of the seventies and eighties in the series of charity shops that greet you as you walk up London's Kentish Town Road. Plastic bags of them had obviously been distributed, more or less at random, amongst the various charities — MIND, PDSA, Oxfam, and so on — and as I picked up most of them, I realised they had all come from the same collection.

From the earliest mid-1970s issues of **Action** to the late 1980s copies of **New Eagle**, a large number had TOM written on them in the same handwriting.

Now, I don't propose that the handwriting was Tom's own. This was the handwriting of someone working at the newsagent at which Tom's weekly comic was reserved. Because newsagents used to write on your comic in those days, so they knew who it was for. And I do mean comic singular. Because in the piles of comics I picked up, you can trace Tom's reading over more than a decade. UK comics publishers such as IPC / Fleetway and DC Thomson operated a policy often referred to as "Hatch, match, and despatch," or variations thereupon.

If a comic was failing, was falling below the sales threshold for profitability, it would not be canceled. It would be merged into another, more profitable title.

Now, this was of course canceled by any other name, but aspects of the canceled comic would survive. For a while, the comic into which, say, **Valiant**, had been merged would for a while claim to be '**Battle and Valiant**', and key strips transferred to the new, merged entity.

There are many examples, but one of the most notable is that both Johnny Alpha, Strontium Dog, and the Ro-Busters, thought of as a key **2000AD** character, were created for **Starlord**, a sister title that ran for five months in 1978.

By such a process did certain characters survive the end of their originating publication, like a landing module allowing its rocket launcher to fall away and burn up in the Earth's orbit as it itself heads towards the Moon.

Almost all the British comics and their characters of that era now belong to Rebellion, the console games developer that bought **2000AD** back in, well, 2000AD. Reprints of old stories and revivals of those characters under the protective umbrella of **2000AD** seem like the logical end point of the hatch, match, and despatch process. **2000AD** has almost become like the Ark. By which I mean Noah's Ark, not the one found by Indiana Jones. It's a vessel into which all the surviving history of not even a genre, but a medium, has been loaded.

Tom, I can see, bought **Action**, and then moved to **Battle** when it became **Battle Action**. He then stuck with it through the years it was **Battle Action Force** and **Battle Storm Force**, before beginning to purchase **Eagle** when **Battle** itself went the way of all newsprint, after almost thirteen years and 650 plus issues.

Where did he go then? Did he put away childish things? At a cautious estimation, he must have been twenty. Which would only make him sixty now.

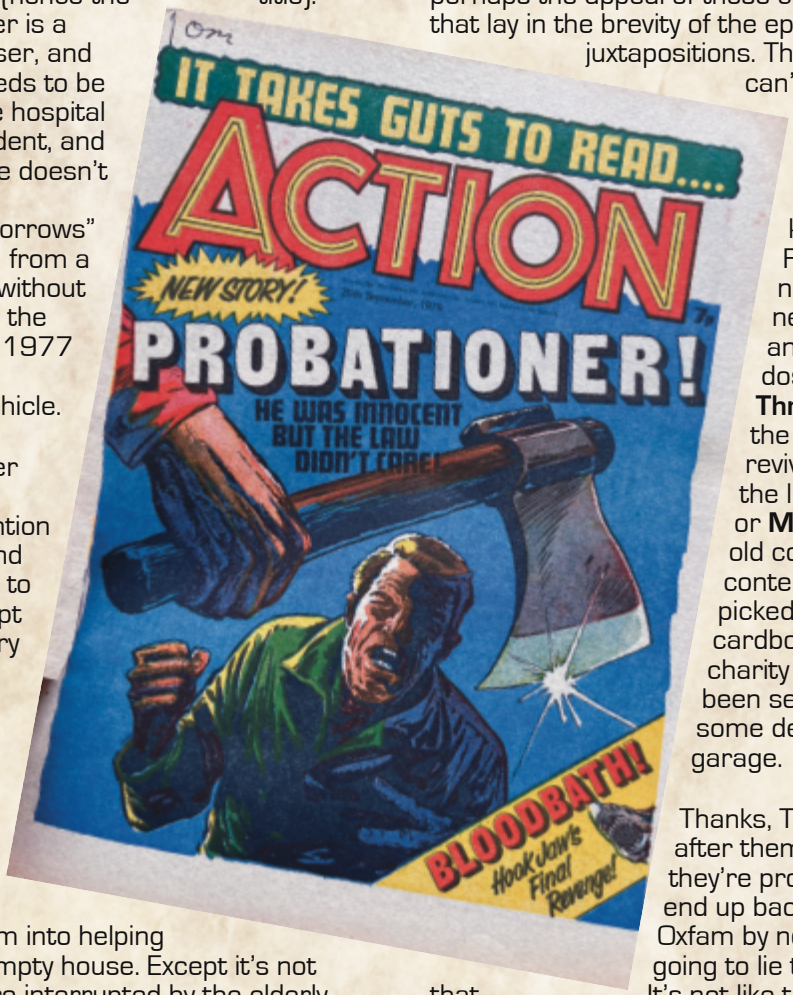
Did Tom grow tired of these relics of his 70s into 80s childhood as 2020 approached? Or did he die young, leaving his collection to be scattered by well-meaning friends and relatives and then partially reunited by me? I don't know, really, which seems the worst from this side of the transaction.

I'd like to think the boy for whom these comics were saved is still this side of eternity. Maybe I've queued next to him in the post office, or nodded at him in a local pub. But if so, how could he let this treasure go? Because surely only love could assemble a collection like this over so long, and there's a part of me that considers the death of the self a lesser sadness than the death of love.

And it is treasure. Such treasure. We are better served for reprints of British comics of this and even earlier eras than we ever have been thanks to the **Treasury of British Comics** collections, but there's so much of

this stuff that opening any issue brings new discoveries of some kind. I had heard of **Probationer**. But nothing could prepare me for the bleakness of the opening episode.

Dave Brockman is arrested by the police at midnight after being mistaken for one of a gang of robbers. He isn't. He's just walking home after a night shift at a fish and chip shop. It goes to trial, and the judge puts him on probation (hence the title). Dave's mother is a wheelchair user, and when she needs to be rushed to the hospital after an accident, and an ambulance doesn't arrive, Dave reluctantly "borrows" a delivery van from a nearby shop without asking, as it's the closest thing 1977 has to an accessible vehicle.



Dave's mother receives the medical attention she needs, and Dave returns to the van. Except his "temporary theft" has been noticed by a local gang member who, knowing Dave is on probation, blackmails him into helping him rob an empty house. Except it's not empty. They're interrupted by the elderly owner. Who Slater promptly kills. With an axe.

I mean, WHAT?

To be honest, it's not even the bleakest five pages in the comic. And look at that cover.

As far as I know, **Probationer** never completed its sentence. It was one of the strips that disappeared when **Action** was put on hiatus, dragged off the shelves by a tabloid furore over violence. (Action would later return, in adulterated form. But it was not what it was, and was folded into **Battle** not long after.) **Probationer** is sadly, unlikely ever to be released again.

Hardback reprints of long-running stories are welcome, and I buy too many of them; but in some way they miss, if not the point, then perhaps the appeal of those comics. Some of that lay in the brevity of the episodes. Those juxtapositions. That variety. You can't get that in the **Treasury of British Comics** hardbacks. I know. I've tried. For that, you need this week's new **2000AD** and your new dose of **Thrillpower**. Or the very occasional revival specials of the likes of **Scream** or **Misty**. Or dirty old comics, specific contents unknown, picked out of a cardboard box in a charity shop, having been sent there from some dead guy's garage.

Thanks, Tom, I'll look after them for you. But they're probably going to end up back in Highgate Oxfam by now . I'm not going to lie to you about that. It's not like there's a better-selling comic I can be merged into when I'm too old to go on. But I think you know that already, don't you?

Rest well, mate. Whoever you were.

... TO NECROMANCING THE STONE

September 13th, 2022. I left work at 5:30 pm, raced to my local bookstore before they closed, and then promptly sat on the couch for five hours straight, *writes M. Alzamora*.

Why? The third instalment in one of my favourite book series had come out that day.

Written by Tamsyn Muir, The **Locked Tomb** series (or trilogy, as it's affectionately still called by fans from before the announcement of a fourth book) is a little hard to describe.

In a blurb on the back of the first book, British author Charles Strauss said: "Lesbian necromancers explore a haunted gothic palace in space!" While very true, the whole thing is a little more complicated than that.

Spoilers ahead. You have been warned.

We're three books in so far, with **Gideon the Ninth**, **Harrow the Ninth**, and the most recent addition of **Nona the Ninth**. So let me catch you up to speed:

The gang has finally stopped playing "Whose body is it anyway?" and everyone is back where they belong. Well, except for Paul who's now a combination of two different people who were always meant to become one in order to become one immortal (ish) necromancer.

Gideon is a revenant, has a chussy (you probably don't want to know), and still isn't happy after killing her childhood abuser.

Harrow has just reawakened from her literal trip down memory lane that details how the world ended ten thousand years ago. And Nona? Well, she's the resurrected spirit of the earth, of course, who was trapped in the titular locked tomb to keep her away from her boyfriend, God. This is what I think, at least. No one here is what I would call a "reliable narrator."

Make sense to you? Yeah, me neither.

But that's a big part of the appeal to the massive online queer community that has formed around this series. Reading the books makes you feel like you're building a conspiracy board hosted on Tumblr dot com and Reddit where everyone is trying to come up with the most insane theory.

And the answers so far have usually been way crazier than anything we could have come up with. To quote one Reddit user from a quick survey I did, "Muir fully expects her readers to go after her mysteries like border collies with a rawhide."

Another said, mostly in jest, that Muir takes the attitude of "figure it out or perish."

I mean, the entire second book basically gaslights you into thinking you actually didn't read the first book at all, only to have you discover near the end that the character

Harrow lobotomised herself to save Gideon after she was forced to spiritually cannibalise her.

Do you know how many times I had to read **Harrow the Ninth** to actually figure out what the hell was going on? Once in complete confusion, then again with this new knowledge, and then AGAIN so I could see what everyone online was catching that I missed on my first two reads.

It's honestly the most fun I've had reading in a while. Every line has a double meaning, each plotline has more and more layers of significance. No matter how sure I am that I'm at least fifty percent on the right track, someone has textual evidence and long essays on scenarios I haven't even considered yet.

Then there's the identity politics – or rather, lack of it. For as much as I love a coming-out story and think it's super important, it's so validating to have a world full of characters who are queer in every sense of the word and every part of the spectrum.

In particular, lesbians are allowed to be messy and too much and gross and fully-fleshed-out characters rather than needing to be made palatable for a wide audience. Palatable here means "completely innocent" or "hyper-sexualised," by the way.

Characters are not token people of colour, but just different races in a way that both slightly mirrors colonialist attitudes but also doesn't matter. People are just people, no questions asked.

In just three books, Muir talks about messy lesbians, the impact of imperialism, cannibalism, codependency, unstable identities, murder mysteries, body horror, the destruction we can cause each other, sex jokes, and the fact that love of any kind can never truly be taken away.

Plus, God/John committed a genocide against the entire human race after his necromancy couldn't kill all the billionaires escaping Earth! He also had a three-way with two of the people who he made immortal and lied to for millennia!

You can't tell me that Muir wouldn't have been burned at the stake for heresy in the 1600s.

It's insane! It's so many heart-wrenching, hilarious, and complicated themes all at once! And I love it so, so much.

I alluded to it earlier, but my favourite part of the **Locked Tomb** series is the community that it helped create. Creativity spurs creativity; I've seen so many talented artists, writers, and theorists come up with art, stories, and ideas that I couldn't even dream of that all build off of each other.

With the advent of the internet (no offence to the original Trekkies), it's so easy to be able to find someone across the world from you with the same interests and start talking and collaborating. I know I'm not the only one who feels this way.

When does the last book, **Alecto the Ninth**, come out? Great question. I'm crossing all my fingers that it'll be early 2024. But for this series? I'd be willing to wait years. Or even as long as the reign of the Emperor.

At least I know that everyone on Tumblr dot com and Reddit will be right there suffering with me...

Rose Ruane drew huge acclaim for her debut novel This Is Yesterday. On the eve of her follow-up, Birding, being released, she tells FROM THE SUBLIME how it all came about.

... TO A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

“Probably the main reason I write is Bagpuss!”

Rose Ruane has incredible eyebrows. Not only styled, but coloured into two matching rainbows. It’s the perfect encapsulation of her — an unexpected splash of colour, at a queer and tangential angle to the rest of the world.

We’re in a coffee shop in Glasgow’s Merchant City, talking about her new novel, **Birding**. It is the follow-up to her critically acclaimed debut, **This Is Yesterday**, and tells the story of two middle-aged women with very different backgrounds whose lives intersect in an unexpected and highly consequential fashion.

The release comes at a busy time for Ruane, who’s also completing a PhD which has seen her curating stories and content around art therapy from those who were in an institution in Glasgow in the 1960s. Visitors to her social media channels will have seen glimpses of the art in question, which feels entirely in keeping with her characterful, sensory-heavy writing.

These two parallel lives, as academic and author, curator and creator, are perfectly in keeping with the themes of her books, it turns out...

Congratulations on the new book. How has the process been getting there — given you were promoting the first one during lockdown and this one, I would imagine, was written during lockdown? Did that change how you approached it, and what you were doing with it as it went along?

Birding came from the sort of collision or elision of separate ideas that existed before lockdown and before **This Is Yesterday** came out. There was a point where I believe they were very separate things, because it sort of follows two main protagonists who start as strangers and their lives end up on a collision course.

One felt like it was very much about what it’s like to arrive at middle age with an abject lack of self-awareness, and one felt like a story about what it is like to arrive in middle age with an almost uselessly overwhelming sense of self-awareness - that sort of like self-destructive self-criticism. They felt like they were dealing with separate things in a very similar way.

Then there was an incident in my personal life which unlocked the idea of actually, what would it be like for those worlds to collide with one another? These women who are ostensibly at a very similar point of life in terms of ageing - the menopause - neither of them are where they sort of want to be... what would it be for those lives to intersect?

I just got really excited about that and both of those stories, which I’d been sort of writing in parallel and felt like they'd become a bit becalmed... the alchemy of placing them into the same story really animated them, both in terms of the excitement of plotting how you would start to bring them together and work out like what the impact they would have on each other would be.

I was just starting to feel like I was really flying with it when the pandemic happened, and it sort of stopped me in my tracks, as I think it did for so many of us. On every level, you're experiencing such a huge tectonic event.

For me, just with the book, it was like, you know, a contemporary work of fiction, and you're like, what is this anymore? I'm writing about a world that doesn't exist at the moment and might never exist again. Is this suddenly historical fiction, is it speculative fiction? Am I writing a parallel world?

My relationship with the book sort of became an avatar of my relationship with everything in the world we were living in. It was all shut down. I was very fortunate that that didn't last for too long, simply because I think I arrived at a point of going like, there is nothing else you can do.

Was it difficult to continue?

It's seemed even more impossible to begin something else than it, you know, and it seemed really impossible to continue writing **Birding** at the time, but it seemed even more impossible to work out what the hell else I would do. I don't think we talk enough about how boredom is sometimes sort of the most disruptive force in the world and how

sometimes it is the locus of creativity and ability - you just are bored enough to get on with something that you didn't know how to continue working on. And so I went away, and finished it, and I was sort of almost at the end when life went back to, in scare quotes and with great scepticism, normal.

It's so rare for me to write based on like a big revelation or some kind of big Damascene moment. It's much more tricky and ugly and messy and effortful. There was something about those months where we were sort of slowly going 'there isn't another lockdown'. This kind of messy, altered, unrecognisable but actually quite quotidian, in some ways recognisable, version of like everything opening back up told me how the book needed to end.

It's like sort of one of the only times where I've written based on receiving some bolt from the blue of how a thing should finish. I feel like that the only two good things that came out of the pandemic for me was that I got to grow out my undercut in private, and that there was this point right at the end where I'd had no idea, I still didn't know how to stick the landing, and I did for certain receive inspiration from the ether and go, oh, that's it!

Is that how you tend to write? Not starting with an endpoint in mind?

Yeah, I'm a big sort of steer into the sweep of your own headlights kind of writer. Writing for me always feels a bit like a dot to dot thing. There's always sort of some inciting incident. And there are certain scenes that feel like they led to moments that I absolutely understand - with great clarity from the beginning - what they will be like and how they'll act on the characters.
The visual world of my books is very strong. I think it's a lot to do with the fact that my writing is as much inspired by TV and cinema as it is by literature or other writing, and the fact that I was originally a visual artist who came to become a writer by accident.

I think that sort of cinematic thinking also helps you have a sense of a scene. I write reactively - I think I enjoy slightly surprising myself. Writing is sometimes a sort of series of like tricks and traps and treats and punishments, and rewards that you inflict on yourself both daily, within the writing and within what you find yourself.

When I was writing **This Is Yesterday**, there was a bit with Peach, the main character, where I just locked her in a room for about two months where I had, like, no idea how to get her out of her needless, terrible, personal locked room mystery. But the relief of finally working on how to get her out of there and knowing what she would do, and how that would affect the story of the other characters, when I finally released her was like such a big alchemical sort of energy that it was amazing.

I think I realised that to a certain extent I'm always writing about whether or not change is possible. A lot of my characters are people who sort of feel like failures or have a strong sense of their life having gone off course.

As an outsider looking in — I'm a white, middle-aged bloke, so I'm admittedly not in that demographic — it does feel that there's a kind of gap in women's literature looking at the type of characters, and age of characters, you write. It seems there's lots of memoirs in that field but not a lot of fiction. Was that your experience too?

I think that a lot of fiction with middle-aged women, because they — this is of the vast majority of women — do end up having children, a lot of them are about sort of motherhood or marriage, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that at all. That isn't a criticism — probably the majority of

protagonists of that kind of fiction are those kinds of people because the majority of readers of that kind of fiction are parents, and that's fine.

But I think especially because of the socioeconomic conditions in which we live... increasingly, there's a lot of not just women, people of every gender in their 30s and 40s who are still renters, who feel there's no opportunity for career progression.

That there's a lack of opportunity, the fact that you won't have secure housing, you wouldn't have job security. And I think there's a gulf between like a lot of great fiction about women in their 20s and 30s dealing with relationships and lostness and mental health issues, and like economic uncertainty, and then there's a lot of fiction about women in their late 30s, or into their 40s feeling trapped in motherhood or marriage.

But there's not so much fiction about those women who exist otherwise; who actually are in middle age, and they're not mothers, either because they didn't want to be or because they were unable to be, women who are queer, or women who actually, you know, sort of don't know who they are. And I think there's also a thing about sort of with middle age and menopause, where like, you know, you sort of have to confront, like, a surprising amount of concerns that feels similar to adolescence in terms of things that you end up questioning your identity, you know, what you intend to do with the rest of your life?

So to me it's not a sort of deliberate ideological choice. I just find myself really moved to sort of write about the versions of middle-age that I think are less seen. They're still the concerns of, sort of, white middle-age and cis middle-age. None of my protagonists are affluent, but they probably quite well-educated, well-off backgrounds, which, again, I think, is something maybe we don't see written about so much, and that sort of those complications, or paths, where you sort of are still essentially a middle-class person who grew up in that world of privilege, but also where they, you know, you certainly don't have the homeownership of your parents, you don't have the sort of conventional heteronormative marriage of your parents, you don't necessarily have children. And so you slightly exist in this funny betwixt.

Both Peach in **This Is Yesterday** and Lydia, one of the two main protagonists in **Birding,** are both people who are realising quite shamefully late in life like how much privilege they've actually enjoyed, but they're both people who are pretty broke and pretty broken and sort of assessing where to put this sense that they are essentially privileged, who have taken like a lot of their advantages in life, taken those for granted and you know, probably haven't acted with great care or thought for others - but they both are, you know, people who are realising that they perhaps have the right to the idea of themselves as some kind of like victims or survivor of harms of their own.

Particularly Lydia in **Birding**, a lot of her story is involved in the idea that both as a younger woman when she was in a sort of shampoo-style pop punk band, and as an adult in a relationship she had with like a sort of famous man, she sort of has a right to consider herself abused. She's the victim of certain things, but also in realising that she has a right to feel like terrible things have happened to her, she also has to sort of assume responsibility for her complicity in, you know, things she's done to other people that weren't ideal.

You said earlier you got into writing by accident. How did that happen? You were a visual artist initially, and those are very

different mediums...

In lots of ways for me, art and writing were never that separate. I always want to make complex things not simple but accessible, you know, and I think, so much for me is about the ways in which we might, without simplifying things, make them accessible.

For me, there's always a sense of like, once I became like, I get really sort of obsessively gripped by ideas. And I think, sort of one of the good fortunes of that is that I sort of think, I don't know how I'm going to do this, I just know that I have to do this.

When I was making art, writing was a way of thinking things through with myself and now that I predominantly write, throwing and making things is often a way of thinking through ideas. They're not necessarily things that I put into a public realm. But I feel very fortunate that I have multiple strands of practice where I could try a lot of things.

Maybe in Scotland more than anywhere else there's a bit of a tall poppy culture, you know, and I realised I have no need to feel uncomfortable about this, but all that happened was I started to think that the writing might be good.

It's funny that, like, you know, even after years and years of therapy, sort of unpacking all those forces that shape you into, sort of self-loathing, human, whether they're like, familial, or sort of cultural or emotional, I still feel really uncomfortable going, like, I just started to realise I was good at it.

I think it's a gendered experience, as well. As a woman, you are taught to be incredibly, forelock-tuggingly grateful to have your creative efforts like tolerated in one area of the arts. It felt like I was being like a bit greedy or grasping to go 'what if I asked the world to also tolerate my terrible littles scrawlings in another aspect of the arts?' and actually, it was incredibly liberating to go 'what if I am just good at multiple things?'

Again, it's that thing about access and privilege where, like, you know, I was fortunate enough that because I was working in one branch, I knew people in other branches of the arts and, you know, I started to share my writing with other people, other writers, who were like, this is good, you can do this.

So I started writing a novel just to see if I could, and it became **This Is Yesterday** - and it was entirely initiated by a visual thing. I was on a train to the Midlands, and the train stopped. And it was stopped by a place where there was like a big polytunnel-style greenhouse. There were two women inside the greenhouse, one younger, one older, being clearly having an argument and one of them started throwing plant parts at the older woman.

The train moved away, and I never left them behind her. I was like, Who are those people? It was like one of those real, utterly banal Wednesday mornings, I was having this entirely prosaic train journey. And then you see this thing where you're like, that's like a pretty massive moment in somebody else's life.

I started writing **This Is Yesterday** as complete conjecture of who these people were and how they had come to be shouting each other in a greenhouse, and shying plant pots at one another.

The other story from **Birding** is about a mother and daughter who live a sort of hermetically sealed, almost Gothic symbiotic relationship, very much sort of informed by **Grey Gardens** and **Whatever Happened to Baby Jane**, that was initiated by two women that I used to see around all the time. It was a mother and a daughter who dressed absolutely identically.

There's a lot of fascination about how have you become these people? Who are you? What is your life? And since I will never know, like a little psychopath, I will allow myself to make that up.

Birding is a lot about whether or not we can ever really see ourselves, whether or not how truthful we can ever be with ourselves or by the extent to which we're unreliable narrators of our own lives. One of the catalysing incidents in **Birding** is the fact that one protagonist, Lydia, takes a photo of the other protagonist, Joyce, assuming something about her.

I'm very interested in that, you know, both as an artist and a writer, how we normalise taking photos of strangers and putting them on social media - which, for me, is a thing I would never ever, ever do. Yet I would write a fucking book based on an imagined life of someone I'd seen in the street. In the time that I've been making art, visual culture has become a totally different thing.

Self-portraiture, what once was sort of the preserve of the artistic - the visual rhetoric to make a self-portrait was once very much the preserve of artists, to put yourself on camera as an act of art was quite a singular thing, a challenging thing ... but like now we do it all the time. I do it all the time. I fucking love a selfie. Which I never thought I'd say. I see a lot of people from my generation like being really scathing of people of all ages for taking selfies, you know, you must be really unhealthy and you must hate yourself to need a stranger's validation. For me that was a lovely thing about it!

Finally, what's next? Is there a third book planned?

Birding was going on for a really long time. My PhD has been going on for a really long time. And I'm really looking forward to writing something unrelated.

Actually, I had a meeting with my literary agent, [Jo Unwin], the other week, and had a really surprising conversation with her. She doesn't normally represent horror. She doesn't accept submissions of horror, but we had this conversation where she was like, 'I always thought you had a really good horror novel in you. I think you should sit down and turn out a horror novel really quickly once you hand in your thesis." And so that's what I'm going to do.

One of the cover quotes for **Birding** we got called my writing hauntological. Hauntology was always in my work, that sort of urban weird... I feel like I'm very aware of it, but it was the first time it was like, well, good, someone else has seen it.

Probably like the main reason I write is **Bagpuss**. I feel like the seismic impact of sort of that combination of melancholia and joy was just indelibly burned into my brain, telling stories and conjuring worlds.

I can relate to that... one of the most viscerally scary things in my head is the music from Picture Box! It terrifies me to this day for some reason.

There is something in that actually. I feel like sort of most of my writerly sensibilities were formed in childhood. Maybe it is a bit like that thing of like sitting down in front of the television. And it's this thing in your house, that sort of like furniture, but it's a portal and it's a window. And the sort of the attention that you pay to that, you know, and the whole world is new, you're constantly in this present state of like time to sort of signal from noise, like I felt like everything that made its way into my head and the first 50 years from **Bagpuss** to like, the films of Derek Jarman on Channel Four, and like public information films.

I think essentially my entire sensibility as a writer was formed in the first five to 15 years of my life, but basically, I'm going to write a whole novel about a haunted public information film. Basically, it's about a woman in middle age, like who's sort of haunted by the fact that she was the drowning child in a sort of **The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water-style** of public information film, and as she spent her entire childhood, not knowing when she would encounter herself drowning on television and being bullied for being the case in the public film, and as you know, as an adult, sort of confronting that in a real-world way, but also just being haunted to fuck by a sort of MR James-ian, **Whistle and I'll Come To You** evil on like a shingle beach...

That's how I want my work to feel like. You know, not being flippant - genuinely, it always comes back to **Bagpuss**...

DUNCAN MCKAY takes a dive into a trilogy of new books about Manchester's favourite subject - itself...

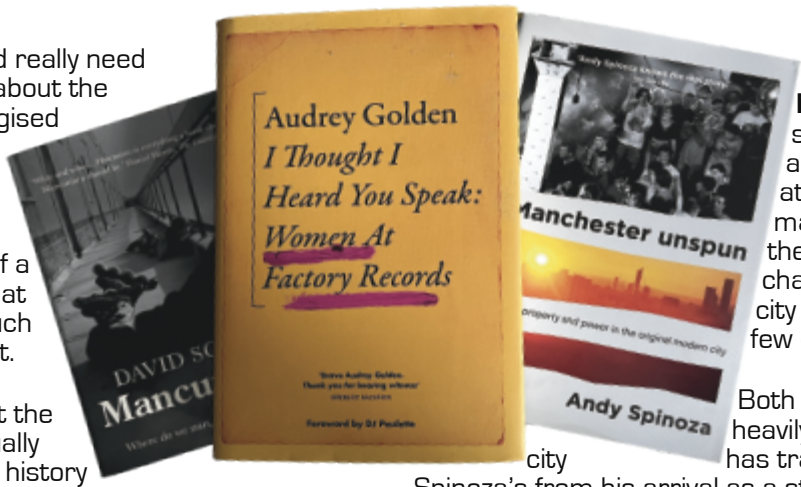
...TO INSIDE MANCHESTER'S MEMOIR FACTORY

In a year where the blue half of the city celebrated a treble, it seems fitting that 2023 also delivered a new trilogy of books about Manchester

City and the city: neither is notably shy about coming forward.

As a fan of the rainy city from afar, it's in equal parts admiration, jealousy and cringe that Manchester remains so in thrall to itself.

A sign of that self-regard can be evidenced in the fact that in the last 30 years, Factory Records' lifeblood, New Order has released five albums, while three members of the band have published six memoirs between them.



Does the world really need another book about the much mythologised Manchester institution? Aside from Motown, it's hard to think of a record label that has had so much written about it.

Yet it turns out the answer is actually yes, as an oral history from the women at Factory Records is a much needed remedy.

It's a rich seam that Audrey Golden mines in **I Thought I Heard You Speak**, and it addresses directly why women appear to have been written out of the label's story – doing so alongside a detailed and entertaining description of what life at both Factory Records and the Hacienda were like.

It becomes clear that without women, neither Factory nor the Hacienda would have lasted as going concerns for considerably less time than they did.

Interviewees such as Gillian Gilbert – the only New Order member not to write their memoirs yet – Lindsay Anderson and others are both brutally honest about the challenges they faced as women, quick to give praise about others and self-effacing about their own roles in the enterprise.

The fact the book had to be written at all is telling and certain Factory big hitters do not come out of the book very well.

I Thought I Heard You Speak is a welcome addition to the Factory library, partly because it offers a perspective which has shamefully been missing for decades and will hopefully be leaned upon for redress the balance when the next Factory-related activity is inevitably launched.

If Golden was clear with what she was trying to achieve then our other two books suffer from an identity crisis.

Manchester Unspun and **Mancunians** see the authors attempt to make sense of the dramatic changes in the city over the last few decades.

Both books lean heavily on how the city has transformed – Spinoza's from his arrival as a student in 1979 and Scott's from the 1996 IRA bombing of the Arndale Centre – and how this urban evolution intertwines with their own stories of growing up and getting old.

The authors are what us Scots might call 'well kent faces' around the M postcode. Scott is a poet, playwright and radio presenter, while Spinoza set up the city's iconic culture magazine **City Life**, then moved to the **Manchester Evening News** before becoming a public relations man.

It is this proximity to Manchester's power than Spinoza wields for **Manchester Unspun**. He has been observing and then becoming an active participant in Manchester's public sphere for decades. If you enjoy subtle – and not so subtle – name drops, then Spinoza's

book is for you.

But despite this access, Spinoza never quite works out what he wants to say. He offers analysis on occasions and his telling of how money and power works in civic Manchester is both very interesting and worthy of publication alone. However his critiques, when he does give them, are almost half-hearted and without bite.

Spinoza doesn't – or can't – bring himself to reflect on how his role in PR might have impacted on the changing nature of Manchester.

That sort of reflection would have been welcome, and as a result he never decides whether he wants his book to be a memoir, a critique or just a series of vignettes.

This leaves the book to become a mash of all three, which ultimately leaves it wanting.

In contrast, Scott appears to lack Spinoza's confidence. Instead of having belief in the power of his own life story and weaving the themes into the text, Scott relies on themes such as crime, drugs and music for chapters and uses extensive quotes from friends, acquaintances and social media to tell Manchester's story.

Whilst interesting, it's far from scientific and this highly subjective approach may give the reader the impression this is 'official' Manchester history rather than a collection of anecdotes.

Scott's telling of his own story, as specific as it is, might have said more about modern Manchester than the smorgasbord approach he instead decided to take.

It's a real shame because Scott's writing and his own experiences would make an interesting book on its own merits.

Both books end up feeling incomplete but you finish them with a greater sense of warmth towards Scott than Spinoza.

But together they neatly represent Manchester's current dilemma of trying to balance the rapid economic growth of the

city with retaining its soul – and whether that's even possible.

And ultimately, what's refreshing about all three books is their lack of dewy-eyed nostalgia.

To butcher a well-known phrase: This is Manchester, there's no mawkish sentimentality here...

M ALZAMORA discovers the hard way how age can lend a whole new dimension to revisiting classic horror

...TO THE TERROR OF FINDING OUT

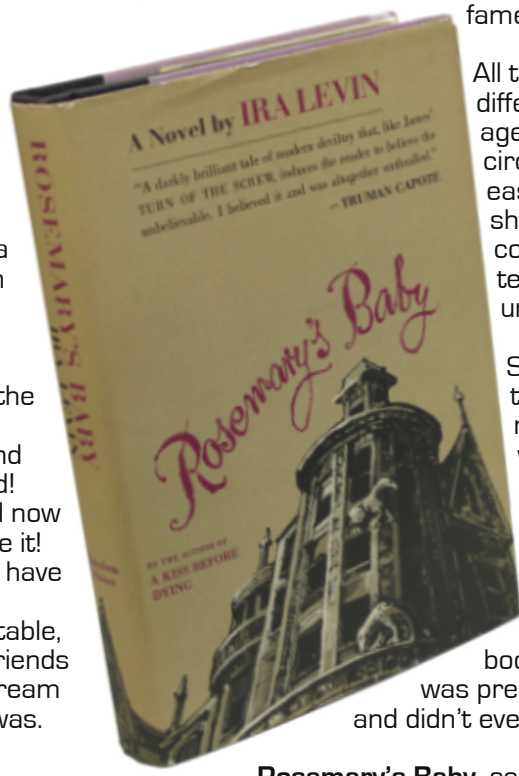
Romeo and Juliet is a story that everyone knows, even if they haven't read or seen it.

After all, there have been so many adaptations over the years that it's hard to miss it. With a few notable exceptions – one being the 2011 instant classic **Gnomeo and Juliet** – each telling ends in some sort of tragedy.

But that doesn't mean that it's any less tragic.

In fact, one could argue that knowing these young lovers are going to die is even worse. They're consigned to their fate, and all you can do is watch it play out.

I first read **Rosemary's Baby** when I was sixteen. I was really trying to get into classic literature but couldn't stomach much from before 1900, and my mom had recommended Ira Levin. Her small consolation prize for my refusal to retry Austen.



My god, was I surprised by the way it turned out. This poor adult woman was tricked and gave birth to the devil's child! She isn't crazy after all! And now she's going to stay and raise it! At sixteen, I thought I would have just dipped. I left with the impression that it was a notable, horrifying book that all my friends should read so we could scream together about how wild it was.

And that was that.

Well, not quite. I've recently been on a kick of rereading books I read in high school. **Catcher in the Rye**? Made me cry this time – he was just a kid who didn't know what to do. **The Old Man and the Sea**? Still hated it. And, as you've probably realised now, I reread **Rosemary's Baby**.

If you don't know, Rosemary is 24 years old and lives with her partner in a crappy apartment, far away from her family. When I read it the first time, I was 16 and living in my parents' house with **Supernatural** posters plastered all over my walls.

Now, I'm also 24 and living in a crappy apartment, far away from my family. I remember thinking she was so grown-up and cool, but I don't feel very cool now.

I feel like I'm barely an adult who still calls her dad when she needs to change a tyre. What does that say about Rosemary, then?

The big difference is that Rosemary actively wants a baby, and I actively do not right now. So I currently don't have to worry about my partner using that against me in search of fame and fortune.

All that being said – it hits different, being the same age and in similar circumstances. I can so easily put myself in her shoes in a way that I couldn't when I was a teenager. I just hadn't understood it yet.

Still, I was a little worried that I wouldn't enjoy it as much since the ending was such a shock. But I can say after finishing, the demonic cult wasn't nearly the scariest part anymore.

This time, it wasn't a book about a woman who was pregnant with a half-devil and didn't even know it.

Rosemary's Baby, second time around, is about a poor woman actively being gaslit by everyone around her.

Her doctor, her neighbours, and even her husband. They tell her that she's supposed to be emaciated when she's pregnant, that she shouldn't talk to her friends about it, that she's insane for suggesting that the witches might in fact be witches.

Her husband, Guy, even thought it would be better to say that he raped her while she slept than say it was the devil.

Big yikes, Guy.

The thing is, I'm never going to have the Devil's baby. At least, I'm 99% sure. But what could happen to me is a relationship, or all of my relationships, changing until I'm no longer sure of who I am or what I'm feeling.

If you take away all of the supernatural elements, **Rosemary's Bab**y is really about a series of toxic relationships that could happen to anyone.

And she's only 24. I'm the same age. It feels like practically a kid, still.

But you just have to read the book and let it happen. The first go around, I didn't know any better. I thought that she might be okay in the end or that she was actually going to end up being crazy. The second time, I had no such delusions. I was way more scared than I was the first time.

It's the inevitability of it all, really. I knew from the first page, this time, that Rosemary was going to suffer. Needlessly. Because of a massive betrayal. And her whole life would be ruined. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Horror and terror are two similar words, but do you know the difference? I promise, I have a point.

Horror is the repulsion and shock of finding out, while terror is the anxiety and dread you get from the waiting.

Rosemary's Baby the first time is horror.
Rosemary's Baby the second time is terror.

Just because you know how it ends doesn't mean you'll be able to change it. Romeo and Juliet die. Rosemary isn't crazy and has to suffer because of the choices that others have made.

She could be any 24-year-old girl who trusted the wrong people. She could be your daughter, or your sister, or me.

And all you can do is wait for it to happen...

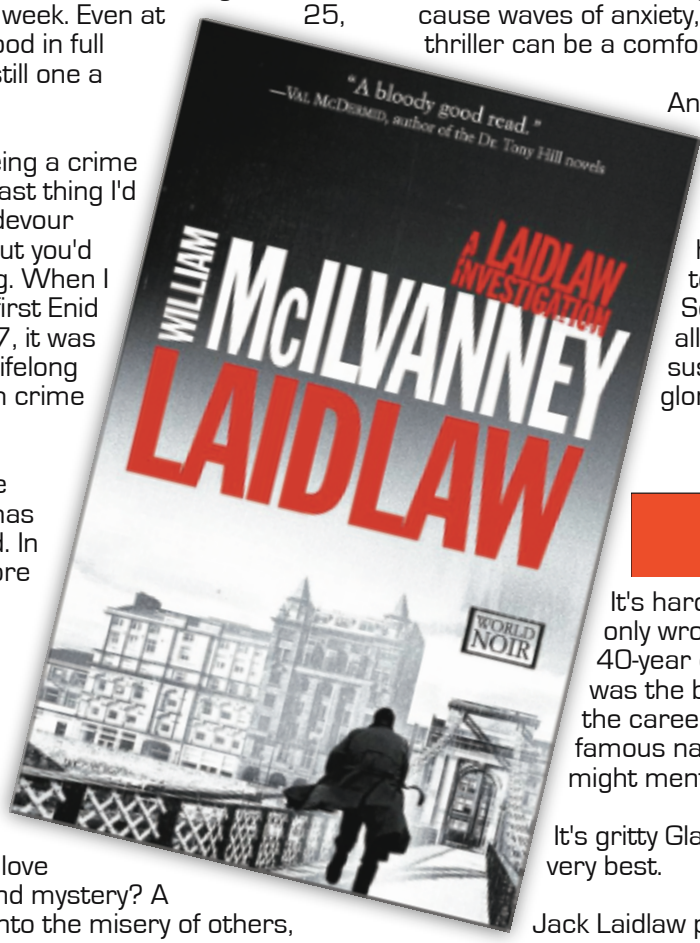
...TO MURDER (SCOTTISH STYLE)

Is there anything better than snuggling down with a cuppa and a new book?

I've always been a reader. From the moment I learnt my ABCs, a book was always in my hand. At age 5, I was demolishing two or three books a week. Even at 25, with motherhood in full swing, it was still one a week.

You'd think, being a crime reporter, the last thing I'd want to do is devour more crime, but you'd be dead wrong. When I picked up my first Enid Blyton at age 7, it was the start of a lifelong obsession with crime fiction.

My love for the printed word has not diminished. In fact, I have more of an appreciation now for how hard authors work and how passionately they hone their craft.



What's not to love about thrills and mystery? A guilt-free trip into the misery of others, knowing there's going to be, maybe not a happy ending, but at least some kind of resolution.

We can become engrossed in human behaviour and observe the violence and wretchedness at a safe distance - all the while knowing it's coming to an inevitable conclusion and the bad guy is going to get his (or her) comeuppance. Triumph over adversity. Good versus evil. Guilty versus innocent. Closure.

We're living in violent and unpredictable times, and when turning on the news can cause waves of anxiety, picking up the latest thriller can be a comfort.

And with compelling murder fiction rapidly becoming the biggest Scottish export since Irn Bru, here's the inside guide to the GREATEST Scottish crime novels in all their twisted, suspenseful, puzzling glory...

LAIDLAW
William McIlvanney

It's hard to believe that Willie only wrote 3 crime novels in a 40-year career, but Laidlaw was the book that kickstarted the careers of quite a few famous names, some of whom I might mention later on.

It's gritty Glasgow realism at its very best.

Jack Laidlaw paved the way for alcoholic, manic-depressive, troubled detectives. But he was also funny, self-deprecating, and single-minded in his determination to solve the brutal murder of a young girl.

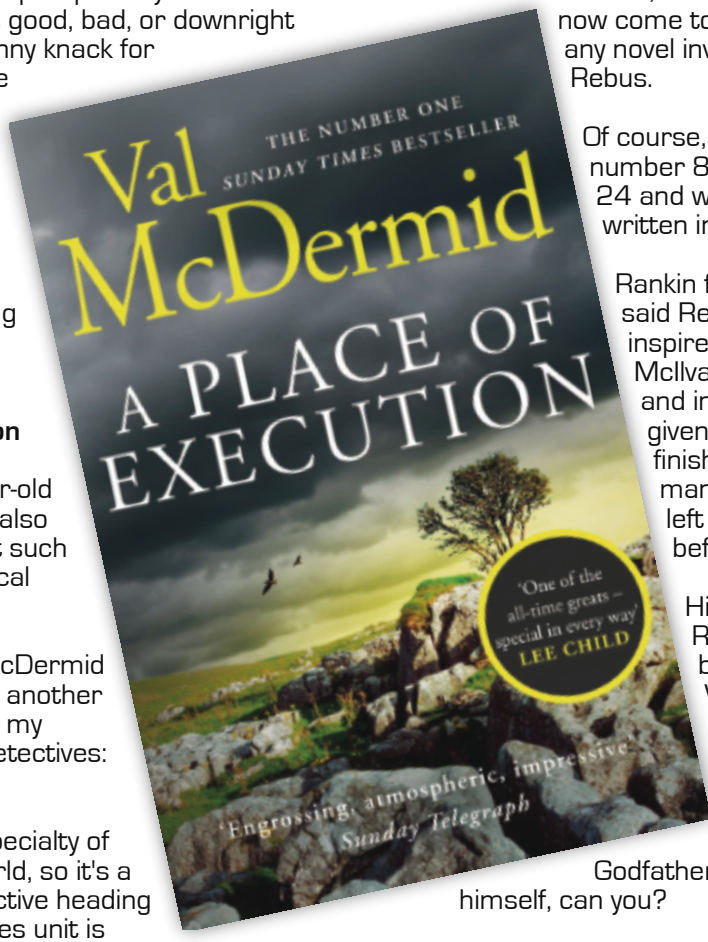
In 2024, the difficult, angst-ridden detective is a familiar trope, but in 1977, when the book came out, it was groundbreaking stuff. Despite the gnarls and the violence that

jumps out of practically every page, something about McIvanney's beautiful use of language, his authenticity, and poetry in every sentence spoke to me. I devoured every book he wrote, every poem he created, and every essay I could lay my hands on.

Laidlaw is more a why-dunnit than a who-dunnit and is a timeless masterclass in crime writing. A masterpiece by a legend.

A PLACE OF EXECUTION
Val McDermid

It's hard to pick one McDermid novel because her back and current catalogue is exemplary. There's a reason she's sold over 20 million books. Every story she writes shows a remarkable perspicacity for human nature, whether it's good, bad, or downright ugly. She's got a canny knack for drilling deep into the human psyche and giving us the thrills and chills every great whodunnit should while displaying a remarkable penchant for tugging on the emotional heartstrings.



A Place of Execution might be about the murder of a 13-year-old girl, but McDermid also examines the effect such a crime has on a local community.

I cannot mention McDermid without focusing on another creation and one of my favourite fictional detectives: Karen Pirie.

Cold cases are a specialty of mine in the real world, so it's a given that any detective heading up a historical crimes unit is going to pique my interest, and McDermid again shows her genius in creating a quirky but normal character whose biggest fault is her runaway mouth.

We Scots love gobby strong women, and McDermid is still top of the class when it comes to police procedurals.

BLACK AND BLUE
Ian Rankin

Usually, it's **Knots and Crosses** that graces the list of 'best' when it comes to Rankin, but for me, **Black and Blue** is a standout. I mean, for this crime reporter who spent a long time reporting on the infamous Bible John (who doesn't really exist, BTW), a serial killer terrorising Edinburgh with the nickname Johnny Bible was just too good to miss. And boy, it certainly provides all the darkness, demons, and frailties we've now come to expect from any novel involving John Rebus.

Of course, this book is number 8 in a series of 24 and was originally written in 1997.

Rankin famously has said Rebus was inspired by William McIlvanney's Laidlaw, and in 2021, he was given the job of finishing a manuscript Willie left unfinished before he died.

His widow said Rankin would've been the writer Willie would have chosen - you can't get any better endorsement than from the Godfather of Tartan Noir himself, can you?

THE CROW ROAD
Iain Banks

The first line - 'It was the day my grandmother exploded' - is still the greatest opening of any crime novel written before or since.

I remember where I was the day I first opened this book. I was on a 19 bus heading into Edinburgh city centre, and I gasped out loud, then I giggled at the sheer audacity of the writer's ghoulish imagination.

I couldn't help but feel envious that someone actually had the cojones to write such a statement about a beloved old granny. I wonder how many who read that sentence teleported their own grannies into the scene?

Humour and death were not familiar to 20-year-old me, but Banks' approach to storytelling with his distinctive prose, wit, and layered plots certainly opened my eyes to the comical side of dying and the complexities of family dynamics.

Almost all of Banks' novels are masterpieces (I hear cries of **The Wasp Factory** is best), but hands down, this was and will always remain one of the true Scottish greats.

So there you have it - a crime reporter's guide to (her) best in Tartan Noir. Scotland might be tiny, but we have a wealth of writing talent on these glorious shores.

But while I've got you (and running out of room), here are a few more Scottish writers that are definitely worth your time: Christopher Brookmyre, CS Robertson, Douglas Skelton, Lin Anderson, Louise Welsh, Stuart MacBride, Alan Parks, Liam McIvanney, and last but by no means least, the bold Abir Mukherjee.

Tom Taylor's run on Nightwing may have divided fans, but **M Alzamora still** found much to enjoy

... TO WHOLLY UNNECESSARY MOANING, BATMAN!

Panel 1: Tight shot of a man's back, a lit-up computer screen in front of him. We can see the faintest outline of the NIGHTWING logo on his shoulders.

Panel 2: Cut to the computer screen— it's a forum.

Post from darKnight43 reads, "the whole franchise has gotten lame imo"

Post from pr1nceOfgOtham reads, "No stakes – boring!"

Post from RandomxXxMango reads, "Two words: Fan. Service."

Panel 3: Laptop is shut, a hand on top. A speech bubble says, "Sigh." Panel 4: Full page. NIGHTWING (alias: DICK GRAYSON) in costume, escrima sticks in hand. We see him through a window. TITLE: KINDNESS ISN'T BORING.

Dick Grayson has gone through a lot of iterations since his introduction in 1940.

He's been, in approximately chronological order:

- Robin, boy wonder and sidekick to Batman
- Nightwing, young hero and Bludhaven's keeper
- Batman, a brief stint after some weird retconning in a miniseries
- Agent 37, an international spy
- And Ric Grayson, an amnesiac in an almost universally hated arc.

If you can imagine it, there's probably been a storyline about it. The man is approaching ninety years old, after all.

Yet the latest run, beginning in 2021 and ending in 2023, seems to be attracting a brand-new kind of criticism – that Nightwing's gone soft.

Fanboys online will expand upon this point without waiting for anyone to ask. It's fluffy and forgettable, nothing more. Nightwing is too weak now and can't do anything by himself. There are too many filler issues. Tom Taylor, the main writer, needs to get rid of Barbara Gordon. The entire thing, from start to finish, is boring.

This isn't to say that Taylor hasn't also received copious praise, winning Eisner Awards for Best Cover Artist and Best Continuing Series in 2023. Fans say that Nightwing has become a fully fleshed character outside of his relationship to Batman and that the plotlines are compelling and fun.

One thing is clear – you either love or hate the current **Nightwing** run. I'm here to set the record straight, once and for all – Tom Taylor's **Nightwing** rocks, actually.

Although not the most avid comic reader, I've made my way around the block a little. At the very least, I've read every issue of Barbara Gordon's **Batgirl** that I could get my hands on, plus some random issues of whatever here and there. What can I say? I love a grab bag.

But I was never really able to get into the comic scene. No matter the company or character, I always felt like the writers and artists were trying to out-grimdark the competition.

The panels were dreary and dark, the plotlines usually resulted in misery without anything to root for. It seemed like everyone involved was holding hands and repeatedly trying to jump an incredibly depressing and dramatic shark.

I still feel like that, for the most part. Just not with **Nightwing**.

I borrowed Volume 1: Leaping into the Light from the library one sleepless night, having nothing else to do and being willing to give it a chance.

After my past reading experiences and cursory knowledge of the horrors of Ric Grayson, I was wary.

My worry turned out to be unnecessary. Dick

Grayson wasn't an edgelord but a kind-hearted man who genuinely wanted to make his community better, through vigilante justice and prison reform. He was silly, and he allowed himself to care about others rather than being a lone wolf.

For as much as others may complain about filler, I found the prevalence of such issues to be breaths of fresh air. I loved getting to explore small moments that give you so much insight into the characters.

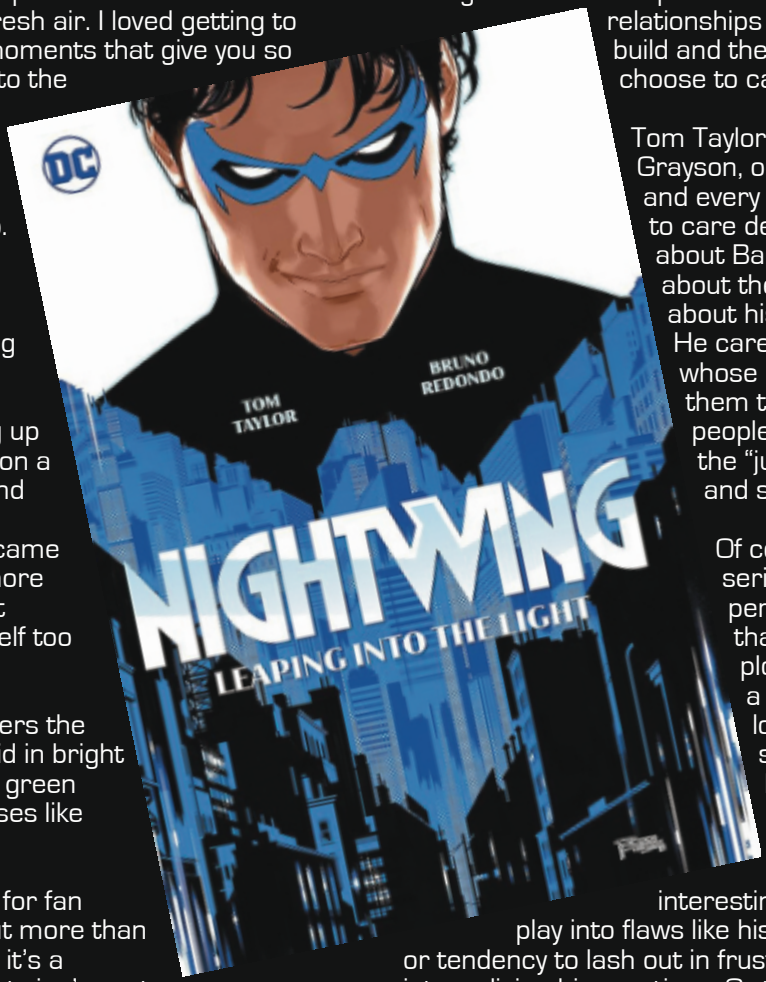
Also, kudos to illustrator Bruce Redondo.

He knows why.

I had fun reading **Volume 1**, so much so that I started keeping up with the series on a regular basis and actually bought issues as they came out. Because more than anything, it doesn't take itself too seriously.

Taylor remembers the wise-cracking kid in bright yellow, red, and green with catchphrases like "Holy Batman!"

He gets dinged for fan service a lot, but more than anything, I think it's a homage to Nightwing's roots.



My absolute favorite issue is **#100**. Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are having this incredible heart-to-heart about what Batman struggles to talk about the most – his feelings.

We see Bruce tell Dick how proud he is that his "son has grown up to be the **best** of us." We get to see them have a conversation that's emotionally raw and meaningful and healing in a way that I've struggled to find replicate in other issues from other series.

And despite Batman's reputation as a lone hero, despite the darkness of Gotham and villainy and his childhood – is that not the core of **Batman**?

There are terrible things in the world, but there's also so much good. And nowhere is that goodness more prevalent than in the relationships we choose to build and the people we choose to care about.

Tom Taylor's Dick Grayson, on every page and every panel, chooses to care deeply. He cares about Barbara Gordon, about the Bat Family, about his fellow Titans. He cares about kids whose parents sold them to demons and people wronged by the "justice" system and stray dogs.

Of course, the series isn't perfect. I agree that certain plotlines can drag a little, and the long-lost sister story is trite. Dick Grayson himself is near perfect; it would be interesting to see Taylor play into flaws like his stubbornness or tendency to lash out in frustration from internalising his emotions. Or to see him highlight Dick's detective nature more.

Others have also pointed out that Taylor has an issue with subtle ableism, specifically with regards to Barbara Gordon and her wheelchair (or lack thereof). Lastly, the last few issues did feel just like a back door into the new **Titans** series.

Ultimately, though, I feel that the 2021-2023 **Nightwing** run captures what's most important about Nightwing and why I love him so much. To his core, Dick Grayson is a hero

who strives to be kind and caring above all else.

Panel 5: Our author is standing next to NIGHTWING now, showing him her notes for the next issue. THE END.

Iain Hepburn finds some surprising - and disappointing - faces among the bottom shelf action schlock.

...TO LIAM NEESON'S BROODING FETISH

One of my favourite magazine features ever was, ironically, in the original fanzine incarnation of FROM THE SUBLIME, where an intrepid reviewer would cast their bleary eyes over the videos that were left in Aberdeen's largest Blockbuster just before closing on a Saturday night.

You know the kind of films I mean. This wasn't your **Strange Days** or your **Trainspottings** or your **Lost in Spaces**. It was your dumb, cheap sci-fi, comedy, and/or action fare – the stuff with Cynthia Rothrock or Martin Kemp or Alexandra Paul.

Obviously, those days are gone now. The Holburn St branch of Blockbuster has long since gone, as indeed has the brand itself, reduced to a logo for slapping on expensive movie quizzes, Netflix sitcoms, and even a bar in Manchester's Northern Quarter.

VHS has gone the way of the dodo too, except for a few hardy souls keeping the flame alive (and a weird recent trend of preserving old tapes in plastic cases and flogging them on eBay for a hundred grand). But the kind of film which used to prop up the groaning shelves of cassette covers at the video store remains – churned out and distributed in double-quick time these days, shot on someone's old Canon 600D with a bunch of jobbing actors, stuntmen, and a few After Effects plug-ins in place of squibs and muzzle flashes.

At some point, the low-budget action film went from being a drunken late-night rental staple to a meme, mediocre flicks sold on the back of an internet-baiting name and poster. Arguably, that's no different to the approach taken by Cannon Films back in the day – substitute social media for Cannes, and that's how half their Chuck Norris films got picked up, after all – but it also means, increasingly, films of that ilk are reduced to a joke name, a trailer, and not much in between.

You can probably blame **Snakes on a Plane** for really kickstarting the trend, but the last few years in particular have seen a plethora of these Asylum-with-a-budget films being dumped on every streaming platform known to man. Never passing go, never collecting £200, not even making it to the late Friday night slot on Legend or Horror.

To save you the bother (or alternatively, give you something to do of a drunken night in, if you wish to join in), we've picked out three recent releases in the low-budget-but-still-with-names-you've-heard-of category. The sort of film you're left with on the shelf at Blockbuster at 10.35pm on a Saturday night, when really you'd only gone in to hire a copy of **Face/Off**.

Let's start with perhaps the highest profile – Michael Flatley's **Blackbird**. The fleet-footed Lord of the Dance clearly fancies himself as... actually, you could probably just stop that sentence after himself, really. But in what was absolutely no way a vanity project whatsoever, the Riverdance star decided in 2018 to showcase his array of other talents by writing, directing, producing, and starring in his own knock-off James Bond-esque film.

Having pumped an alleged £3 million of his own cash into what's basically – to borrow

Red Letter Media's perfect term – a black tank-top production, for years the internet took great delight in wondering where Flatley's opus was, why it hadn't been released, where the trailer was, and just how bad it would be...

Late in 2022, all that got answered when it was released into the wild. A sort of Please For the Love Of God **Never Say Never Again**, it features the 64-year-old Irish American as a retired spy disillusioned with the espionage game after the death of his girlfriend, and now running a hotel in the Caribbean – conveniently staffed by many of his former undercover colleagues.

When another former colleague turns up at the luxury resort on the arm of weapons dealer Blake, he reluctantly gets drawn into his old profession, knowing the lives of the people closest to him are at yawn. Sorry, I nodded off typing all that. Anyway, you know the drill.

So after all the hype and the sniffy reviews and sneering died down around **Blackbird**, what did we actually end up with? To be honest, something that was nowhere near as bad as the sarcasm would suggest.

Indeed, Blackbird's biggest problem, really, is that it isn't incompetent. If it had been a **The Room**-esque disaster, it would have been a much more entertaining film.

For all the jokes about it being a vanity production, Flatley clearly understood the way to make a film work is to hire decent people around him. So while the premise might be dumb, his performance as wooden as a dance studio floor, and all the business with the hats completely ridiculous, the film at least looks and sounds like a proper movie.

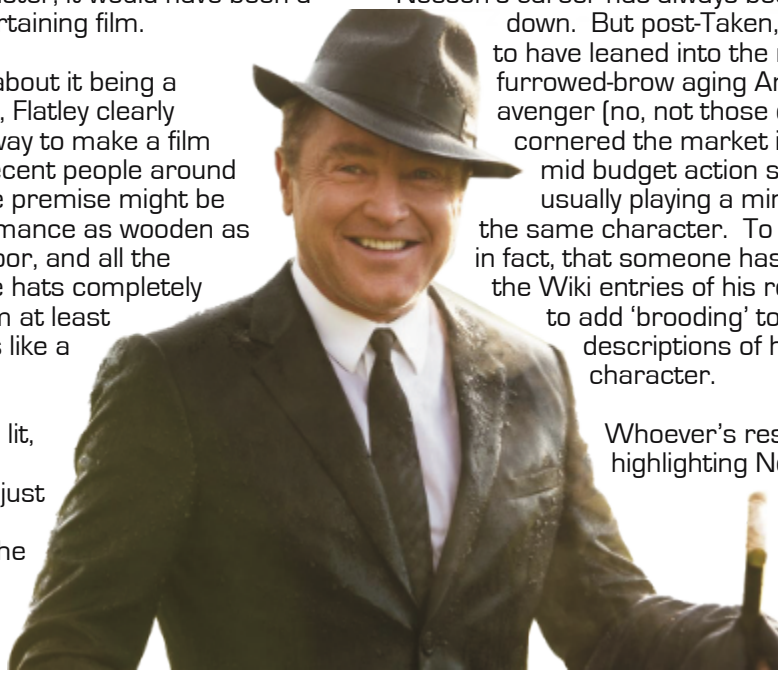
It's well shot, well lit, well blocked, and everything in it – just about – makes sense. Most of the actors are at least competent, and a couple are actually good. Flatley doesn't make for a charismatic action star, but he can hit his marks and read his lines.

Which, to be fair, makes him a step up from Eric 'I always dress for the occasion' Roberts – whose performance is either the best portrayal of someone permanently semi-pissed ever seen on the large screen, or it wasn't a performance.

Blackbird isn't a terrible film. It's not even, really, a bad film. Not in the way the internet likes to make out. It's just boring. Which, in the realm of low-budget auctioneers, probably does actually make it a bad film.

Despite talk at the time of production of a sequel, it's unlikely we're going to see any more action films from Flatley – between health issues and the critical reaction to **Blackbird**. However, someone who has apparently embraced the action hero role full time is Liam Neeson.

With Bruce Willis giving up his crown as king of the geezer teasers following his tragic dementia diagnosis, the septuagenarian Norn Iron Man has been efficiently stepping into the void, churning out low-to-mid budget action flick after action flick on an almost industrial rate over the last few years.



Neeson's career has always been up and down. But post-Taken, he seems to have leaned into the role of furrowed-brow aging American avenger (no, not those ones). He's cornered the market in the low-to-mid budget action schlock, usually playing a minor variant of the same character. To the extent, in fact, that someone has altered all the Wiki entries of his recent films to add 'brooding' to descriptions of his character.

Whoever's responsible for highlighting Neeson's apparent brooding fetish, we salute you.

In

Memory, he plays Alex Lewis, a brooding, aging hitman with – ironically – early-onset dementia. Hired to kill two targets connected to a paedophilia ring, he balks when he discovers one of them is a young child and instead turns the tables on his paymaster.

It then becomes a race against the clock as Alex tries to take out the bad guys before they, the police, and his own failing brain catch up with him.

Neeson's action films aren't quite geezer teasers in the truest sense – they tend to be made for a bit more money, with a bit more star power and talent attached to the project. As a result, from the outside, they seem to have the shape of an actual movie, but like an old Hollywood backlot, it's just artifice.

Memory, for example, is directed by Martin Campbell – the man behind **GoldenEye**, **Casino Royale,** and the **Zorro** films. Oh, and **Green Lantern**, but we won't mention that. It co-stars Guy Pearce, Ray Stevenson, Monica Bellucci, and a bunch of British soap actors – including Lee 'Jez Quigley' Boardman as a Mexican gangsters. No, really.

Some of that may be down to the fact that it was shot in Bulgaria, standing in for Mexico City and El Paso, although you have to feel for the poor local performers – all these bloody English actors coming over and taking their jobs...

And that really sums up the problem with it. None of it feels convincing. Particularly not the bits with Neeson. It's based on a Belgian crime novel – **The Alzheimer's Case** – but something was either lost in translation or the standard Hollywoodizing took an interesting premise and turned it into a sub-**Memento** shooter.

Indeed, the presence of Pearce in the cast only serves to hammer home the **Memento** comparisons, even down to Neeson's character writing things on his arm to remind himself of his cover story or his mission.

Sadly, the weakest link in all this is Neeson himself. His advancing years mean, like Patrick Stewart in **Star Trek: Picard**, that there's a physicality gap between what the script requires and what he can physically achieve. It turns the fight sequences into a blurry, hyper-edited mix of extreme close-ups and back-of-the-head stunt performer stand-ins.

It also doesn't help that he's got one accent – "American" – for all these roles. His character was meant to have been brought

up on the US Southern Border. The other cast members at least stick in an attempt at a Texan accent now and again. Neeson never varies from his generic gruffness – not even when talking to his brother.

It's frustrating because it's easy to see how this could have been a better movie. Most of the constituent parts are there. What serves as the ancillary plot – FBI agents being frustrated at local corruption blocking attempts to stop child trafficking, and effectively going rogue – would comfortably work as its own film. There's an actual proper film buried in there somewhere. Unfortunately, it never sees the light of day.

Incredibly, **Memory** is Liam Neeson's 99th movie – and he's had another four either finished or about to come out since Memory was released (or at least, escaped into the wild). He said recently he didn't see himself doing a TV series – presumably cameos in **Derry Girls** et al. aside – because "Yeah, I'm a bit of a snob when it comes to TV. I must admit, I just like the big screen, you know?"

Given so many of those recent films have been straight-to-digital schlock, barely troubling the local multiplex, you wonder if his agent's been entirely honest with him.

Speaking of cheap action schlock with terrible accents, it'd be churlish to mention big Gerry's latest opus, **Plane**, where big Gerry stars as Big Gerry the Pilot, aided by Luke Cage, to rescue his passengers in as gruffly Scottish a manner as possible. Mainly because, like all big Gerry's films, you know exactly what you're getting.

So instead, let's look at the ultimate in low-budget, star-power-adjacent schlock to be released recently – Kevin Sorbo's jaw-dropping **Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist**.

The original 2014 Nicholas Cage vehicle was loosely based on a series of Christian post-apocalyptic (literally) books from the late 20th century, depicting the world reacting to – and recovering from – the Rapture.

The Cage film, directed by regular Hollywood stunt arranger and go-to action guy Vic Armstrong, notably downplayed the religious aspects of the film, skirting around much of the overtly faith-based bits of the books.

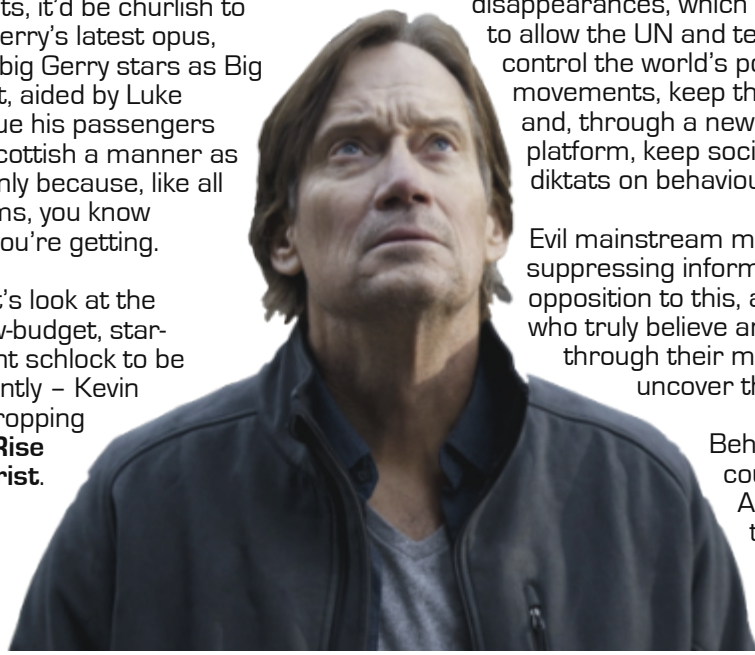
Almost ten years later, along comes this straight-to-digital follow-up, with Sorbo directing and replacing Cage in the leading role (along with various members of his family popping up in minor roles). Which explains why this follow-up, set six months after the original yet also confusingly taking place in 2023, has quite the tonal shift.

Anyone who's made the mistake of catching Sorbo's Christian-right, anti-vax, homophobic MAGA posts on social media in the last couple of years will probably be braced for what comes over the two hours of run-time.

Those who aren't, or who are expecting cuddly Kev from **Hercules** or **Andromeda** are in for a shock. This is full-on, tinfoil hat brigade levels of insanity – using the Rapture, and the aftermath of it, as a parallel for every right-wing COVID conspiracy take imaginable.

So now we have a second 'wave' of disappearances, which have been faked to allow the UN and technocrats to control the world's population's movements, keep them living in fear and, through a new social media platform, keep society bound to their diktats on behaviour.

Evil mainstream media owners are suppressing information about the opposition to this, and only those who truly believe are able to see through their manipulation to uncover the truth.



Behind all this is, of course, the Antichrist of the title. A Romanian politician suddenly promoted to

head of the UN and leader of a new World government to bring control after the carnage of the Rapture. And the only people that can stop him, and see through his manipulation, are the good God-fearing folk at Sorbo's local church – including a cynical journalist investigator who accepts Christ as his saviour just before it all kicks off.

Now, I'm not someone who mocks other people's faiths. Although I'm an avowed Adamsian agnostic, and come from a city where religion is used as an excuse for two tribes of knuckle draggers to kick shit out of each other at least four times a year, I'm happy for people who have genuine religious faith – of any kind – if it brings them happiness.

As long as you're not imposing your views directly onto others, or using your religion as a cudgel to whack minorities with, may your heart be filled with the word of God, Allah, Buddha, Vishnu or whichever deity your belief structure orbits.

But **Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist** is less a faith-based drama and more a two-hour sermon with an occasional bit of shouting and violence in between the praying. It has the air of a Sunday morning religious show forcibly mated with a drama made for the GBeebies crowd – and more notably their US equivalents – where narrative is less important than owning the libs.

Like **Blackbird**, it's not that **Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist** is incompetently made. There's clearly some money behind it, and Sorbo has assembled – much like Flatley – at least enough decent workers in front and behind the camera to ensure that everything feels almost like a real movie.

There's a decent car chase at the climax, and a proper explosion with pyro – no dodgy After Effects plug-ins here. As well as a lot of stock footage, there's liberal use of drones and while the direction is, at best, perfunctory it is at least clear what's going on.

Along with Sorbo, the film also features Neal McDonough and Corbin Bernsen. McDonough's an interesting case. It's not that long ago since he was a regular on big TV series – such as playing Flarrowverse chief villain Damien Darhk, or a regular role in **American Horror Story** – and decent profile films such as **Sonic the Hedgehog** and **Captain America.** But in recent years it feels as though he's been slumming it in fare like this, or the Bruce Willis travesty **Apex**.

He's claimed in the past his devout Catholicism has cost him roles and seen him fired from productions for refusing to do love scenes. Whatever the reasoning, he deserves better than being in literally God-awful toss like this.

The producers reckon they've got enough source material to make six more films like this. So if you want to sympathise with what Alex went through in that torture scene in **A Clockwork Orange**, imagine being forced to sit through a 14-hour Left Behind movie marathon at the cinema.

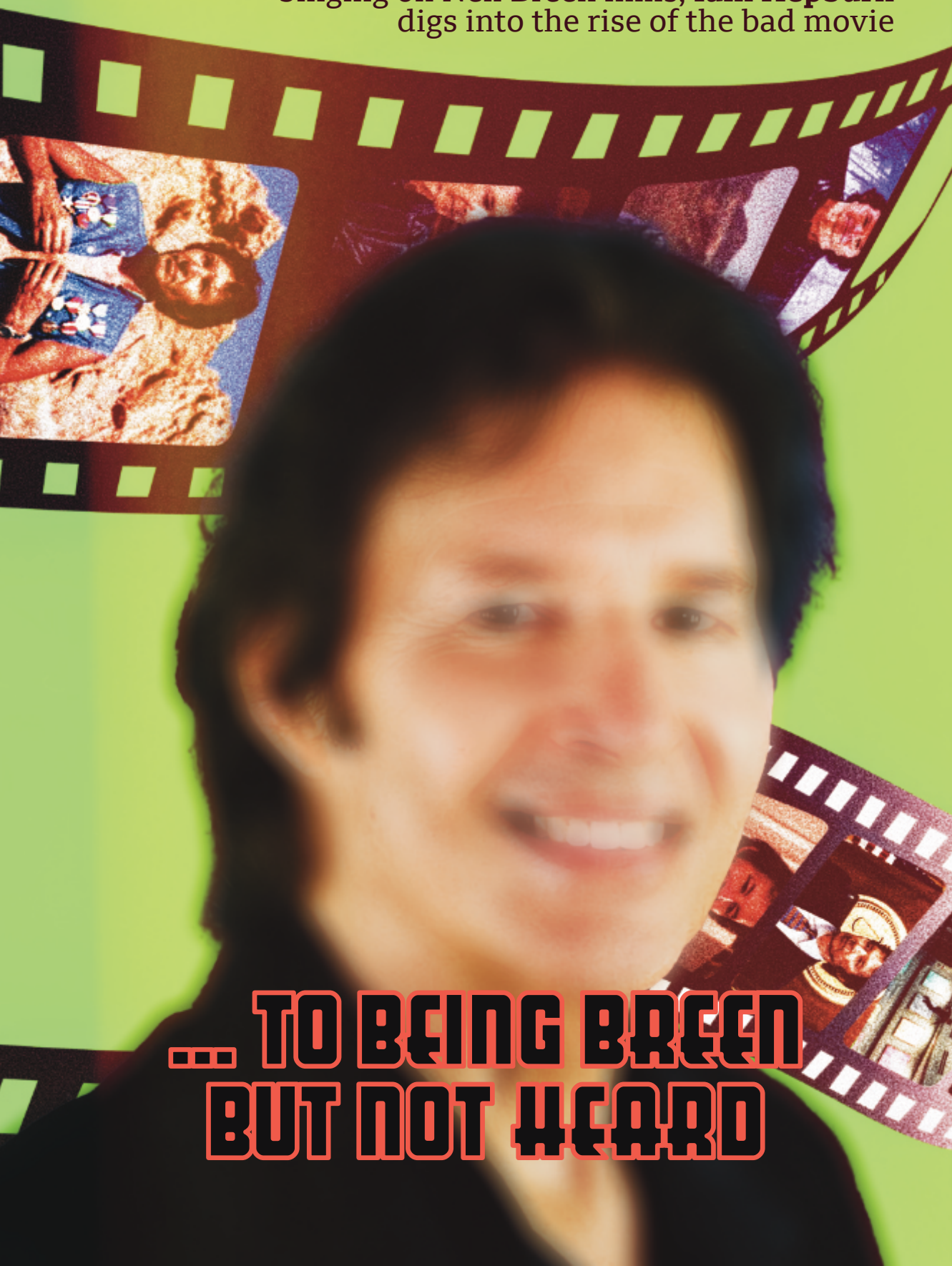
Frankly, death couldn't come quick enough.

So what have we learned? Well, it's that the disconnect between looking like a film and actually being one is widening, even as the audience for them narrows.

While Amazon's servers may have an infinite amount of space compared to Blockbuster's shelves, with so much choice out there, their audiences could be forgiven for turning a blind eye to these films, no matter how much of a bad movie rep they get. And that's a far better type of forgiveness than anything in Kevin Sorbo's catalogue.

Oh, and for god's sake, would someone tell Big Liam it's time to retire...

After a lifechanging - and confusing - day binging on Neil Breen films, **Iain Hepburn** digs into the rise of the bad movie



... TO BEING BREEN BUT NOT HEARD

It takes a certain, special type of filmmaker to inspire interest just at the mere announcement of a new film on the way.

Scorcese, Malick, Nolan, Aster... These are the sort of names for whom just a confirmation they're stepping behind the camera again is enough to drive speculation and anticipation to fever pitch.

And at the other end of the scale, you have Neil Breen. There's no less interest and intrigue when he announces he's making a new film - sporadic though they are, with just six movies in 20 years. It's just for entirely different reasons.

For no one person defines the modern-day cult of the bad movie more than Neil Breen.

Much of the intrigue of Neil Breen's films comes from the man himself. Like with the similarly notorious Tommy Wiseau, his origins are somewhat shrouded in, if not mystery, then at least a decent level of perhaps deliberate obfuscation.

What's known is that Breen's in his 60s, lives in Las Vegas, and that he was previously an architect in California. He also worked for a short time as a real estate broker - in one rare interview, he claimed it was only a year. Then, at some point in the 00s, he decided to make a self-funded feature film.

That first film, **Double Down**, wasn't so much released as escaped into the wild in 2005, eventually finding its way to Netflix as part of their DVD rental library from where it started to slowly build up its online notoriety.

Despite the reaction to it, he kept on making more, before finally making what could arguably be his breakthrough with 2012's **Fateful Findings**. Since then, he's made three other movies and a how-to guide for those wanting to follow in his footsteps.

But beyond that, we don't know a lot about him. Even his real age, for instance - when someone posted on Twitter wishing him a happy 65th birthday last November, he insisted he was 'much younger'. We don't know if he has a family, for example - although we can reasonably guess at him owning a Ferrari and a nice house, given how often both feature in his films.

He hasn't done a lot of media work - largely avoiding press, and as he handles his own distribution, rarely has to engage with the wider industry. But in the few interviews he has done, he claims to have wanted to make films from childhood.

He told Influx magazine in 2014: "The reality is, especially me growing up back east, Hollywood was a million miles away and it was literally a dream. But it was really something that I was passionate about. So I knew that I needed to get and wanted to get a real job doing something creative and fun and that I could make money at, while never giving up the dream.

"That's when I went to college to become an architect. Graduated college as an architect, practiced as an architect, but still never gave up the dream of being a filmmaker. Never being a part of the Hollywood insider's group, I knew that I needed to self-fund my movies. I was willing to make that sacrifice and that's how I got to this point."

Notably few of his actors have talked about their experience working with him, so we don't get much of an impression of what his sets are like, or how he operates as a director, although Breen has always insisted he advertises for actors professionally, and that cast and crew are paid properly.

One actor who did break silence was Tommie Vegas, who appeared in a minor role in his second film, **I Am Here... Now**.

"I wasn't too impressed with the work that was done and the way things were done, so I kind of just left it at that," she told the Las Vegas Weekly in 2014.

Beyond that, Breen has been largely content to let his films do the talking for him. And boy, have they had much to say.

Rob Hill, author of the fantastic **Bad Movie Bible** and host of the accompanying YouTube channel, is perhaps the nearest thing we have to a Breen expert.

“There’s something incredibly open about him,” he told **FROM THE SUBLIME**.

“He doesn't seem to realise how much of himself he gives away, and that access draws us in. His work is also truly unique, even within this sphere. Unlike many of the worst filmmakers of the past and present, he isn't much of a movie fan and doesn't seem to be attempting to speak the language of cinema.

“It probably also helps that he's able to self-fund his movies, and therefore keep feeding his audience. Nobody else at his level is still active, unless you include Tommy Wiseau.”

For starters, though, let’s define what we mean by a bad movie. There’s a difference between a B-movie and a bad movie, a line which has tended to get blurred.

B-movies were originally a specific thing: low-budget productions, with shorter running times, often genre-heavy (such as westerns or horror) and made to be shown as the second part of a cinematic double feature.

Effectively, they were the film equivalent of a b-side on a single. They weren’t necessarily the reason you bought the record or went to the cinema, but they were a nice additional bonus.

And importantly, while B-movies were often cheap filler, they weren’t incompetently made. They tended to feature lower-grade actors, have less money for effects, or be more schlocky, melodramatic, or over-the-top, but they were at least watchable. There’s a world of difference between the world of Roger Corman and the work of Ed Wood when placed side by side.

But as time went on, and double features became less of a thing, the term began being applied to any low-budget schlock and exploitation film— regularly conflating the idea of a B-movie and a bad movie in audiences’ minds.

One of the key drivers for that, Stateside at least, was the rise of the Midnight Movie - late-night screenings by television channels throwing on cheap films as filler for the schedules that got around the rules for content watersheds and expensive residuals. Often, these were hosted by a character making asides during the ad breaks about what you’d just watched, or what was coming up - such as Morgus the Magnificent or the legendary Elvira.

Thus was given national prominence the idea that these exploitation films could - and usually should - be accompanied by a healthy dose of snark and irony. Cinemas soon began

to follow the same idea. While B-movies had been run as late-night showings since the 1930s, New York's Elgin Theatre cinema began showing Alejandro Jodorowsky's cult film **El Topo** in midnight screenings specifically aimed at counterculture audiences.

So the idea of a healthy dose of irony and join-in commentary to low-quality schlock was already sewn into the minds of the public before a bunch of snarky mid-Western nerds began hunting down and poking fun at legitimately awful films for new audiences. No, not **Red Letter Media**. We're talking, of course, about **Mystery Science Theatre 3000**.

MST3K, when it came along, initially as filler for the local KTMA channel in Minneapolis and then later to wider audiences on the Sci-Fi Channel and, ironically, in cinemas themselves, didn't so much shine a spotlight on ironically enjoying bad movies as engulf it in neon lights and set it on fire.

The aftermath of **MST3K** continues to be felt today, 35 years after its debut. The show continues, originally via Netflix and now through crowdfunding. It split into rival shows such as **Rifftrax**. It birthed an entire genre of podcasts, audience screenings, and YouTube channels where hunting down, watching, and reviewing bad films became as much an industry as the B-movie itself.

And it brought to prominence a whole host of films which became cult features - classics never seem the right word here - because of their awfulness, their tediousness, or general downright stupidity. Suddenly, in place of just B-movies, we had Bad Movies. Lots of them. And enjoying them became increasingly as popular as watching actually good films.

"Ultimately, I think a 'good bad' movie is a bad movie that isn't boring," says Hill.

"Exactly how that's achieved by movies that don't engage us in the intended way is near impossible to pin down. But at the mainstream end of the spectrum, excess is important, and at the other end (the Neil end) perhaps it's kind of like Schadenfreude; we feel smarter than the filmmaker, we're amused by our own incomprehension of what we're seeing and how anyone could be so delusional.

"And it has to be sincere. There's nothing good about a deliberately bad movie."

Which is where the lines have blurred even further.

The problem the Bad Movie obsession has generated is that it's given rise to a need to create more bad movies. And a good example is New York Ninja.

Like many of the Bad Movies which find notoriety - such as John De Hart's **Get Even** or Leo Fong's entire oeuvre - **New York Ninja** has its origins as a vanity project.

Taiwanese-born action star John Liu tried and failed to make his own film in 1984, aiming to cash in on the flourishing US ninja movie craze. It was shot guerrilla style, with very little budget - reportedly the visual effects kitty ran to a whole $100 - and with Liu writing, directing, and starring.

Partway through making it, however, support for the already shaky production collapsed completely with the distribution company going bust. It was never completed, and Liu largely retired from the film industry, moving back to Taiwan to found the Zen Kwan Do martial arts discipline.

Then along came Vinegar Syndrome, a home media company with a specialty in rereleasing obscure trash and schlock films in prestige presentations, oftentimes giving schlock films which would otherwise be completely forgotten about the level of treatment afforded prestige productions by the Criterion Collection.

They picked up the unfinished, audio-free reels from Liu's production and— in an impressive piece of cinematic archaeology— pieced together something as close to an actual film... if not necessarily Liu's actual film.

As no dialogue had been recorded, Vinegar Syndrome hired a host of 80s VHS action stars, including Don 'The Dragon' Wilson and Cynthia Rothrock, to revoice the original actors based on some liberally interpreted lip-reading and a script designed to try and

plug the gaps. A suitably retro score was added by Voyag3r to complete the mood.

It's a fascinating exercise to watch, but the question arises— is it just a bad movie, or is it a bad movie being released for the purposes of pisstaking?

A liberal response would be that it's both. What we've got, obviously, isn't Liu's original concept— and understandably he wanted nothing to do with Vinegar Syndrome's release— so we're only getting a third-hand interpretation of the material, 25 years removed.

As they're using the original material, piecing together what was known about the film from the original cast and lipreading the dialogue, it is at least something of an analogue of Liu's original idea.

But that's as far as it goes, and given the liberties taken with the material to make it even vaguely make sense, the fact the voices are provided by B-movie actors, and the pastiche soundtrack, it's impossible to divorce from the idea it's there to be viewed in an entirely ironic way.

New York Ninja (above) is a fun film to watch, for a variety of reasons, but it's also a film that wasn't meant to be seen— at least not in the format we got. It's an enjoyable viewing experience, but it's also arguably a bad-faith one.

> It's not even just about celebrating mediocrity these days.

The Bad movie industry has become a very lucrative industry. Alongside the likes of Vinegar Syndrome are distribution companies specialising in the sort of weird, trashy, unlikeable, or just plain bad movies that normally would have been buried in a landfill site and never spoken of again.

Severin has given new, 4K life to the likes of **Cathy's Curse** while propping up cheap guff like the **Birdemic** series. SyFy - and Legend here in the UK - has given over much of its schedules to unwatchable toss from The Asylum and its ilk. Alamo Drafthouse built a cinema chain and distribution company on the VHS weirdness of **Miami Connection**, putting their work front and centre of schedules and giving the - albeit with tongue poking out of cheek - the same legitimacy as **Oppenheimer** or **Unforgiven**.

Tommy Wiseau's **The Room** is - or was, until Breen came along - held up as perhaps the worst vanity film ever made, but it generated a big budget, big name 'fictionalised' making-

of starring the Franco brothers and their pals, a book by its co-star, and put Wiseau firmly on the convention, midnight screening, and Kickstarter circuit to cash in on his newfound notoriety.

Similarly, the discovery and release of **Samurai Cop** - one of Amir Shervan's trilogy of crap attempts to make Hollywood-style action movies with none of the flair, talent, budget, cast, location, props, or even wigs - ended up with a seemingly intentionally awful sequel being made, reuniting the original stars 25 years on with the likes of Wiseau and Joe Estevez for a film where irony threatens to collapse the whole thing in on itself.

Despite this, though, Hill still believes the growth of the Bad Movie culture has been a good thing.

"Aside from its potential to bring people together, it throws the spotlight on forgotten movies and can make fans appreciate the really good ones even more," he says.

In terms of the nature of those fans' reactions, I think things are getting more positive all the time. There was a point when everyone on YouTube seemed to be bitter and angry that they'd somehow been let down by these things, but it's not really like that now.

"When I watch a documentary like **Best Worst Movie** (about **Troll 2**), and see fans asking the director why he's so useless, it makes me cringe horribly. But things have changed as this phenomenon has grown, and the filmmakers themselves have come to terms with their pasts.

"I've interviewed numerous people primarily known for their failures, and Neil's about the only one who doesn't appreciate the way in which fans react ironically to his movies.

"I'm not a fan of sneering; we should all be aware these people actually made movies rather than sitting talking about them, but that said, it can be fun to come across something so technically, creatively, and morally reprehensible that it deserves to be torn apart.

"Doesn't happen often, though."

All of which brings us back to Breen...

His latest film, **Cade: The Tortured Crossing** (below), has finally been released.

Like all Breen's films, not only is it self-financed and self-produced, it's also self-distributed, appearing in 2024 in customers' mailboxes on a DVD-R in a jewel case with a printed sticky label.

Importantly, it's the first sequel to one of his previous works that Breen's attempted, continuing the storytelling of 2018's **Twisted Pair** and the stories of Cane and Cade, two alien human robot things sent to Earth to save us. One's good, with humanity's best interests at heart. The other is evil - something we know because he's got a beard.

I sat down to watch **The Tortured Crossing** at the end of a day going through his entire back catalogue. I'd seen the other films, individually, before, but thought watching them en masse might give an insight into what makes his movies so much more special than the rest of the bad movie cult.

It is, like all of Breen's previous work, laughably bad. But this time it goes beyond that, into genuinely baffling levels of ineptitude. For someone who oversees pretty much every aspect of the production himself, and who has now made six films - and who claims to have read numerous books on filmmaking - there's a fascinating, consistently downward trajectory in terms of quality as his films go along.

His earlier work was shot largely on location, on film, around Las Vegas. For all **Double Down** is a preposterous James Bond wankfest, it does, surprisingly, look passable, making use of real places in the city and the desert to at least give a sense of solidity to the movie, albeit one not supported by the script or performances. But as time has gone by, Breen has increasingly resorted to using greenscreen for his work.

Whether this is because it's cheaper, easier to control, or just another cinematic delusion based on how 'big' studios make their films isn't clear, but it's meant they look cheaper and crapper with each subsequent release.

Even **Twisted Pair** managed to pull off some location shooting - albeit pretty much exclusively in Breen's house or his local college. But with **The Tortured Crossing**, the entire thing is either using stock footage or shot on green screen - and exceptionally badly keyed in greenscreen at that. Even things like staircases are a stock photo onto which actors have been poorly composited in.

All of Breen's films have had a weirdly messianic flavour, casting him as a super spy or a super soldier or a deity who walks among us, transcending humanity and here to save us from the corrupt institutions.

Here he takes that one step further, building— well, continuing— his role as Cade Altair from **Twisted Pair**, a twin who has been enhanced by aliens with... well, it's never actually clear. Somewhere between **The Six Million Dollar Man** and the **X-Men** seems to be the intent, but like all Breen's hero figures, the actual details are lost in a word salad of vaguely futuristic terms with no actual meaning.

With **The Tortured Crossing**, not only is Cade somewhere between Jesus and Batman, but it ends with him training a new group of genetically experimented-on people to serve as more defenders of the Earth from evil corporations, banks, governments, criminals, and villains with sellotaped-on fake moustaches.

Surprisingly, for once, he doesn't rely on voiceover to explain what's going on— something which, if written down, would look like the sort of manifesto you'd see being flagged by the security services as a potential threat. The downside of which means we're

reliant on him— and his cast— acting.

And ultimately, that's the problem. Because whatever else Breen thinks he's making with these films, ultimately you're watching a pension-age man with no discernible performance skills spending his own money filming himself and a bunch of other people with no discernible performance skills in front of stock photos of fields and staircases, where they deliver badly written exposition, occasionally shout 'no' in lieu of emoting, and react to stock footage and clip art explosions they can't see.

Oh, and he fights a CGI tiger. Because of course he does.

Six films into his cinematic career— not to mention his guide on how to make films— the questions start to arise: Is Breen in on the joke?

Surely, after nearly 20 years of being the punchline, he must realise the vast majority of his audiences aren't getting his films because they see him as talented?
Hill's not so sure. "I'm asked this a lot and I honestly don't know, but despite everything, I'm inclined to believe he's sincere, although that's a view that gets harder to justify with each new work.

"If he is in it for the money, he's doing everything wrong because buying his movies is notoriously difficult and he does nothing to engage with the bad movie crowd.

"Tommy Wiseau's made millions touring **The Room**. I've intro'd Neil's last two movies at premieres, and the hoops promoters are required to jump through - designed to make sure the film's presented sincerely - are ridiculous. He's making a fraction of what he would if he were willing to exploit the true appeal of his work.

"I also find it easy to believe there are people out there who are this delusional. His early movies were unquestionably sincere, as are oddities like **After Last Season** and **The Empiricist**, both of which are weirder and worse than anything Neil's made.

"So, if people really can be that mad, why not Neil...?"

BREENOGRAPHY

All films below written, directed, produced and edited by Neil Breen. And also financed, catered, marketed, distributed and everything else really...

Double Down (2005)
A rogue CIA agent (Breen) stops a terrorist attack on Las Vegas and is plagued by visions of his dead wife and a belief he can heal people.

I Am Here... Now (2009)
Disappointed in mankind's behaviour, the creator (Breen) arrives on Earth in a human form and meets various troubled souls on his journey to Vegas.

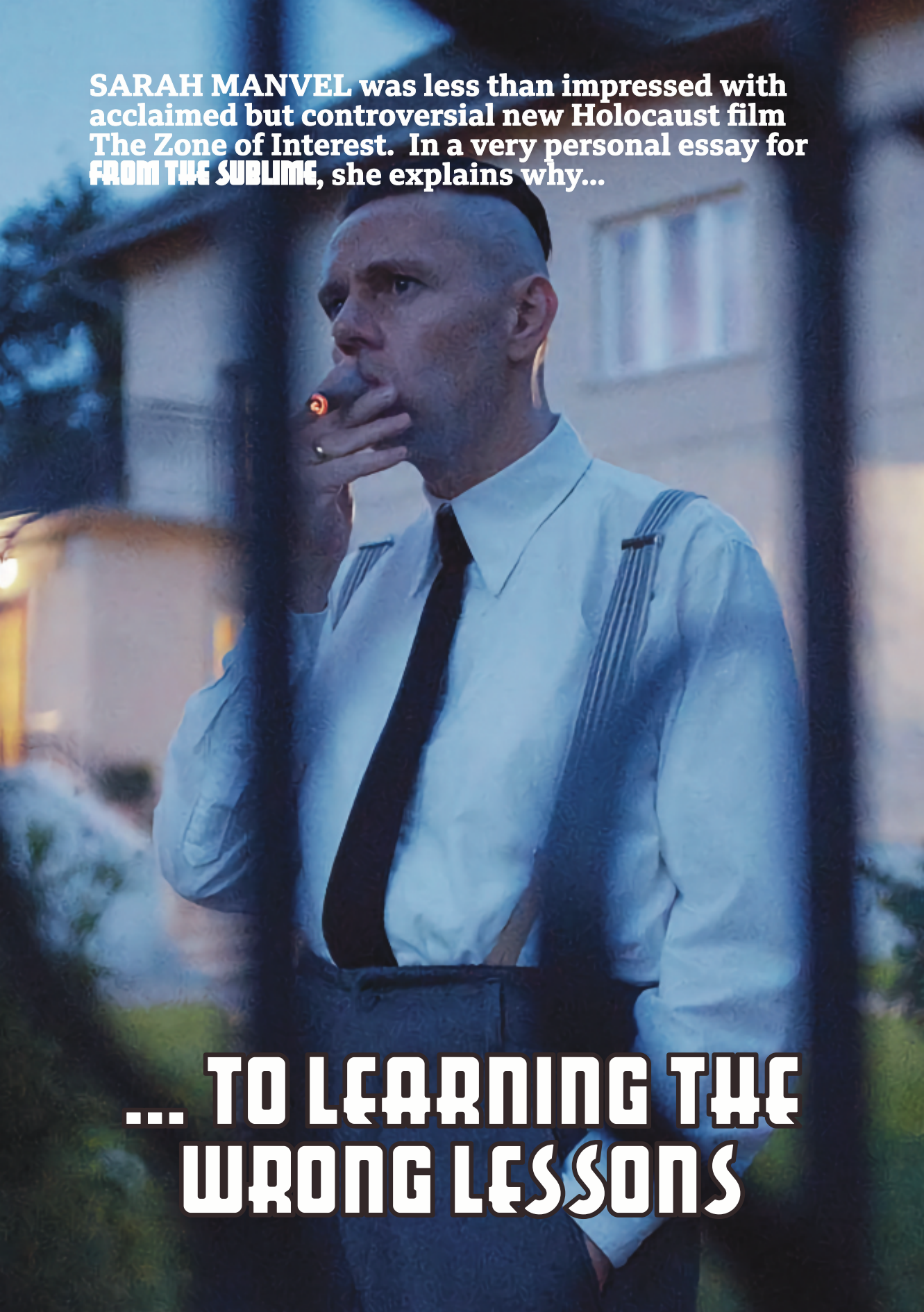
Fateful Findings (2012)
A writer and computer expert (Breen) is hit by a car, hacks into government databases to expose corruption, reunited with his childhood best friend, and faces the consequences of their youthful dabbling in the mystical arts.

Pass Thru (2016)
A denim-clad messianic being from the future (Breen) travels to modern-day America to wipe out 300,000,000 "bad people" and bring about a new era of peace on Earth.

Twisted Pair (2018)
Identical twin brothers Cale and Cade (Breen) are abducted by aliens and grow up to become become superhuman hybrid AI humanoids - one working to save mankind, while the other has more evil intentions.

Cade: The Tortured Crossing (2023)
Cade restores a mysterious, run down mental asylum and discovers the patients are being experimented on - so trains them as warriors to protect humanity. Cale wears some jam on his face and eventually finds redemption.

BONUS! Five Film Retrospective (2020)
Neil humbly shares his professional movie knowledge and reveals how he was able to make the above films. Not that we're any the wiser.



SARAH MANVEL was less than impressed with acclaimed but controversial new Holocaust film The Zone of Interest. In a very personal essay for FROM THE SUBLIME, she explains why...

... TO LEARNING THE WRONG LESSONS

The title of The Zone of Interest comes from a novel by the late Martin Amis – as did its idea to display the banality of evil through a focus on the home life of the Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedler).

On the surface it was a delightful home life too, with loving wife, Hedwig (Sandra Hüller) and five children ranging from a baby daughter to a teenage son. There's also a staff of several village women who do chores around the house, largely in silence, as well as silent men working in the garden, who are sometimes instructed to wash the blood off Rudi's boots.

Their garden is large, containing significant vegetable and herb plots as well as an English-style section with flowerbeds, a pergola, and even a small pool with a slide for the children. The fact the garden wall is also the outer wall of Auschwitz affects the adults members of the family not at all.

The screams and gunfire from within the camp are simply the background noise to their lives. When the wind blows the smoke from the crematoria in their direction, Rudi and Hedwig close the windows and send the women out to bring in the washing.

Other reviews have called this 'idyllic,' but those reviews are written by critics who do not understand power. Whereas I am a film critic who spent her entire pre-adult life in a military family, including seven years living inside military bases in three different countries, behind fences topped with barbed wire and guarded by men with guns.

I grew up within a system of power that used my existence and my unwitting innocence as a symbol of that power. I know how being a symbol feels. That knowledge is something I learned before I knew I knew it.

When I was nine years old I was sent to a summer camp. My family had recently returned to the US after nearly three years overseas; in my new school I was being viciously bullied and I was miserable. One of the counsellors at the summer camp was nice to me, in the ordinary way someone in college is nice to a dorky little kid, but I had not experienced a lot of kindness since our return so she made a very big impression. I liked her so much that when we both came back the following year I didn't care that she had forgotten my name.

Over time I talked about her so much that when, in December 1988, she was on the front page of our local paper, my mother knew to break the news to me gently. The counsellor had been a passenger flying home for Christmas on Pan Am 103, and thanks to a bomb planted by a terrorist she was no more.

A short time later, America sent aircraft over Libya in a revenge raid, dropping bombs on purportedly military targets which killed some children. When I learned of this, I was upset that those children, who were children like me, were dead and that their deaths were supposed to make up for the deaths on Pan Am 103. I learned that if I, a child in a military family, was murdered, my death would make someone else feel better too.

The deaths of those children didn't bring the counsellor back to life, either.

Later still, my father took my sister and me to another family's house for dinner. I don't really remember the other father, but I remember his daughters. They were nice to us in the ordinary way someone in college is nice to two dorky little kids. One of them drove a jeep with vanity plates. One of them showed me where a tree in their yard had been struck by lightning.

On the drive home my father mentioned in passing that their father had been one of the pilots who'd flown that revenge raid over Tripoli, who'd dropped those bombs and killed those children in retaliation for the lives lost on Pan Am 103. And I was twelve or thirteen, the counsellor I liked was dead and the father of those nice young college women had gone to work one day and killed a bunch of children like my sister and me, and like his own daughters had been. And I wondered how those nice young women lived with the knowledge that their father was a murderer, and how I would live with the knowledge that my father brought me to his house, knowing

he was a murderer.

Murderer was my word, not anyone else's. I was a child, but I had my own ideas.

Ordinary war fought by professionals is not the same as terrorism or the Holocaust, of course, but let's not kid ourselves. However you label them, the basic principles of military aggression and the war machine are the same: the eradication of the enemy, the power to determine who the enemy is, and a casual willingness to blur the lines to serve your own purposes.

The might used to reinforce that power has a secondary purpose: the ability to make other people complicit in your choices. And that power, however it is wielded, replicates itself by bringing children in, that is to say, people who do not have the ability to choose their lives for themselves.

For all the hype around their inclusion, the children at the centre of **The Zone of Interest** barely exist. Their names are mentioned in passing if at all, or at least they are not all captured in the English subtitles of the entirely German dialogue.

One day Rudi takes two of the children boating and their games are interrupted when he realises ashes from the camp crematoria have been dumped in the river; on their return home the house women must scrub the children's skin until they howl.

One of the older sons spends an evening examining by flashlight sets of false teeth, undoubtedly stolen from Jewish mouths. One of the younger sons occasionally wears the uniform of the Hitler Youth.

And at no point did writer-director Jonathan Glazer provide them with any thoughts.

These children make little noise. They ask no questions. They spend no time sharing their stream of consciousness with the adults around them. Hedwig, the children's mother, never interacts with the children alone or is shown talking to them. There is no prattling, or puzzled questions, or silly games, or half-understood remarks parroted at the dinner table.

The depiction here bears no resemblance to the lived family life of any house with five children in it, much less a happy one. While the Höss children are essential to this so-called idyll, as their existence excuses Rudi's choices and justifies Hedwig's selfishness, they are silent symbols, props. Nothing more. Certainly not people with feelings of their own.

By contrast Hedwig has many scenes bragging to other Nazi wives or to her mother about the niceness of the house and the work she's done to build a happy home.

We know about Hedwig's thoughts and feelings in great detail through many scenes

between her and Rudi bickering about his career plans and her personal ambitions. But at one point we watch her silently put a letter from her mother in the fire, after her mother has realised what Auschwitz is and left in haste. On that Hedwig has nothing to say.

Intercut with the scenes of the routines in the Höss home are night-time sequences – filmed like a camera negative, in stark shadows of silver, grey and black, and boldly soundtracked by the creepy music of Mica Levi – of a teenage girl sneaking into Auschwitz to hide apples and other foods.

The character isn't named and does not speak, and the actress playing her wasn't identified in the press kits supplied by the Cannes Film Festival, where **The Zone of Interest** had its world premiere in May 2023. That girl's courage and kindness are shown in darkness and outline, in brazen contrast to the sunny scenes of the Höss home.

Glazer's previous film, **Under the Skin**, was about an alien (played by Scarlett Johansson in the most interesting choice of her career) who arrives in Glasgow to harvest humans for reasons left unexplained and unfathomable because they are literally inhuman. In that movie the cinematography held back from judgement.

In **The Zone of Interest**, cinematographer Lukasz Zal attempts the same distancing stance: neutrality about the horrors happening outside of the frame, allowing Johnnie Burn's sound design and Levi's music to set the tone and mood, or the use of this camera-negative effect when the horrors cannot be avoided.

But the Nazis were not aliens from another planet, and their reasons for their actions were unforgivably human.

The closest we get to a direct depiction of any horror is when Rudi summons a redheaded woman into his office, who sits in silence and unbraids her hair as he watches her. The next sequence is of him returning home by a series of underground tunnels to wash his genitals in a basement sink.

It's obvious what has happened, but the directorial decision not to show what Rudi did to the redheaded woman – while keeping in mind the murders in Under the Skin were shown in great detail – is a demonstration of power, too.

That is the power to shape a narrative, the power to allow plausible deniability, the power to maintain the fiction that these people were only following orders, and their power to keep that truth from their children.

But Glazer is no more interested in providing a life for the Höss children than he is in providing a name for the redhead in the office or for the courageous village girl. They are merely all props for the appalling final sequence, in which Rudi has a vision of Auschwitz's future as a museum tended to by an army of cleaning women.

They silently polish the railings and dust the windows protecting the mountains of stolen items which act as stand-ins for stolen lives while Rudi stands in a hallway in his stormtrooper uniform and glimpses his future, which is to say, our present.

This is meant to demonstrate that Rudi knows he is irredeemably evil but he goes and does the evil things anyway. But this self-understanding is rarely something that those in power will allow themselves to know. Instead, dead children are collateral damage whose deaths can be justified.

The deaths of millions of people, people who died screaming because of their ethnicity, are for the greater good. And those deaths are worth it, because the children of the people in power have warm food to eat every day and a warm house to sleep in every night.

At night the Höss daughters' bedroom is lit by the fires from the crematoria, but if they've ever noticed this, or asked about it, or been caught past their bedtime looking out the window at them, it is never mentioned.

Because that is not the point.

The power is the point. And it would seem that a great many adults – that is to say, people who used to be children – have never thought about the true meaning of power from any perspective, because **The Zone of Interest** won the Grand Prix at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

I was in the room when the award was given, and from the stage Glazer thanked Amis for the idea of showing the perspective on the perpetrators, and expressed his gratitude that he was able to show Amis the film before his death.

As if art from the perspective of the perpetrators is new. Art that shows the perpetrators of great evil not reckoning with their own monstrosity is not new. It is not even new in Glazer's own work.

What is new is taking monstrosity for granted and thinking that merely (and tastelessly) depicting it is holding it to account. It's new that the courage of a child to stand up to evil, repeatedly, at the risk of her own life, is not even worthy of a name. It's new to focus on the banal daily chores over all other actions which make a future reckoning possible, and it's new to make art about evil in which the reckoning is left for a future the evil-doers will never see.

But the Höss children – who were real children,

and three of whom are still alive – were there, watching and learning about power from the inside of the walls topped with barbed wire.

What they learned during their childhoods and what they think about it now would have been a significantly more valuable story, which should be for them to tell in their own words if they choose to do so. They are not metaphors, but living people, and words should not be put inside their mouths.

Glazer could also have focused on the nameless child with the courage to return, over and over again, with help for the people enduring the horror of Auschwitz. But he chose not to.

People with power prefer stories which support their power, and stories of children capable of thinking and acting for themselves rarely do that. And further down the chain, the analysis of whether or not the stories we're told are worth watching is left to people with still less power, such as critics like me. As the movie has toured the festival circuit it has been causing great discomfort amongst my fellow critics.

For the most part, the reaction has been to praise the film for causing everyone to have such unusually strong feelings.

But I had already come to terms with how adults use their power to play with the lives of others, especially their children. The people responsible for Auschwitz were ordinary men and women, ordinary mothers and fathers, who were determined to twist the future into a shape of their own liking and happy to kill millions to do it.

Not monsters, or aliens from another planet, but people. When adults see children as props, their existence and their innocence to be used solely for their own interests, it limits the adults' ability to find a true reckoning.

This means the praise for **The Zone of Interest** is lacking, as the movie itself is lacking. The best way to confront evil is not to let it pass. It is to prattle about it, to ask puzzled or embarrassing questions, to remove the veils of lies and self-pity and racism and to be honest about what's happened. It is to listen to the people on the margins of the tale, to respect their feelings about their experiences, and, above all, to tell the truth.

The Zone of Interest is an act of cowardice, made by people who want to pretend they've confronted evil but who have been unable to look it in the eye.

It is embarrassing indeed that Glazer was so close to the true heart of his story and got it all wrong. But, as children know, the emperor hates to be told he has no new clothes.

... TO PLENTY OF SAX APPEAL

A weird trend has grown in recent months.

An almost puritan backlash against depictions of sex on screen seems to have sprung up. But this time it's not the religious right, or Mary Whitehouse, or the usual protesting suspects behind it. It's folk on TikTok, taking umbrage with a flash of flesh on screen - a backlash largely started by **Oppenheimer** but which has been slowly snowballing since.

Yet the erotic thriller has been a part of cinema since its earliest days - although the charged nature of the eroticism has obviously evolved and become more explicit, as black and white glances gave way to heaving pink and not quite blue.

But it was the advent of home cinema which really allowed the genre to explode in the 1980s, as the VHS boom and the need for video shops to stock ever more content for prospective renters meant shelves soon positively overflowed with cheap thrillers and mysteries punctuated only by regular flashes of female nudity, the odd male buttock, and lingering saxophone solos.

Both high and low-end cinema dipped their toes - and usually other bits of their anatomy - into the genre, knowing even if they didn't go to the box office, straight-to-video would still see their titles being picked up off the shelves of Blockbuster over a weekend.

The bigger-budget end was the go-to coming-out films for actors looking to move on from their family-friendly, comedic pasts into more grown-up material. From Steve Guttenberg to Stan Collymore, Neve Campbell to Judge Reinhold, the erotic thriller genre was where actors came of age.

And at the cheap and cheerful end of the market, the likes of Shannon Tweed built solid, working careers as the often pneumatic woman at the centre of some minor bit of schlocky chaos.

People tend to think of the likes of **Fatal Attraction** or **Basic Instinct** as the champions of the genre, and certainly they're the highest-profile. But for me, the high point came with 1988's **Sea of Love** - which saw schlubby divorced cop Al Pacino being dragged semi-wittingly into an affair with Ellen Barkin, a murder suspect accused of offing various lonely hearts advertisers.

But it's also shot through with a real sense of class. Pacino's world-weary cop, marking his 20th anniversary on the job with a little too much whiskey and calls to his ex-wife (now dating one of his colleagues), has an almost pitiable desperation to his life, while director Harold Becker fills out the rest of the cast with recognisable names on the cusp of stardom, most notably John Goodman - still only a couple of years into his role on **Roseanne** - as Pacino's larger-than-life police partner.

At one point, it threatens to turn into a **West**

Wing prequel, with Goodman, John Spencer, and Michael O'Neill - who played Ron Butterfield - all showing up within a minute of each other.

Barkin's femme fatale is anything but - a chaotic divorcee looking after her child, stalked by an ex-husband (played by Michael Rooker in another early role) and looking for passion in a passionless New York.

That metropolitan backdrop is essential too. This is still New York in the process of cleaning itself up, when Times Square was as much adult cinemas as blockbuster movie posters, and Big Apple was in need of a good polish.

It holds up remarkably well, even with the slightly murderer reveal at the end, helped by a cast taking the relatively clichéd material and elevating it way higher than it might have deserved. It's easy to imagine the Jim Wynorsky version of this, with Shannon Tweed in the Barkin role and some no-mark B-level actor flattening the script out as the detective.

Speaking of Wynorsky... 1995's **Sorceress**, which he directs, is the absolute acme of low-budget, pneumatic-titted 90s erotic thrillers - featuring the unlikely pairing of Penthouse Pet of the Year 1993, Julie Strain, and **The Exorcist**'s Linda Blair.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the latter has the sense not to get her kit off on camera. A messy supernatural film, it starts with Edward Albert's Howard - husband of Blair's character, Amelia - being involved in a black magic-inspired accident just hours after beating Larry - boyfriend of Strain's character, Erica - to a partnership at their law firm. Upset at her meddling, Larry accidentally shoves Erica off a balcony, and as she dies, she warns him he'll never be rid of her.

Amelia then goes on a revenge spree, firstly trying to get her gardener to murder Larry in his office, before enchanting his ex-girlfriend, Carol, to seduce him and pass herself off as an Erica to drive him mad - reaching its absolute high/low point (depending on whether you're a horny teenager or not) when she gives the girlfriend erotic dreams about having a threesome with Strain and her character's witchy pal, Maria.

The climax, as possessed Carol goes on a concussion-inducing spree, knocking out everyone in the house before stabbing Larry and chasing him to finish the job, while paralysed Howard hauls himself across the floor of his own house with a gun in a race to shoot Amelia before she remotely finishes the job, is somewhere on the gobsmacked scale between Goldfish and Evil Ash.

The whole thing is a confused mess - which makes sense at the end as it's revealed (shock!) to have all been a nightmare by the sleeping Larry. Or is it? Yes. Yes, it is.

Wynorsky, with friend and fellow schlockteur Fred Olen Ray serving as producer, dishes up the full range of trashy 90s clichés, with big shiny houses, sharp suits, and flashy motors. They even manage to sneak in a cheeky wave to their old pal, Steve Barkett, in the dialogue, just to see who's paying attention.

The remarkable thing is how little agency any of the characters end up having. Most of the

potential killers only do so because they're possessed. Blair is carrying out her evil plans as revenge for her now wheelchair-bound husband, and Larry spends the majority of the film either being ridden like a glaikit-looking six-foot dildo or cowering from whoever's been sent to off him next. By the end of it, you're rooting for Larry's best pal— perhaps the least likeable character in it.

Poor Linda Blair. I'm sure if you told her after finishing **The Exorcist that** this was the kind of film she'd end up in, it would be enough to make her head spin.

Agency is notably much more significant in the genre the nearer to modern times you get. This year's **Fair Play—** a relatively big-money Netflix release marking the feature debut of writer/director Chloe Domont— inverts a lot of the regular 90s erotic thriller tropes while also serving as a much more significant exploration of things like toxic masculinity and the cult of alpha male behaviour as preached by the likes of Andrew Tate.

Alden Ehrenreich manages to imbue the increasingly pathetic and aggressive Luke with enough charisma that you initially feel for him, before watching him spiral, while Phoebe Dyvenor — daughter of Sally off **Corrie**, a fact once you realise you can't ever unsee— gives real simmering venom to the final scenes without ever once losing audience sympathy.

Weirdly, like **Sorceress**, none of the main characters in **Fair Play** are particularly likeable— let's be fair, when was the last time you saw a sympathetic banker character?— but Domont's writing and directing manage to balance that off and still keep

Although billed by Netflix as an erotic thriller, it is very much the latter aspect which is the key— perhaps thankfully, for the modern audience— with sex being a part of, and then a lost bit of, the relationship being portrayed on screen.

But the peak of the erotic thriller madness has to be 1994's **Color of Night**.

A flop on release, both critically and commercially, it became notorious for the amount and nature of the on-screen couplings between Bruce Willis and Jane March, then still barely out of her teens. Critics panned it, although Maxim - as a sign of the times - gave it an award for best sex scene. The 1990s was a different world...

But, stripped of the hysteria and sniping of the time, and viewed through 2023's prism, time has - if not been kind, then certainly slightly more forgiving.

It's got a remarkable, if not particularly starry, cast. March, fresh off the controversy of her debut in **The Lover**, ends up playing multiple roles as the personality-divergent Rose - one of them, notably, a trans character who is treated entirely sympathetically by the plot - and surprisingly shines in most of them, even if the script requires her to have her bum out for about 75% of her screen time.

Director Richard Rush pads out the rest of the cast with quality support, including the likes of Lance Heinrichsen, Brad Dourif, and Lesley Ann Warren - all solid character actors taking the material and running with it.

Poor Scott Bakula, though. This was his first high-profile Hollywood gig after the end of **Quantum Leap,** and given the thankless role he's landed with, you can only presume his agent really hadn't forgiven him for that show ending...

But the biggest problem here is Willis. He clearly, absolutely, doesn't know how to play the role of a traumatised mental health counsellor in what is a campy, over-the-top script, and just reverts to John Maclean type whenever things get too much. Which is often.

We know Willis can act, and he can do brooding and traumatised well - as M. Night Shyamalan proved with **The Sixth Sense** and **Unbreakable**. Just not here, in a role which really needs him to provide the grounded anchor point to the madness around.

And it's a shame, too, because visually **Color of Night** is fascinating. Rush only directed one other film after this - a making-of about his previous hit **The Stunt Man** - and it's a shame, because he manages to find ever more interesting ways of shooting it.

The camera moves, tracks, and zooms about like a twitchy recovering junkie, while his regular framing of shots within a mirror to play with perspective and conversation is really something to see, particularly during the final shootout and confrontation.

The best bad movies are memorable when they're a failure despite their component parts, and **Color of Night** has, on paper, all the pieces needed to make a clever, noirish thriller - a tortured anti-hero, a collection of suspects, a mysterious femme fatale... and instead everything ends up working against each other, resulting in a tonally disjointed soup which lurches wildly from would-be action thriller to campy schlock - often within the same scene.

Is it good? Absolutely not. Is it worth revisiting though? Definitely, because if **Showgirls** can get reclaimed as an ironic crowd favourite, then **Color of Night** deserves a similar reclamation as the apotheosis of tits and sax silliness.

Cinema is, thankfully, a much more enlightened and responsible place in 2023. Intimacy coordinators ensure the kind of abuse of actors and actresses of old - which, going by some of the stories on **Zandalee**, even Nic Cage could be guilty of - are increasingly a thing of the past.

The increasing removal of the male gaze means films like **Fair Play** can be par for the course, rather than a big genre twist à la **Disclosure**. But for all the tutting and furrowed brows, it's unlikely the genre is going to ever go away.

So there you have it. A palmful of bonkers bonking and sax-scored borderline grot to ruin your watch histories with. Unless you're on TikTok of course...

... TO REAL GRASS ROOTS FOOTBALL

"It's the glacier that Jules Verne wrote about in Journey to the Centre of the Earth. It's actually, in his words, the entrance to the centre of the Earth. So there's magic in the area as well. That was one of the things that kind of hooked us."

Smari Gunn is talking excitedly about the Snaefellsjökull glacier which overlooks the tiny Icelandic fishing village of Hellissandur. About three hours' drive north from Reykjavík, it boasts 369 residents, a shop, some houses, a school, and an arts space.

It also boasts perhaps one of the most beautiful football pitches ever created. Reminiscent of the ground on Eriskay, and hewn from the ash and rock of a lava field, local coach Vidar Gylfsson created it in the mid-1990s with the dream of hosting the town's first-ever Icelandic FA Cup game on it.

Fate had other ideas though - for their first game, Reynir FC were instead handed an away trip, to face the Golf Club of Grindavík FC. The debutants were promptly gubbed 10-0, Vidar gave up on football and the pitch, virtually unused for the next quarter of a century, never had that inaugural game.

This is the story behind **The Home Game**, which aired to rightful acclaim at the Glasgow Film Festival in March, winning the Audience Award as the public's favourite film of the event.

A beautiful shot, amusingly told, and cynicism-free story of generational redemption, community spirit, and the joy of grassroots activity, it's probably the best advert Iceland has had since **Game of Thrones** packed up shop.

Shot over the course of a year, it follows Vidar's son Kari trying to correct a 25-year-old wrong and give the football pitch the home cup tie to inaugurate it Gylfson missed out on.

To do it, he needs to build a team from scratch - from local would-be rapper kids to the last remaining active players of the 10-0 defeat - and enter them in the Cup. "They've got a sense of humour about themselves," says Gunn.

"Obviously, what happened there 25 years ago, when they lost against the golf club, 10-0. It was embarrassing for them. And it was kind of swept under the carpet, and no one wants to talk about it..."

"I didn't even know about that game," chips in Logi Sigursveinsson, his co-director of the film. "And I lived there for, like, 17 years, living in the next town. No one talked about it."

Both Gunn and Sigursveinsson are unashamedly close to their subject matter. Both have known Kari Vidarson since their youth. In 2000, as the world slowly came to terms with COVID, lockdown, and a changed way of life, they found themselves, separately, contacted by him with an idea to resurrect Reynir FC.

The pair, who didn't know each other before joining forces to make the film, had to work around the restrictions of coronavirus and of distance - with Smari based in London and Logi in Iceland, it meant lots of remote communication and having to plan around weekends to make sure they could shoot.

"People were definitely a bit sceptical, a bit tentative to start with," admits Gunn.

"His very best friends would humour him and go to training with him to start with. And then people were just looking out their window, seeing them going into training twice a week. And then they just started turning up."

And turn up they do. By the day of the big match, Reynir FC has more than 30 players - including a local baker, a couple of 15-year-olds, a Portuguese immigrant, and a former Icelandic women's international.

The ragtag group find themselves training through the brutal Icelandic winter conditions, helping to clear the frozen pitch from 12cm of subsurface ice - and even rapping a new team song.

"I think Kari also has that kind of charm in that town that whenever he takes on big, crazy projects, when he asks, people just say yes, because they believe in his kind of energy."

As the film shows, the Reynir spirit - where everyone should be allowed to play football, regardless of age, ability, or gender - slightly rubs up against the rules of the Icelandic Cup, if not its spirit.

An added complication comes when the draw for the first round hands the team their desired home game... But their opponents are one of the top sides in the Icelandic second tier. It would be the equivalent of your local pub side drawing Leeds or Dundee United.

The moment when the team discovered they'd landed their home game did leave the directors with a bit of a scramble, thanks to a lack of warning from the KSI - the Icelandic football association.

"We asked to be kind of in the loop when they do the draw, because we wanted to film the real reaction to the draw and they were

always like, yeah, we'll let you know," admits Gunn.

"It was actually a really funny thing. They let us know on a Tuesday, after we'd done a long weekend of filming from like, Thursday to Monday. And we decided to stay in Hellissandur for a day just to hang out with Kari and chill out.

"Logi went back to Reykjavík, which is three hours away - and then we got an email at 10am rom the FA saying we're going to do the draw at lunchtime. So we're calling Logi and our other cameraman like, guys, jump in a car. And we had to put the whole team on the sheet; they all had to like quit their jobs on the day and went to the freezer.

"We took all their phones so we could get like a genuine reaction. But to be fair to the FA, with the film coming out, they've been our biggest supporters. They've been so helpful."

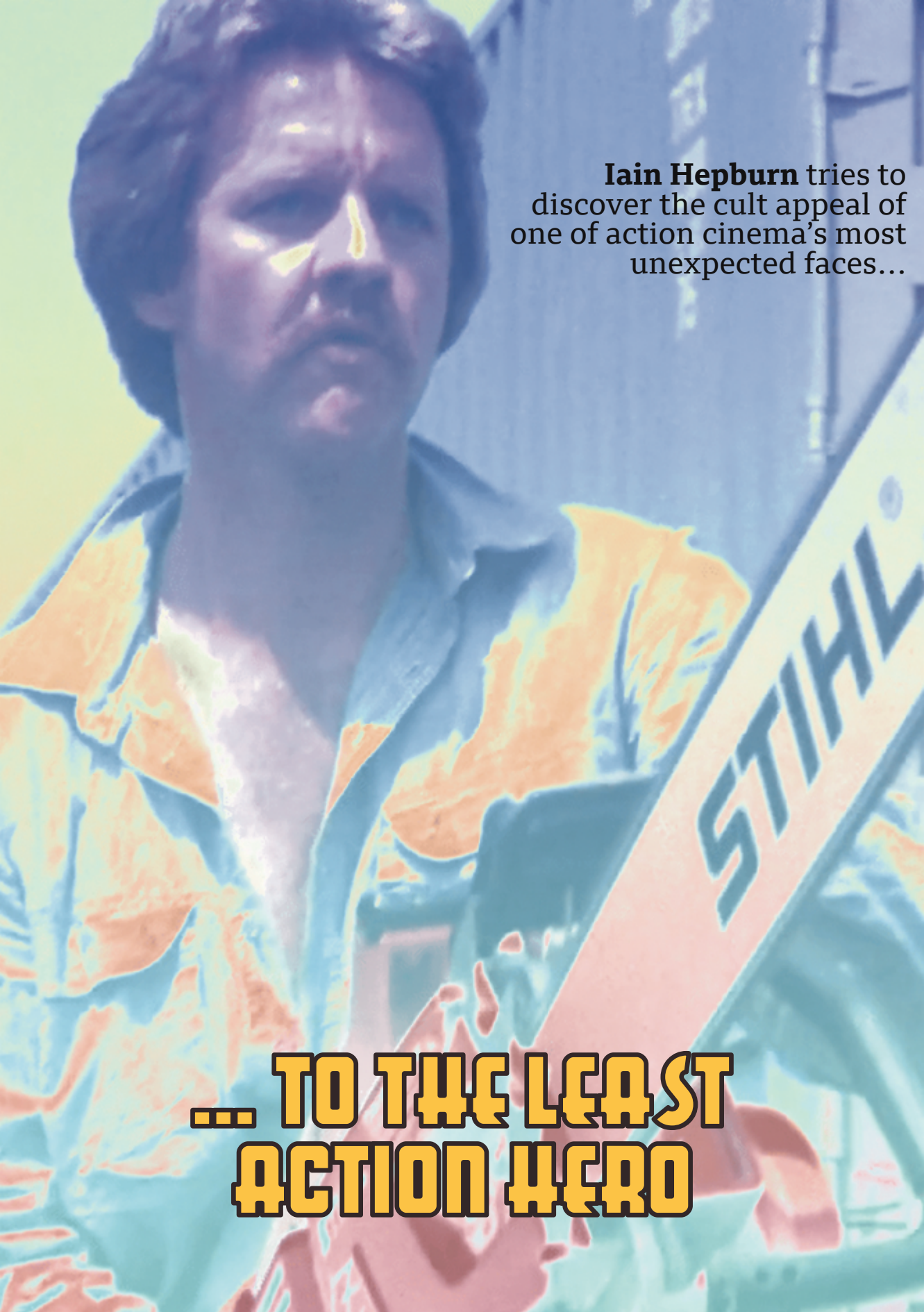
Unsurprisingly, the film has been hugely popular wherever it's screened, with the Glasgow audience voting it their top film of the 2024 festival - beating off the likes of Viggo Mortensen and Maxine Peake to the honour.

Although it hasn't yet landed wide distribution, it seems only a matter of time before it's being seen by a wider audience than just the festival circuit.

"People laugh at slightly different places, but usually they have tears in their eyes and a smile on their face when they leave," says Gunn.

"It's a very local story, but it is universal. The themes of the film and the charm of the people."

"But I think we kind of just wanted to make a film that we wanted to watch. Something that will make you feel good."



Iain Hepburn tries to discover the cult appeal of one of action cinema's most unexpected faces…

… TO THE LEAST ACTION HERO

There's something oddly fascinating about Robert Ginty.

He doesn't have the body of a Schwarzenegger or a Stallone, the charisma of a Gibson or a Willis, or the action chops of even a second-tier talent such as Norris or Dudikoff. Yet Cannon, and others, kept casting him throughout the 80s in the sort of B-movie pish churned out for the back shelves of the video store, largely on the success of trashy cult favourite **The Exterminator**.

He was quite well thought of as an actor - but usually he's such a charisma vacuum in those movies that he's negatively drawing all the energy off screen, with a delivery style so flat you could use it to calibrate a spirit level.

As such, he's become a figure of fun for the bad movie brigade - the likes of **MST3K** and Red Letter Media delivering a regular shoeing to his performances.

And yet in spite, or perhaps because, of that, he's a weirdly compelling figure.

In some ways he's like a very poor man's David Hemmings. He was clearly a talented supporting actor, based on the acclaim of his early roles, and a skilful director - he'd go on in the 90s to helm a lot of popular pop culture telly, then earning a good reputation directing theatre around the world and serving as artist in residence at Harvard before his untimely death from cancer, aged just 60.

But for a decade or so he seemed trapped in a series of films clearly beneath him and which, increasingly, he seems to be doing to take the money and run.

Aside from his breakthrough role in **The Paper Chase**, he's probably best known for **The Exterminator** - the low-budget Viet-vet vigilante exploitation flick from the early 1980s, and its even trashier sequel. But spurred on by the recent rerelease of one of his other, most notorious films, we've dug out three much more interesting slices of Ginty action from the bottom shelf of our fictional Holburn St branch of Blockbuster.

White Fire, which was restored and rereleased during the pandemic by Arrow Films, already has a degree of notoriety - regularly popping up on bad movie lists and Best of the Worst-style shows.

It's a Turkish-set drama by a French softcore director about a pair of Russian orphans – Boris and Ingrid, played by Ginty and Belinda Mayne, respectively - involved in diamond smuggling operations run by a Greek gangster.

When they discover the White Fire - a diamond so pure it burns to the touch - they become embroiled in a plot to steal it, resulting in the death of Ingrid and her replacement via plastic surgery with a prostitute who Boris meets in a bar brawl, while being pursued by her American pimp.

We've all been there, let's be honest.

It's fair to describe **White Fire** as an unpleasant film. In fact, it's downright nasty. Not in a fun, B-movie 80s schlocky way either. It's a grimly unlikeable story with a deeply weird, not even hidden incest-driven hero, played by Ginty, who clearly has designs on his sister to the extent of trying to bang the hooker rebuilt to look like her.

If you like lots of long shots of Turkish quarries and cavern systems, and jarringly inappropriate pop songs on the soundtrack, this is the film for you. For the rest of us, it's just an unlikeable slog.

The only times the film comes alive tend to be when Fred Williamson all too briefly shows up, largely because he's Fred Williamson and brings enough charisma to the screen to balance off the anti-Ginty effects.

Meanwhile **Three Kinds of Heat** is an altogether much more enjoyable film - albeit equally as weird as **White Fire** in its own impenetrable way.

Produced by Cannon Films (the logo at the start is always a mark of quality...) and written and directed by Lesley Stevens - the creator of **The Outer Limits** and **Buck Rogers in the 25th Century** - it is the result of a weird bit of thinking that the best way to make an action film with appeal to a global audience is to have Ginty as the suave male

hero and a cigarette-smoking, machine gun-wielding Sylvester McCoy - at that point already en route to the TARDIS - as the villain.

Chuck in a bunch of London locations awkwardly doubling for New York, a cast featuring Barry '**Van Der Valk'** Morse, Samantha Fox, and Britcom stalwart Reginald Marsh, and you have every bit as unlikely and disjointed bit of drama as it sounds.

The central premise, though, is not only sound but surprisingly fun. Ginty's ludicrously named Elliott Cromwell - an Interpol agent with the US State Department - and Victoria Barrett's airport cop Terry O'Shea get caught in a shootout between gangsters trying to hit low-level snitch Harry Pimm (McCoy).

Also present is Major Shan (Shatki Chen, dressed in a pristine Hong Kong white police uniform which amazingly never picks up a single smudge despite shootouts and fireworks) who is hunting Pimm for his connection to the Black Lion gang. The two women are co-opted by Ginny and Interpol to hunt down Pimm and his gold-smuggling girlfriend in a globetrotting journey from New York to London and... back to New York.

It is a complete mess, but gloriously so. Tonally, it's all over the place. It wants to be a fun, fish-out-of-water flick like **Beverly Hills Cop** - and has a notably synth-heavy score presumably designed to evoke Murphy's film, but which ends up sounding more like an electro-reggae cover of the Monkey Island soundtrack.

It doesn't help that Ginty, charged with being the lead in an action comedy, has the timing and delivery of a falling cooling tower. Every joke hits the deck with a sickening thud. Even seemingly easy bits of business, like putting on a pair of sunglasses backstage at a fashion show, look awkward and forced.

Ably hampering him are Barrett and Shatki. Neither are natural comedians, and Shatki's heavy accent often drowns out the non-sequiturs her 'thoroughbred Mongolian cop' comes out with. Meanwhile, secondary villains Mary Tamm and Trevor Martin are apparently auditioning for **Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels** a decade early, wildly overacting like low-level Cockney gangsters in a 00's episode of The Bill.

The worst part of it is, it's not hard to see how Three Kinds of Heat could be turned into an actually really good film. The central premise - a distaff **Lethal Weapon**/**Red Heat** mismatched buddy cops film - is perfect for the time. The smuggling plot - using gold spun into thread for dressmaking - is surprisingly innovative.

Admittedly, you'd need a better script, director, cast, and budget, but apart from that...

Finally, we've got **Warriors of the Lost World** - a great example of the Italian-made exploitation flick of the early 80s - answers the age-old question which literally nobody has ever asked: What would happen if you crossed **Street Hawk** and **Mad Max**, but did so with the budget of half a **Blake's Seven** episode?

The resulting mess is like an action film equivalent of a fever dream, with Donald Pleasance doing his **Dark and Lonely Water** voice, Persis Khambatta going from fragile beauty to scream queen to tough action hero in the space of a scene, and a fight sequence between... well, everyone you can think of, from little people to ninjas to bikers to members of the Human League, held in a quarry like the world's weirdest Royal Rumble.

Visually, it's stunning - no surprise as writer-director David Worth, making his feature debut, started out (and would continue after this) as a successful cinematographer. He throws everything at it, from quirky, under-cranked shots during the vehicle chases to low-angled, fish-eye-lensed close-ups on location in Italy's finest brutalist architecture, giving even mundane scenes a sense of weirdness.

The soundtrack too, full of bleeps and dirty synth beats, elevates the mundane story - Ginty's motorbike-riding hero is asked to help rescue Khambatta's father, who leads the opposition to Pleasance's dictatorial post-apocalyptic Senate, then rounds up a ragtag group of outsiders to rescue her and free civilisation after she's abducted by the villainous Omega Force.

With little money but a hell of a lot of goodwill, Worth's flick gives it its all - the last 30 minutes is basically just one very long extended chase and fight sequence involving helicopters, rocket launchers, machine guns, and the Megaweapon - a giant spiked truck of doom.

Oh, and Fred Williamson shows up again for an extended cameo. Apparently, he'd just finished filming a movie next door and loved Italy so much he asked for a role so he could extend his work permit and stick around the country. Despite that, he's still brilliant.

In fact, almost the only thing wrong with **Warriors of the Lost World** is - and you might have guessed where this is going - our lead. Ginty, with a week's stubble and David Hasselhoff's leather car coat, manages to stalk woodenly through the film.

In fact, the only time he shows any kind of personality is in the scenes in the capital where Khambatta's character has told him he has to remain emotionless or he'll give away their presence.

To be fair, he isn't the worst thing in the film - the squeaky-voiced computer on his super bike, which thankfully meets a (albeit temporary) grizzly end under the wheels of the Megaweapon, is so annoying it makes, to coin a phrase, Jar Jar Binks look like fucking Shaft.

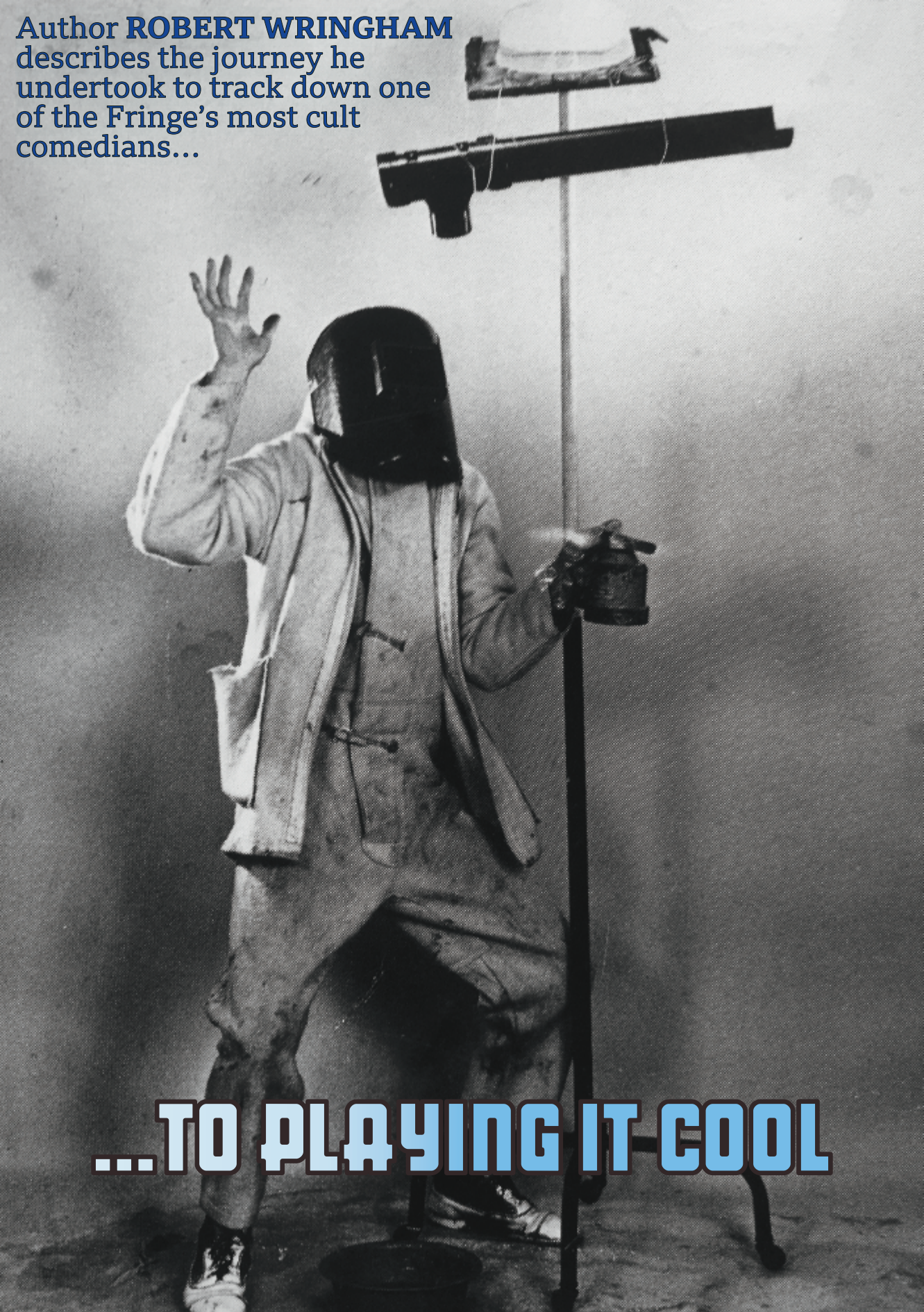
So what's the big takeaway here? It's that Robert Ginty really, really shouldn't have been an action star. Or a lead, generally. In each of the films, his presence is usually the biggest flaw.

Some folk can carry off being b-movie leads - the late, great Treat Williams, for example. It's not an easy gig - you need charm, charisma, comic timing, and to at least look like you're capable of throwing a punch or two.

And yet, despite all that, Robert Ginty managed to keep getting roles. Was it because he was popular? Cheap? Available? Who knows. But, like the Cannon logo that so often preceded his films, he represents a certain type of low-budget VHS flick.

You have been warned...

Author **ROBERT WRINGHAM** describes the journey he undertook to track down one of the Fringe's most cult comedians...



...TO PLAYING IT COOL

He melted ice, they said.

Massive blocks of ice. Yes, he'd try to melt them on stage. No, there wasn't much else to it, that was the act.

Sometimes, they said, he played tightly-looped music in the background. Oh, and he'd talk to the crowd as he melted the block. A comedy monologue? Not exactly, they said, he mainly did laborious ice-related pseudo-puns like "I get depr-iced sometimes."

Look, here are the facts. The Iceman did indeed melt ice in alternative comedy clubs back in the 1980s and early 1990s. He'd sling the most hopeless puns you've ever heard while the tightly-looped music tended to divide the audience into those who were tickled by it and those who detested it.

Mike Myers is one of his famous fans, along with Bill Bailey, Jo Brand and Stewart Lee. But what people don't remember - or at least, seldom report - is how there was an artistry to what the Iceman did. I know because I tracked him down and spent a few days with him and he told me all about it, but we'll come back to that story later.

First, here's what the Iceman did as a performer:

To begin with, he'd set up a rickety podium on which to place the all-important ice block. Doing so would be his first "bit," a clumsy slapstick affair of things falling over noisily and almost taking people's eyes out. It was a way to show he was adorable yet dangerous: clearly harmless but also harmful.

Next, he'd take a Polaroid photograph of the block as if to commemorate it or to create a reference by which to chart the progress of the melt. He'd let the audience have a good look at the Polaroid while he introduced them to the duck.

The duck – a plastic bath toy duck – would sit patiently in a bucket beneath the podium, waiting for the water level to rise.

He'd then begin the melt. "Escalation," he says, "was the name of the game." He'd begin by breathing uselessly on the block. Then he'd get the audience to breathe collectively, but still uselessly, on the block.

Then he'd try rubbing it with sandpaper, rubbing it with salt, rubbing it with coins. Friction was not the intention of the latter: that idea was to bribe the ice to melt.

He'd chisel it and chip it, kick and assault it, spray antifreeze all over it. Sooner or later, he'd get out the big guns. Literally. He had stage guns to fire at the ice block, fires to light, fireworks and other pyrotechnics to set off. "They didn't make a great difference to the block," he says, "but they looked impressive."

The sight of this clumsy and unpredictable eccentric waving a gun around and lighting blue touch paper must have created an electric atmosphere, especially in the kind of small and sweaty comedy clubs he was likely to play in. Genuine peril in service of... well, something that was clearly important to him.

With time running out, the Iceman brought out a blow torch. I always assumed this would destroy the block but, apparently, it never did. The ice was generally left unmelted at the end of the show, the plastic duck not floating at all. Audience members would often see the Iceman after the show, in the car park, still frantically chipping away or just shouting at it.

One of the big jokes was, as Simon Munnery points out, that the ice would eventually have melted anyway.

In 2010, I wrote a tiny book called **You Are Nothing** about an alternative comedy club called **Cluub Zarathustra**. Barely a thing had been written about it before, so my approach was to interview a dozen comedians who performed there and a bunch of audience members who witnessed it.

Everyone, at that time, had been "out of their minds," as Stewart Lee would later put it, and the tangle of memories was... well... a tangle. Even so, when I asked the simple question, "what do you remember about **Cluub Zarathustra**?" they would quite often remember The Iceman. And when they didn't start with the Iceman, they'd come to him soon enough.

Everyone saw the Iceman as "the real deal," one of the genuine eccentrics who'd never be telly famous and would be remembered fondly by those in the know forever.

I found a 1993 review of the Iceman's Edinburgh Festival show in the Independent's newspaper archive, which taught me that his off-stage name was Anthony Irvine.

From this I found from the IMDB that he'd been in the Jerry Lewis film **Funny Bones**. When I watched the movie he was in it for literally a fraction of a second, yet his name appeared prominently in the credits. Who was this guy? My mate Ian Macpherson had gigged with him at London's **Banana Cabaret** in about 1989. He used the phrase "a memorable block," which introduced me to the vocabulary of the Iceman: it's never "ice cubes" or even "ice blocks", but always, specifically, "blocks."

So the Iceman was a legend in two senses. For one, everyone who'd seen him could whisper their half-remembered stories about him. For another, there was little about the Iceman online and barely more than footnotes in comedy history books.

Like many fringe acts before him, he was, simply, gone.

One of the things I knew about the Iceman's act was the detail of taking a Polaroid photograph. He'd also, someone told me, meticulously number the block like an artwork and record it for posterity in a ledger. I wondered if he still had his photographs and his ledger. It could be a book. It really should be a book. It was history!

Eventually, in 2022, I mentioned this fantasy book of blocks to comedy gadfly John Fleming. "I know the Iceman," John said, "he's a lovely man. I'll put you in touch."

And he did. A couple of days later, I got an email: "Ice to meet you," said the Iceman. I couldn't believe it. I was communing with the real and actual Iceman. The legend. He was still alive and he was still punning. Maybe he was even still melting.

When I asked if he still had his collection of photographs, he said: "Sadly, Ice only have 56 ice them."

56? Well, it wasn't the thousands I'd been imagining and hoping for but it was, in my opinion, just enough for a little photo book. Most of the blocks had vanished as nature intended, but we could grant immortality to 56 survivors couldn't we?

"There should always have been a book of blocks," the Iceman later told me. He'd made a block book of sorts back in the '80s: "A photocopiced affair. Ice sold three copice."

The Iceman sent me his photographs by courier from his home in Bournemouth to mine in Glasgow. For twelve hours or so, I felt genuine concern that they might get lost on the way. They were, to me, important relics. I would not have been happy to have played a

part in their loss.

Few others would see it as so important and even the Iceman would probably have laughed it off, told me that he was doomed to transience just like his blocks, but I wanted the blocks and the legend to live on. That was the whole point of the book.

Thankfully, they arrived. And they were wonderful.
When I opened the package, the first thing that struck me was the smell. They reeked! It turns out that twenty-year-old Polaroid photographs, bundled together, give off a rancid chemical fume. I held my breath and excitedly riffled through them.

The blocks themselves were bigger than I'd imagined and they weren't generally the cube shape I'd imagined either, largely because most of them had been made using buckets and so were cylindrical or trapezoidal in shape.

The first blocks I saw in the pictures were propped up by the rickety wicker podium. The next ones seemed to be pre-show, still in the freezer. The best ones were shot on-stage with the audience in the background.

The audiences were small and they wore a mixture of delighted and bemused expressions (as well as some delightful 1980s and '90s clothes and haircuts), some of them clearly getting the joke and others yet to be convinced.

In addition to the 56 main performance Polaroids, there were a few more recent ones taken in the Iceman's garage —so he was still melting —and some great memorabilia.

There were newspaper cuttings and promotional photography, my favourite being a black-and-white shot of the Iceman in a mask and boiler suit, reacting with theatrical

horror, or perhaps reverence, at the very existence of a block.

Well, we had to do something with these...

We agreed to meet at the Battersea Arts Centre in London for an interview. The interview could run through the book, alongside the photographs.

It's often said that the Iceman's act prompted more questions than it answered, but maybe we could get some answers anyway.

Battersea Arts struck me as an apt place to do the interview because the Iceman had played the venue several times in the '80s. Being an arts centre, they'd be sympathetic to our project and maybe give us a space to work in.

And, as it happened, they were already hosting our friend Simon Munnery's Edinburgh preview show, so a little reunion would be possible too.

I met the Iceman on the steps of the art centre. He's in his seventies now but I could still recognise the cheeky face I'd seen in some of the photographs. He wore a blue artist's smock, sandals, a rusted badge with "Iceman" written on it, and a lanyard proudly displaying the word "aim," which is the new identity he uses for his paintings.
He also carried a yellow plastic duck.

The way he carried the duck was disarmingly tender. John Fleming had been right; Anthony Irvine was obviously a lovely man.

I don't like to waste energy before starting an interview, so we started right away.

Often, if a subject and I spend time getting to know each other first, details will inevitably come out that go unrecorded, so I set the dictaphone running and we got on with our interview. I learned all about Anthony's pre-ice time in showbusiness, his moment in the alt-alt-comedy spotlight as the Iceman, what happened with **Funny Bones**, his disappearance from the scene, a show at the Royal Festival Hall, and his more recent paintings.

Anthony explained that the paintings are his current artistic passion but that they're a continuation of his original "performance project" and that some of the paintings are actually versions of moments already captured in the Polaroids.

Could we include those in the book, alongside the Polaroids? Yes, he said, this could be an art book. He seemed to like this idea and I did too. The book could be not just a history but a living thing.

The interview went well. As well as getting the scoop on the act and his days in comedy, I also learned about his days in the circus where he worked as a clown and in a boxing kangaroo act. He's wistful now about cruelty to animals he witnessed at the circus but he also loved the kangaroo and (wait for it) shared a caravan with it.

He told me that he prays to a being called The Blockless One (he sees the blocks as representing ego and that God wouldn't have ego) and that he believes in Ghost Blocks (these being the absences of ice he has left at comedy clubs and art centres all over Great Britain). He says he can sense Ghost Blocks whenever he's near one of his old venues.

Mid-interview, I spotted Simon Munnery in his stetson, checking into the venue. The last time I saw him was in a lockdown-era video chat, which had left me feeling a bit sad and pining for the comedy scene. The last time Anthony saw him, he confided, was twenty years ago. I had no idea it had been so long. I went over to say hello to Simon and, with relish, to reintroduce his old friend.
"Icey-Icey, Baby!" cried Simon on seeing Anthony. It was more than I could have hoped for.

Simon came for some drinks with us after his show. "How many legends are at this table?" said the Iceman. "Well," said Simon, "I count

four," generously including me and the duck.

We showed Simon the Polaroids and he cackled audibly on seeing the audience in shot. The sun set, we got drunk, I think I might have told Simon that I loved him before he disappeared into the night.

Since the book's publication, Anthony and I have done some cool bits and bobs to promote the book. For example, the Iceman popped up on **RHLSTP** (RHLSTP!) and then melted a block on **Ginger Beard Mark**'s YouTube interview show. You know the lad.

But best of all, the Iceman and I have become friends. I'm seeing him next week for his art exhibition in Wiltshire. I'm supposed to do a comedy acceptance speech in exchange for one of his paintings.

I have no idea what to expect: a crowd of middle-class art toffs nursing flutes of champers, a vibrating tribe of devoted comedy fans, or a handful of bemused Wiltshirians lured in from the street.

If I manage to schlep the painting all the way home on public transport it will hang on my wall, pride of place, for the rest of my days.

Anthony and I also made a new pal in the form Bournemouth-based punk musician Spencer Wakeling aka Coley Portions. Spen has made a brilliant song about the Iceman called, aptly, **Melt It!**

There's even a music video involving puppetry and ice block destruction. It's absolutely great.

This has led to the possibility of the Iceman touring with the Nightingales and Ted Chippington someday, as God (of perhaps the Blockless One) intended...

Drop the Dead Donkey staged an unlikely comeback - and **Iain Hepburn** discovered it still has much to say about the media…

… TO AN UNEXPECTED EQUUS ASINUS RESUSCITATION SCENARIO

Ever since I was a small child, I knew I wanted to be a journalist.

The idea of writing for a newspaper, or telly, or radio. Of being on the frontline, speaking truth to power and crusading fearlessly in pursuit of the facts.

It's why, when I was 11, I wrote an essay about how the person I respected the most was Robert Maxwell. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, that might not have been the wisest choice, but it did win me the prize on BBC Saturday morning kids' show **UP2U**, a day with my local paper and two days hanging about with Jenny Powell, so who's to say if I was wrong...

Obviously, since those sun-kissed halcyon days, I've discovered that journalism isn't - or at least, isn't usually - a profession of crusading, challenging whipsmart heroes saving the world one expose at a time, but is as venal, shallow, darkly comic, and miserable as any other workplace.

Which is probably why I love **Drop the Dead Donkey**, Channel 4's long-running satirical newsroom series from the 1990s.

For me, it's one of only two perfect media depictions of what an actual newsroom is like, alongside Ron Howard's outstanding 1994 movie **The Paper** - basically a very expensive TV pilot, like **ER** in a newspaper office. Both capture the essence of what working in news, be it print, digital, or broadcast, is actually like.

And with **The Reawakening**, original TV series Andy Hamilton and Guy Jenkins have done something remarkable - 30-odd years after the original series changed how people thought of journalism, they've managed to capture lightning in a bottle again.

The premise for the new stage revival, which unfolds as the main characters are unexpectedly reunited, sees Gus Hedges - former chief exec of Globelink News - put in charge of a new broadcasting start-up and deciding the best way to operate it is to reunite with the team who made Globelink such a roaring "success" 30 years ago.

Which is how we get former editor George Dent, former assistant editor Helen Cooper, broadcast assistant Dave Charnley, now wheelchair-bound reporter Damien Day, and anchor Sally Smedley back in the fold. It seems a slightly contrived premise, but the script also has time to play with that - indeed, Joy Merryweather (yes, she's also back, clad in leathers and in the terrifying position of head of HR...) skewers Gus' obsession with reuniting his old team.

We learn what happened to the old favourites from where we left them at the end of the show. George, you'll be unsurprised to learn, was working on Liz Truss' media team...

There's also a couple of new faces in the cast - Kerena Jagpal's Rita, a 19-year-old British Asian intern brought in as the weather presenter, to tick as many diversity boxes as possible, and Mairead - played by **2.4 Children's** Julia Hills, an Emmy-winning undercover hack who has been recruited to run Truth TV's investigations department.

And lurking in the background this time, in place of the all-looming spectre of Sir

Royston Merchant, is The Algorithm - software developed by the channel's mysterious consortium of foreign backers, which scans the news output and suggests suitable topics and scripts to generate the most social media outrage and viewership.

It couldn't be more timely. The original **Drop the Dead Donkey,** particularly in its earliest seasons, was as much about the increasing tabloidisation of news broadcasting - sparked by fears of Murdoch's Sky TV and US networks.

30 years on, and the industry goalposts have shifted so much they may as well be offshore. Hamilton and Jenkins' script reflects that - Truth TV feels very much a child of a world that gave us TalkTV and GB News, where reactionary right-wing bollocks can be spewed on air in defiance of Ofcom - indeed, hoping for censure by the regulators in order to maximise publicity on social media.

There's some tongue-in-cheek reflections on obsessions with representation in the media - with Rita's hiring and gender-neutral toilets being a point as well as a punchline - which initially feels close to anti-woke eyebrow-raising but, as you'd expect, expands into a much wider, more salient point about the responsibilities of the news media, both to its audience and to those who work within it, especially youngsters being recruited on no wages with the promise of 'experience' or 'a foot in the door'.

As such, we end on a stirring speech from Damien - hardly the last bastion of honesty and reflection in news - about improving the state of journalism in 2024. Of course, this being **Drop the Dead Donkey,** it's instantly knifed by a well-placed punchline.

Still in place though, are two of the key elements which made the TV version of **Drop the Dead Donkey** such a success - the topicality and the cameos. The script, which in Salford dropped in references to Sunak's most recent press conference, Biden's memory issues, and the then-impending Rochdale by-election, keeps that same sense of being updated on the day of transmission.

There's also a brilliant, surprising, and brutal cameo from a British news broadcasting legend, utterly in keeping with both the broader tone of the stage show and the sharpness of its original predecessor.

That broad tone is a bit jarring - there's far more F-bombs than 10 p.m. Channel 4 would allow, albeit all in the service of a running joke - and the performances are bigger for the stage than a TV camera requires, especially from Rawle and Lacey, who were much more

subtle on screen. And even after a couple of weeks, it felt like there were a couple of timing issues - nothing major, certainly nothing that disrupts the performance, but still obviously there.

But there are lovely tributes too - both to Haydn Gwynne and David Swift in the programme and at the curtain call, and to Swift's character - the iconic, monstrous newsreader Henry Davenport - in the script. Unsurprisingly, he's passed on, in a manner which you sense both Davenport and Swift would very much have approved of...

For all this is a stage production, it's not hard to see how this would translate to TV if Channel 4 decided they wanted to bring **Drop the Dead Donkey** back for a limited run. Or indeed anyone else, for that matter. It wouldn't take much surgery to cut the two hours into four episodes, and the cast slip so comfortably back into their roles it's like they've never been away.

Perhaps the only barrier to it would be how hard it is now to satirise the state of the media. The knowing editorial injokes of **Drop the Dead Donkey**, the overblown noise of **The Day Today,** the edgy insight of **Brass Eye**... we've reached a point where modern news broadcasting has sailed way past all of them, into uncharted realms of partisan bellowing, fakery, and manipulation. Against that backdrop, would a **Drop the Dead Donkey** return really have an impact?

Who knows. But I'd love to see them try...

ROB WRINGHAM has had Herring on his mind for more than two decades - but finds nothing fishy in that…

… TO WARMING UP FOR 22 YEARS

I have thought about the comedian Richard Herring at least once a day for over twenty years. In my adult life I've thought about him more times than I've had breakfast, and I hardly ever skip breakfast.

I can't pretend to know Richard, though it sometimes feels like I do. He doesn't know me either, though I think he recognises my name. Having such a strong awareness of a person you don't know is a bit strange really.

So let me explain. The reason for my mind daily drifting Herringward is his blog. Herring began posting on Monday 25th November 2002. I joined in as a reader maybe four weeks later, quickly munching my way through the backlog and turning up each day for more. He's never missed a day and neither have I. I'm older now than Herring was when he started blogging.

Checking in each day to "see what Rich is doing" is a bit like having a pet hamster or goldfish. You rock up to his enclosure in a casual but not disinterested manner and tap gently on the glass. Richard Herring is my pet man. Instead of feeding him with a pinch of tetra flakes, I buy his podcasts and merch. Instead of cleaning his tank out, I go along to his live shows and clap a lot. Every day, via RSS, I see him running in his wheel. He loves it.

I was pretending to study psychology at Wolverhampton University when I found his blog. Like Rich, I was more interested in comedy at university than getting a degree. Rich, meanwhile, had recently made a tonne of money writing for Al Murray on **Time Gentlemen Please** and was floundering a bit in his Balham flat, playing a lot of Gameboy Scrabble and unsure of what to do next. I had no idea what to do after graduation so I sympathised with his listlessness.

The blog was (and is) part of his website, built by "Goblin King" Rob Sedgebeer who had also looked after the Lee & Herring websites back when the double act was on TV. The guestbook was good, offering some pre-social media back-and-forth between Rich and his fans, and the downloads section was full of interesting old scripts and photoshoots for show posters. The blog was the juiciest part though, a daily diary in which Rich would focus comedically on a particular element of his day. "This may look like a daily diary," reads the opening line of the blog's introduction, "but it isn't exactly that." It's a writing exercise, he explains, a way to launch himself each morning into a writerly flow state without Al Murray's people to set a deadline. Which is why it's called **Warming Up.**

I wasn't the only Herring reader at uni in 2002. Some friends also read the blog and we'd discuss **Warming Up** casually as if talking about another friend: "did you see that Rich is in [such-and-such town] today?" and "Rich was funny today about [whatever it was]." We rooted for him in the CNPS days (CNPS being Consecutive Number Plate Spotting, a essentially impossible game intended to keep children occupied on long car journeys, but which Herring picked up in his thirties as a seemingly genuine dragon to slay; he charted his progress with a Dave Gormanish graph) and read most of the **Talking Cock** book ahead of publication because he often posted his drafts as part of an entry.

We met characters from his comedy life, such as tour manager "Arrogant" Simon Streeting, and learned about people from his past like school friend Phil Fry and the bloke who shouted "pert nipples!" at a screening of **The Other Cinderella** at the Wells Odeon. There was the "shut your bloody sheety mouths" guy too, who was annoyed at Herring and friends talking all night at a campsite. It's bizarre that I should know about any of this.

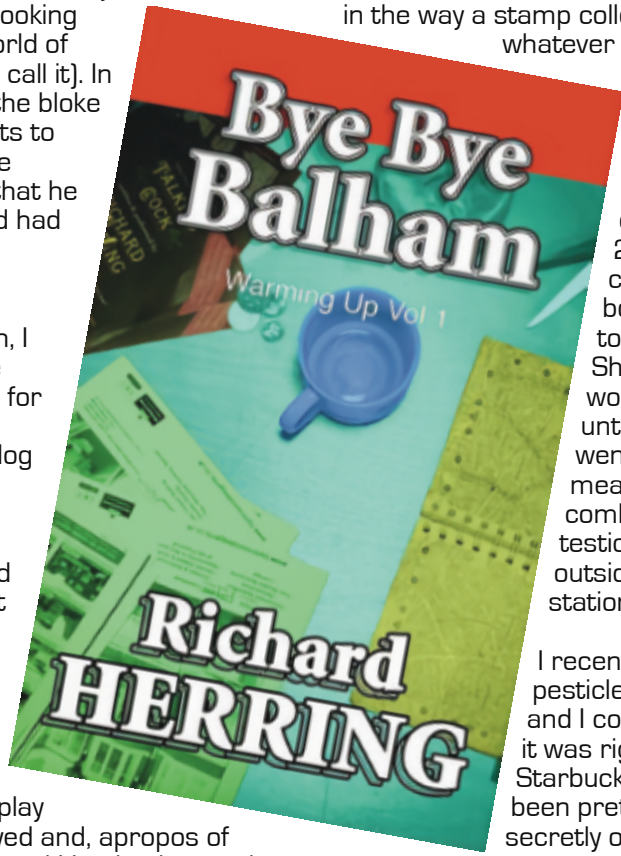
"In a world obsessed with major historical events," writes Herring in the intro to **Bye-Bye Balham**, the first collected volume of his diary entries, "billions of supposedly insignificant events are unrecorded and forgotten." Warming Up quickly became not just a writing exercise but a repository of these events, often reflected upon comedicaly but also–we long haul readers can tell–with a sense of sentimentality.

Rich genuinely doesn't want life to pass him by and, in recording such nothingy moments as the time a pigeon got into a train station McDonalds, he achieves a sort of

immortality. **Warming Up** is, after all, archived by the British Library.

Rich used to suspect he was in his own version of The Truman Show before, around 2005 or so, deciding it was paranoid and arrogant to believe such a thing. Oddly though, he really is in his own version of **The Truman Show**: a self-made one via **Warming Up**. And people like me–and all those fat bearded men who work in IT–are the viewers.

On occasion, I've inadvertently passed through the looking glass and into the world of WU (as the cool kids call it). In Edinburgh in 2004, the bloke who printed my tickets to Herring's show at the Pleasance confided that he too read the blog and had even been in it. I felt jealous.



At another Edinburgh, I got chatting to some punters in the queue for Herring's Udderbelly show: they weren't blog readers but after seeing some up-and-coming fringe acts they said they wanted to see "a name." I felt proud. My pet man was "a name." At yet another Edinburgh, a young comic was plugging his show on the Royal Mile by asking passersby to play chess with him. I played and, apropos of nothing, he said "Richard Herring is a real shambles of a man," referring, I think, to his long hair and the buckets of change he'd lug around after charity collections at his shows.

God help me, I felt hurt by the remark. "That's my pet man you're talking about, you prick."

Time marched on. Herring appeared in more one-person shows, usually starting in Edinburgh and touring them before committing a final performance to posterity on DVD. The DVDs were produced by Chris Evans (not that one) at Go Faster Stripe and, in 2012, Chris gave me the job of editing the second collected volume of Herring's blogs. Much like Peter Baynham on hearing of the death of Rich's grandad, I was delighted. I was the right person for the job: I'd had a then-unthinkable ten years of daily training. I'd even noticed that Rich frequently confuses "past" with "passed" and for the first time ever I could stop him looking like a fucking idiot.

The book was called **The Box Lady and Other Pesticles**, two bizarre concepts I recognised in the way a stamp collector would recognise whatever stamp collectors are interested in. The titular Box Lady was a presumptuous neighbour who pestered Rich for a couple of weeks in 2003 for his cardboard moving boxes after he moved to his new house in Shepherd's Bush: he wouldn't give them up until he was ready and it went on and on. Pesticles, meanwhile, refer to the combination penis-and-testicles on a statue outside Hammersmith tube station.

I recently spotted the pesticles statue in real life and I couldn't believe my eyes: it was right outside the Starbucks where Rich had been pretending to work while secretly ogling the legs of some young women. It was all real! I mean, of course it was, but it was another of those through-the-looking-glass moments where I found myself in Rich's semi-fictionalised world.

Editing the pesticles book was like a time machine. It was strange to remember the events on the page with such clarity (a personal trainer called Nelson advising Rich to relax his shoulders, the poster campaign of a lonely woman seeking her lost love Sergio, and the time Rich found seven snooker cue chalks in an alley) but it was

stranger still to remember where I was at the time of reading about them. I was usually, but not always, in the basement computer lab of the Wolverhampton Uni psychology building but just as often at my parents' house or on holiday or in the company of a bare lady. Well, maybe not the last one. I'd put most women off by doing Pliny and Histor impressions all the time and by giving them handmade St. Skeletor's Day cards after forgetting to do anything about the previous day, which some would argue is more widely observed.

I don't know if Herring wants to do any more book versions of the blog. I'd like him to. I'm there for the edit and this time I have 22 years of training. Then again, I wonder about the total cost (and weight) of printing it all out. I'm not sure there's enough paper in the world any more if he wanted to bring the book version up to date. In one of the video podcasts he recorded with Andrew Collins, you can see a shelf of ring binders behind them. One of them is marked "Warming Up" with some dates after it. I think Rich might have printed out each blog entry. How long did he do this for? Does he still do it? If so, it must threaten the integrity of his floorboards. I hope he lobbed them when he moved house, like he did with all those old phone chargers and computer mice. (Truly, I remember everything he does. It's awful.)

Having read the blog for so long, I sometimes see blunders looming on the horizon. I remember thinking "maybe don't do that" when he mentioned wanting to put on a play in Edinburgh in addition to his own show. "It'll cost a fortune," I thought. And it did: he was in the hole by £40,000 if memory serves. But how could I stop him? It's not my place to say anything and he wouldn't have listened if I did.

It's like being Clarence the Angel but without the ability to intervene. I tried once though. In a very small way. When he blogged about the posters for **We're All Going to Die!** in 2013, the designer Steve Brown gave Rich a choice of typefaces: a dignified tombstone serif or a schlocky green b-movie splatterfont. The latter was the only choice–it suited the hysterical exclamation marked show title and honoured the zombie imagery of the photoshoot–but I knew Rich would choose the wrong one. I abandoned my sacred nonintervention policy and emailed him from (I always remember, remember) my desk in the library of the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal. He disagreed and used the shit one.

I have front row seats not just of his shows but of the work that goes into them, the process, the way they evolve from scribbled note or improvised chat to final performance. Some of his best ideas started life in **Warming Up**. The "magpie reward system" from **Someone Likes Yoghurt** began there, as did the inciting event of the same show. Stop me if you've heard this, but Rich was stocking up on yoghurt at Sainsbury's while they were on offer and it prompted the cashier to remark that "someone likes yoghurt." It plunged Rich into a vortex of shame and paranoia and he spent a whole brilliant hour of his live show defending himself against the implied accusation of yoghurt deviancy.

It's been fascinating and deeply enjoyable to travel with him in this way. I know so much about this funny and awkward and hardworking man, but for what? I should just stop reading really; I sometimes feel like I'm living his life as well as my own and it all started before the word "parasocial" even existed. I have an idea of pressing my pointless knowledge of him into service by choosing "The life and work of Richard Herring" as a **Mastermind** special subject.

You see, my pet man was treated badly on **Celebrity Mastermind** in 2010 when his score–the highest score in the history of the show–was improbably trumped by the next contestant, the antiques expert Hillary Kay. This could be chalked up to bad luck, but Kay was allowed to answer questions about pottery despite the subject being within her professional wheelhouse while Herring was told he couldn't answer questions on the human penis because of his work on **Talking Cock**. I could avenge him. Maybe I will. I just need to improve my General non-Herringy Knowledge first.

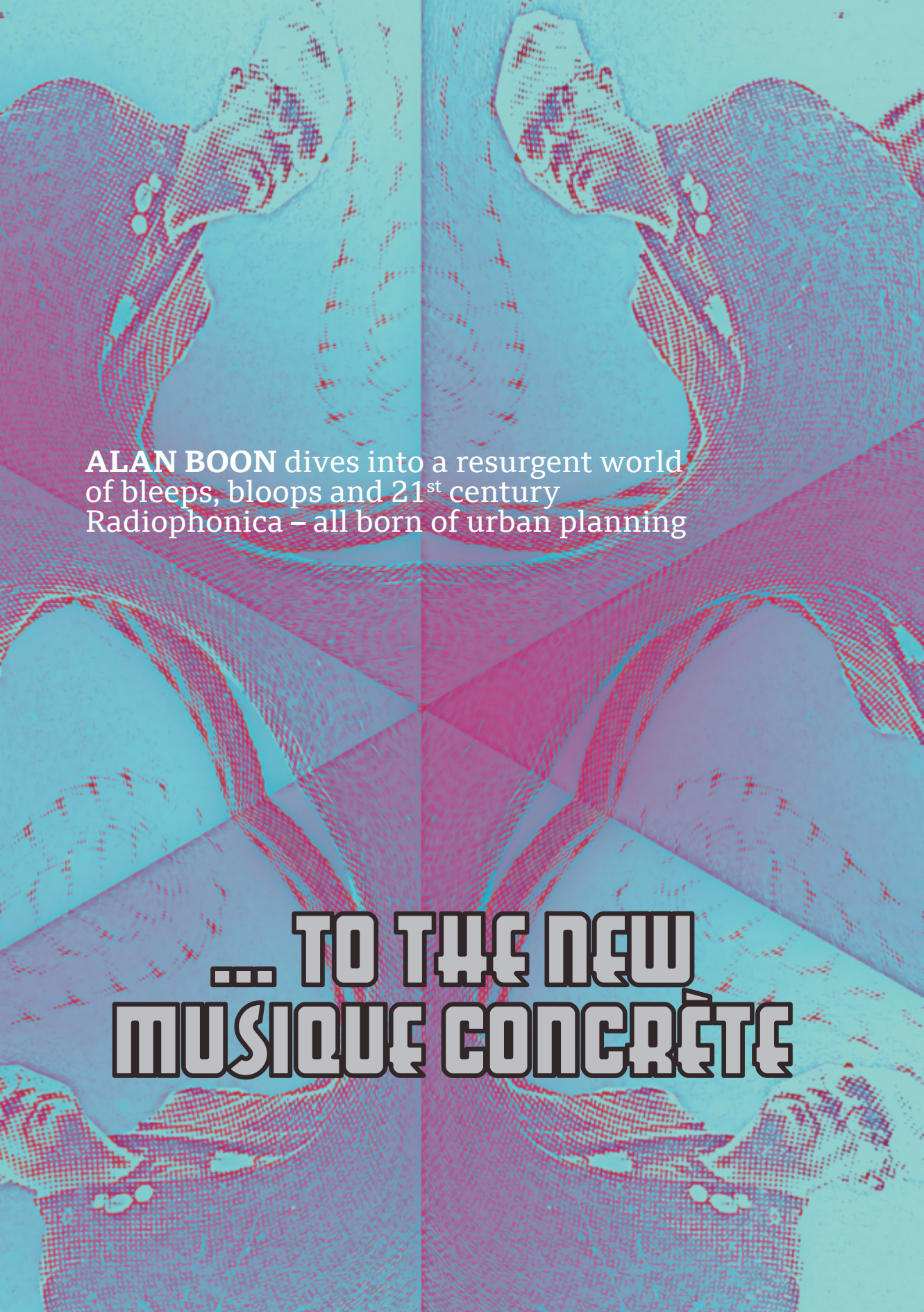
A few years ago, Herring reached a singularity of productivity wherein even I - his benign and largely-silent watcher- - could no longer keep up. I've tried to get into the Stone

Clearing podcast and to watch his Twitch of Fun puppet shows and listen to Me1 vs Me2 Snooker but it's too much.

I have no idea if the other long-serving fans (Jeanette Muff, John Hoare, Andy McH, none of whom I know beyond their names cropping up in the blog) consume it all. It doesn't seem possible. Though we might be growing apart as Richard speeds up production and I slow down in following it all, I'll always remember our "time together" as he (we) fretted over ticket sales (will he ever play the Slade Rooms in his bellwether town of Wolverhampton?) and his (our) weight-watching (up and down like a yo-yo thanks to his love of Easter eggs and Pizza Express and "Flumpses" but now in hand thanks to stir-fries for breakfast, a George Foreman grill and the Zoe app) and of course the agony and the ecstasy (!) of CNPS.

When Rich podcasts himself into an early grave despite his oft-mentioned hope of performing into old age like Jethro or Ken Dodd, I'll still be here, containing every moment. His strange desire to capture the ephemeral will live on in me for a while longer at least.

In November this year, **Warming Up** will be 23 years old. That's like, the age of a real fully-grown person. A person older than I was when I started reading it. Long may it continue. Don't die, Rich. When you die, I know I'll only have 18 years left. And I won't have anything to read.



ALAN BOON dives into a resurgent world of bleeps, bloops and 21st century Radiophonica – all born of urban planning

... TO THE NEW MUSIQUE CONCRÈTE

South of Runcorn, where the Weaver runs into the Mersey, Rocksavage Power Station is a gas-powered facility generating 800 MWe, around four times the capacity of Sellafield at its height.

Named for a ruined Elizabethan mansion that sat nearby, the site was previously home to Rocksavage chemical works, an ICI operation that employed more than 6000 people when the population of the town was barely six times that. Designated a New Town in 1964, Runcorn was a hive of industry, with plants like Rocksavage producing useful things and discharging their toxic waste into the river nearby.

It was a similar story across the water in Widnes, where the Mersey Gateway Bridge links the two towns and ICI operated the Pilkington Sullivan works, and half a dozen miles up the river in Warrington, another New Town – this time of 1968 vintage – and one dominated by a Unilever factory which produced washing powder for more than 130 years until its closure in 2020.

Towns like Runcorn and Warrington thrived in the post-war race to improve the lives of those who had suffered through six years of sacrifice - each given a Development Corporation to oversee the urban sprawl, welcoming those squeezed out of less-than-desirable habitations in the inner cities of Liverpool and Manchester.

In 1980, the two were linked by the amalgamation of their Development Corporations, inexorably joining the two in the minds of those with an unnatural interest in town planning and the peculiar ephemera it produces.

And that's where **Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan** comes in.

Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan appeared, fully formed, in February 2021 with the eight-track **Interim Report, March 1979** on Castles in Space.

The truth is more complicated than that, of course, but there's a semi-deliberate obfuscation on the part of Gordon Chapman-Fox – the man behind the unwieldy alias – as regards his pre-2021 musical activities. There's talk of ignored earlier releases under other names, and a past life spent providing samples and noises for a grindcore band, but there's a neatness to the **Warrington-Runcorn** story that makes for a tidy, self-contained listening experience.

Equally inspired by the music collected by his electrical engineer father, and by the explosion of Brutalist architecture that proliferated British towns and cities from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, Chapman-Fox has curated a series of albums that share an aesthetic – all released by Castles in Space, a Biggleswade-based label that has become a go-to source for slightly outré electronic music.

Interim Report was followed in September 2021 by **People and Industry**, which carried an image of Warrington's now decommissioned Fiddlers Ferry power station on its cover. The two albums were recorded back to back but there's a progression from a

suite mostly concerned with the buildings found in British post-war towns to the people that lived and worked in them. As the name suggests, Chapman-Fox is acutely interested in the overspill New Towns that sprang up to take those either displaced - or seeking a new life away - from the crowded inner-cities of Birmingham, Liverpool, London, Manchester, and more.

This was particularly overt on **Districts, Roads, Open Space**, which arrived in October 2022. It left the buildings behind in favour of exploring everyday life in these pockets of modernist harmony. Perhaps overt is the wrong word; past the odd sample, there's no lyrics here to guide you through Chapman-Fox's tour of pre-Thatcher life, merely an evocation that hits hard with anyone who lived through the decades of managed decline that followed in the wake of that foul harridan.

By May 2023'S **The Nation's Most Central Location**, Chapman-Fox could no longer disguise his absolute disgust and anger at the damage done by leaving everything to market forces that didn't particularly care for those with least power, spending or otherwise.

This was something brought back into the modern conscience by the failure to keep promises to "level up" forgotten communities, perfectly illustrated by the collapse of the northern arm of the HS2 project. Infrastructure and investment, it seems, are still only for those within spitting distance of London.

Just as previous releases found tracks calling out the likes of Runcorn's Castlefields estate and the Golden Square shopping precinct in Warrington, **The Nation's Most Central Location** zeroed in on such area landmarks as Danesbury Laboratory, Europa Boulevard, and the power station at Rocksavage, infusing a sense of place and time into the album's targeted ire.

The summer of 2023 found Chapman-Fox in a more reflective mood, releasing the vinyl-only EP **Building a New Town** and exploring the earlier days of his stock in trade. Keen to imbue his works with a sense of authenticity, Chapman-Fox only uses technology – or emulations of that technology – that existed during the time his records are set, and **Building a New Town** saw him take an unexpectedly pastoral turn, exploring the transformation of open field into housing estate with a surprisingly folky flavour.

With fifth album **Your Community Hub** due in April, Chapman-Fox continues to work his magic on both record and live, where a **Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan** appearance has become a guarantee of an hour of beat-filled escapism.

As gregarious as he is tall, Chapman-Fox is a totemic leader for a scene that has only just begun to work its way into the ears and minds of those seeking some explanation for the chaos of modern life, looking for answers in just where it went wrong.

Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan may be at the vanguard of this movement but he's far from alone in exploring the pathways that link ears, hearts, and minds through retro-tinged synthesiser music.

Basking in suggestive names like **Concretism**, **Polypores**, and **eMMplekz,** this loose collection of outsiders from Lancaster, Coventry, Basildon, and countless other mundane locations have been soundtracking the lives of men of a certain age for a number of years yet.

Like **Warrington-Runcorn**, many of the artists found on Castles in Space have also taken monikers that could apply to a faceless corporation, leading one to ask questions such as, have you seen the cutting edge sonic research from the **Twelve Hour Foundation,** pored over the aural vectors drawn by **Field Lines Cartographer**, or cast your vote for the **Soulless Party**? Did the **British Stereo Collective**'s latest missive rouse you from your slumber, did you sign up to be a part of **Mount Vernon Arts Lab**'s new happening, and did you see what the **Central Office of Information** have disseminated through the nation's stereo systems?

This is a scene with no name, a scene that pushes boundaries from within a set of carefully prepared (field) lines, and a scene with a surprising breadth that welcomes

dedicated explorers and those who have stumbled unsuspecting through its gates in equal measure.

In many ways, it's a perfect encapsulation of the New Town experiment that inspired some of its best exponents; carefully planned, lovingly executed, and enthusiastically embraced by its denizens. The New Towns failed because those in charge forgot that they need loving care to thrive, something that **Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan** looks to be in no danger of.

KEY TRACKS

Gateway to the North (Interim Report, March 1979)
The very first thing the world heard from **Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan** opened with a sample of a speech introducing the concept of the New Town, the fifteen-minute city of its day, a top-down gift from a benevolent state to its people. Undulating tones then welcome the listener in to a fascinating world that's already tinged with a darkness...

Buzzby's Lullaby (District Roads, Open Spaces)
Album three's closer doesn't require the listener to know who Buzzby is to understand his lament, the imminent sell-off of our utilities to private interests reflecting that woman Thatcher's view that there is "no such thing as society." It's a message into space but a very terrestrial space, formed by an approaching absence of the social contract...

Rocksavage (The Nation's Most Central Location)
A pulsating call that almost sounds like it could be transmitted through pylon-linked power lines fed by the titular power station, *Rocksavage* takes **WRNTDP** firmly into the 1980s, but that peculiar liminal 1980s that will never fully develop. That it could soundtrack both a **Tomorrow's World** segment and a murder spree by Jason Voorhees is somehow perfectly apposite.

Solid Foundations (Building a New Town)
Taking a folktronica turn as it digs into the roots of the New Town project, Building a New Town is **WRNTDP**'s most optimistic release but even that still carries a touch of the melancholy. *Solid Foundations* understands that, with courage, there will be better days ahead but that the 1970s and post-War social consensus are doomed to fall. All in three minutes and forty two seconds of gentle drift...

41 FEST

Life can be tough for the musicians that just fall short. **BEN BAKER** looks back at the bands who failed to break the charts.

In this age of uncertainty, there's plenty to keep a person awake at night: imminent global collapse, spiralling prices, global warming at an all-time high, and endless devastating wars rendering thousands without homes and watching their loved ones die at the hands of a brutal regime.

Inevitably for an opening paragraph such as this, I do not think of those things. I think about how weird it must be for someone to find out you used to be in a band and upon asking if you had any hits, you can only say "…. erm, we had a Top Forty…one?"

To me, there's cultural cache and respect for a Top 40 hit, whether it's top of the shop or down in the reception area of rock, because you can say "Yeah, we had a Top 40 hit".

I've long been obsessed by those acts who failed to get into the Top Ten by one position throughout their entire careers, with the Levellers, Super Furry Animals, Del Amitri, Joni Mitchell, The Cult, solo Nick Heyward, Fountains of Wayne, Air Supply, The Mission, and the joyful punk pop bellow of Shampoo all failing to get past No. 11. And that's the way it's going to stay… well, outside of them appearing in the next smash Netflix drama about spunk-eating ghosts or something anyway.

Yet even in those situations, they have the glory – and maybe even some money – of top 20 hits and perhaps even an appearance on **Top of the Pops** for future miserable bastards on social media to go "well, I don't remember it" when it inevitably gets repeated on BBC Four.

But where does a career peak of number 41 get you?

For me, it's an instant ticket to the imaginary "Gorky's Park" where forty-one funsters can revel and live in peace from anyone asking about their chart history.

The grounds were, of course, named after Gorky's Zygotic Mynci, the loveable oddball Welsh pop stunners who managed to have eight Top 75 singles without any reaching the Top 40. The highest at 41 – "Patio Song" – was their first single for the major label Fontana and seemed to be following "Cool Cymru" countrymates Super Furry Animals, 60ft Dolls, and Catatonia into the National Chart. Then…didn't. Maybe it was the near-Christmas release date or lingering post-Diana death maudlin mopery. Or maybe it is just because the British public make terrible decisions constantly.

Perhaps it's merely an unexpected blip in the career of a more album-oriented act – like in the case of American jazz funk legend Roy Ayers, whose 1978 disco pop single "Get On Up Get On Down" was one of seven Top 100 hits in the UK that never made the big 40 but didn't especially impact his career or standing among fans, most of whom now regularly hail his earlier non-charting records – such as 1976's "Everybody Loves the Sunshine". (Although that does mean Britain was denied his 1984 single "Poo Poo La La"…)

But for others, it is a cruel blow to the start of a promising career… and something that immediately points record companies towards the dumper. Largely forgotten today, BBC One's live Saturday night talent oddity **The David Essex Showcase** was something of a quiet sensation in terms of the acts it came to feature in the summer of 1982.

Many of these were already signed with records ready to go, but needed that televisual bump – and bump they did for Talk Talk, Thomas Dolby, Toto Coelo, The Belle Stars, and Mari Wilson with "Today", "Windpower", "I Eat Cannibals", "The Clapping Song", and the still-stunning "Just What I Always Wanted" benefiting from the millions of bonus eyes who weren't watching Russ Abbot on the other side.
It would be electro-pop singer Philip Jap (right), however, who would take the crown and win not just his heat but the whole series.

Granted, his weekly heat was not the most eagerly contested, with only lightly comic guitar irritant Richard Digance notable as going on too much, but this was still a huge boon for a new act, and the Trevor Horn-produced "Save Us" was primed by A&M

Records for release just after his first appearance.

A bass-heavy, funky number, "Save Us" is a reasonably decent record with Jap coming over as a contemporary to Limahl or the bloke out of Classix Nouveaux. There's a professional video with mildly Bowie-esque fascist flirting and a lot of topless dancing. All perfect fodder for the era, which leaves an eventual number 53 placing in the chart somewhat baffling.

Undeterred but more importantly still signed to A&M, "Total Erasure" followed in September 1982, where it hit that tragic No.41 position, the peak for both the single and Jap's time in the sun. This could explain why the TV special commissioned by BBC One after his victory was rather cruelly stuck out at 10:45 p.m. on a Tuesday night just after Christmas.

He's still making music, though, with lots of songwriting and production in that way people you forgot about from the past seem to end up doing, but you know he must lie awake at night wondering "WHY?"

Some number 41 dwellers have achieved fame elsewhere; for instance, there's The Other Two— Stephen Morris and Gillian Gilbert of New Order— whose "Tasty Fish" single in November 1991 easily deserved a placing much higher but was knackered by coming out at a time Factory

Records were haemorrhaging money on delicious crack cocaine for the Happy Mondays, and a myriad of new signings who couldn't find their way to their charts with a detailed map and an Aldi lamp.

Coming out two years after recording due to the Factory financial collapse, the ensuing album "The Other Two & You" is, for my money, the best of the New Order side projects with Gillian showcasing an amazing voice that, for some reason, the parent band thought best ignoring for old gravel-gob Sumner.

And you can't shake a (Chapman) stick at Nick Beggs, who as bassist (and later vocalist when Limahl was told to bugger off) of Kajagoogoo had four Top 20 hits in his back pocket, with "Too Shy" being a huge smash everywhere and the 13th biggest seller of 1983 in the UK. After that act came to its natural conclusion, Beggs would join together with singer Austin Howard, who, alongside Suzette Smithson and Yasmin Evans – Yazz to you, mush – had been part of unsuccessful disco pop trio The Biz and producer/keyboardist Simon Ellis for this rather Ronseal-monikered trio.

Despite a glossy pop sound with a Depeche Mode-style synth line and "Life ain't nothin' but a bubble!" hook, "Big Bubbles, No Troubles" had two goes at chart glory, originally hitting No.59 in July 1988 before a re-issue in February 1989 gave it the 41st position that we are becoming dangerously familiar with.

It would do better in West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Austria but not enough for RCA to keep them on the books. Their demoed second album eventually was put out as a CD-R by Beggs himself in 1997, the same year Ellis would join pop mogul Simon Fuller at 19 Entertainment, going on to be one of the biggest musical directors in the world, working with the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, Westlife, and S Club 7, co-writing the latter's "Don't Stop Movin'" and "Never Had a Dream Come True" among others not written by Ronnie Hazlehurst (subs please check).

Also going onto better things after a change of course was Damon Rochefort, who had

begun his career as a teenage writer for the likes of Smash Hits and the Sun's "Bizarre" column, a newspaper that prided itself on its campaign against the evil acid house parties that were perverting the nation's young people with drugs that made peas come out of your face. Quite what they thought when Rochefort released "Don't Believe the Hype", a piss-peak cash-in house single in December 1988 under the name Mista E.

Piggybacking on the sample-heavy hits of the previous twelve months from M/A/R/R/S to Coldcut, Rochefort sought to satirise the bad press the house scene got with clips of **News at Ten** alongside fake sampled speech performed by some young impressionist called Steve Coogan, which is about all that is interesting about it.

Thankfully, it got better when the **Now 19**-riffic hit "(I Wanna Give You) Devotion" reached No.2 under the name Nomad. Which you'll be surprised to learn is Damon backwards. You might also be intrigued to learn that he is now one of **Coronation Street**'s most prolific writers, with over 300 episodes credited to him since 2004. I wonder if MC Skat Kat is now on the production team of **Hollyoaks**...

Much more up my street were the indie rock songs, of which underperforming is almost expected from anything bought by me.

Awkward outsiders: The Auteurs managed consecutive No. 41, No. 42, and No. 45 with the superb "Lenny Valentino", "Chinese Bakery," and the "Back With The Killer" E.P., respectively, between 1993 and 1996. Although the latter was headed by the brilliant but not very "promotional appearance on **Live and Kicking**-tastic" track "Unsolved Child Murder," which might have done for its success a little.

Equally never quite hitting the heights they deserved would be Art Brut (above right), whose tale of lost love "Emily Kane" would take the honour as the biggest hit single for perennial indie underdog label Fierce Panda when it hit the magic 41 in May 2005.

It had been particularly galling for the band upon learning it had missed leapfrogging

Sunset Strippers' "Falling Stars" by a paltry TWO sales due to many of the purchases being on the newfangled iTunes and not properly incorporated into the overall figures.

Looking at the chart for that week shows a weirdly indie-heavy slew of new entries, including Weezer's appalling "Beverly Hills" at No. 9 ahead of The Killers ("Smile Like You Mean It", No.11), Maximo Park ("Graffiti", No.15), Idlewild ("I Understand It", No.32), A ("Rush Song", No.35), and at least five more even less memorable than those.

But, Art Brut are still touring and releasing records with a devoted audience across Europe. "Emily Kane" currently has 1.7m streams on Spotify and isn't even their most played track. Would it have affected them any differently if those sales had counted and they were a legit top 40 act? Probably not...especially in the modern era when the charts are effectively a Spotify playlist taped live from a hairdresser's salon in Bromley.

For me personally, I'm doing my part by playing one of these acts every week on my Sunday night **Noisebox Radio** show "Songs of Reappraise" to keep their dreams alive, because, for all those striving for gold and coming up with zinc, Gorky's Park will always be open...

...Unless you got to 42 or below, in which case I can't help you. It's a shit business.

For years, **ALISON EALES** has been the best kept secret in Scottish indie pop. But now that secret is out – just like her debut solo album…

...TO THE SOUND OF THE UNDERGROUND

Right, Eales, tell us about yourself.
I write songs and sing them, and I mess about on lots of instruments. I play keyboards in a band called Butcher Boy, sing in a choir called Glasgow Madrigirls, and have collaborated with a few other bands. I grew up in the South of England, but I have lived in Glasgow for most of my life. My favourite things are jackdaws, haiku, Italian Westerns, and the Moon.

Jackdaws?
They're just so clever and playful. Jackdaws often nest above my bedroom so I sometimes get to see them up close. I had to help a baby one back into the loft a couple of years ago. It looked absolutely furious about the whole thing.

Okay. So tell us about the new album.
Mox Nox is a collection of songs about the passing of time, and especially the transition from day to night (literally and figuratively). I wouldn't call it a concept album, but there is an arc.
The title is a sundial motto - it means 'Night, Shortly' - and there are other sundial mottos scattered throughout the record, including etched into the vinyl.

The artwork is also inspired by sundials. At its heart it is a pop record, but the influences that sit behind it are quite wide-ranging.

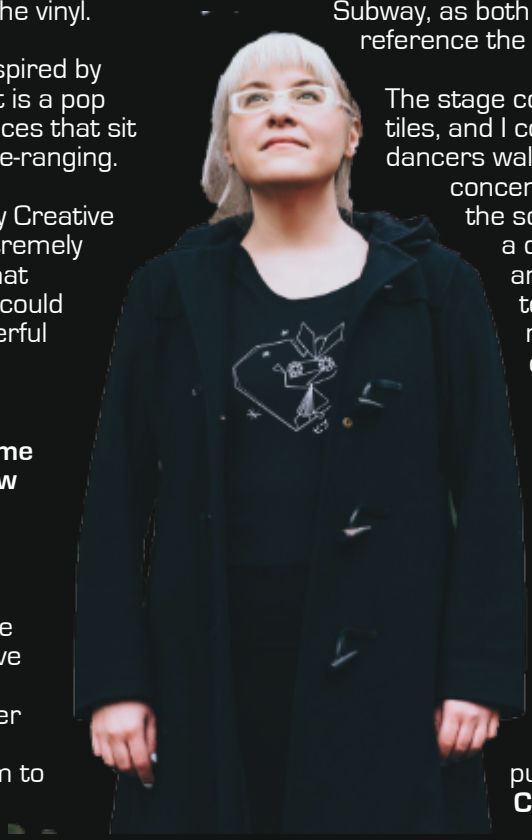
It was part financed by Creative Scotland, and I am extremely grateful to them for that support, as it meant I could get other some wonderful people on board.

This is your first solo album, after a long time with other bands. How different was the process of putting it together?
The most obvious difference is that these are all songs that I have written myself. With Butcher Boy, our singer John Hunt writes the songs and brings them to the band, and we all work together on arrangement and production. With The Color Waves, and our previous project, All My Friends, I was co-writing with my friend Garry Hoggan - typically, he would write some music and send it to me, and I would write lyrics and sometimes sing the vocal.

Did you prefer the solo process compared to being in a band?
Yes and no. I enjoyed having the final say in the creative decisions. That's quite nerve-wracking, because it means you're responsible for things that don't work, as well as things that do – but I think it was very important for me to experience that at least once in my life.

I would have liked to have been able to work with the other musicians on the record a bit more before going into the studio, but the pandemic made that very challenging.

So which of the tracks is the one you'd send to Eurovision?
Probably **Fifty-Five North,** which was the first single. I think it's the most upbeat. Plus the staging could be themed around the Glasgow Subway, as both the music and lyrics reference the trains.



The stage could be all beige and brown tiles, and I could have orange-clad dancers waltzing around me in concentric circles. And periodically the song could be drowned out by a distorted tannoy announcement asking Fiona to call St Enoch and reminding people to take care on stairs and escalators...

And which of the tracks is the one you want people to fall in love with?
The title track. It was the third single, and I think it captures the mood of the album - it's a bit sad and spooky.

The video was inspired by Manual Cinema's shadow puppetry for the 2021 **Candyman** film. I made it

myself (using Powerpoint, of all things). It's my first attempt at animation and I'm quite proud of it.

So what comes next?
Right now my priority is to develop as a live artist. I've just started performing these songs, and I'm really enjoying it. In terms of more solo recording, I'm planning to make an EP of songs I've previously written with Garry, including one that has never been released. He and I also been discussing a new songwriting project.

I've taken a break from Madrigirls in order to prioritise this record, so I'm also really looking forward to getting back to that. There is nothing like singing with other people and I haven't been able to do it since before the pandemic.

Did you realise the album cover looks exactly like the Vulcan symbol off Star Trek?
I didn't, but I'm okay with that. Maybe I can get a support slot with **Star Pilot** on Channel K

Finally - it's the end of the world, so how would you mark the apocalypse?
The honest answer is that I'd try and call my loved ones. But in the spirit of the question, I'd probably get a Chinese takeaway, a nice bottle of Marlborough wine, and a massive bag of Maltesers, and watch some crappy old telly on YouTube.

I love finding uploads of Saturday night TV from the 80s, especially when they include trailers and continuity.

Oh and if it was dark outside I would take a shower with the lights off. I find that very relaxing for some reason.

Thanks Eales. Theales.

Mox Nox is available now at all good record stores, your usual streaming platform, and fikarecordings.com

DUNCAN McKAY saw Bob Dylan and the Pope live in short order - and found a much more profound experience…

…TO THE DEVIL'S BEEN BUSY

On both occasions, the audience was there to pay homage to octogenarians. To bear witness. So how on earth did watching Bob Dylan perform on stage in Glasgow feel more spiritual than Pope Francis giving the Holy Mass?

Full disclosure: I'm agnostic to God, but equally in my younger years, I was agnostic to Bob Dylan, so perhaps there is still time before eternal damnation is brought upon me.

Two Sundays. They were events exactly twelve weeks apart. Bob Dylan played Glasgow, and I was there. Three months later, I find myself in Rome and secure tickets to a papal mass.

Sourcing tickets for either event was challenging – demand outstripping supply in both instances, with both developing their unique barriers to entry.

One pays more than is comfortable to see Dylan, while admission to see the Holy See is free – if you are willing to brave the unique challenges that the Vatican places upon visitors.

You email weeks in advance with absolutely no guarantee of a reply, pick up tickets the day before at specific times... and from a description of a place rather than a location.

Both venues are striking from the outside, but that might be where the similarities end. No one can reasonably expect to be awed by the inside of the SEC Armadillo – it does not have the same sense of jaw-dropping wow-ness that St. Peter's Basilica offers its guests.

No one describes the Armadillo as one of the "greatest in Christendom" as they might St. Peter's. Mind you, St. Peter's didn't host something as significant as Susan Boyle's **The X Factor** audition, so swings and roundabouts...

Each event shared the same sense of anticipation, and surprisingly, in both instances, the audience was far more diverse than I'd anticipated. Yes, there were a lot of people over the age of sixty in attendance, but they didn't overwhelmingly dominate the occupation of seats.

But it was the audience behaviour that probably made me reflect on how Dylan ended up being a far more spiritual experience than our several hours with the Pope.

On our arrival at the Armadillo, we deposited our mobile phones into pouches that were locked shut by venue staff. Initially sceptical about how this might enhance a concert-going experience, consider me a convert. There's an odd sensation of knowing you have a phone but no access to it, but this dissipates when you reconcile that everyone is in the boat. It allows you to give full attention to the show.

You are rapt.

At the Vatican, it was the poor St Peter's ushers I felt for. They were on their feet constantly, politely reminding people to remain seated, to stop recording, to stop taking pictures. An exhausting experience for them, reminiscent of childcare or a real-action version of whack-a-mole.

This wasn't just the odd person. It was hundreds of people throughout the ceremony, of all ages, backgrounds, and shapes and sizes. Seated in front of me were a quartet of nuns who spent more time WhatsApping images from within the church than they spent with their heads bowed in prayers.

I offer no judgments here aside from the fact that those at Dylan were considerably more 'into' proceedings than those in the Vatican.

Aside from the Swiss Guards in all their colours in sharp contrast to Dylan's five-piece band clad head to toe in black, perhaps the Pontiff could learn a thing or two from his younger colleague about stagecraft.

It was clear what we were going to get from Dylan: no one was expecting song patter. We knew we were getting 100-plus minutes of him reinterpreting his own songs. Even some songs from **Rough and Rowdy Ways** – **Key West** being the best example – sounded completely different to their recorded versions.

Dylan has arrived at the position where he sets expectations, then exceeds them. There's no confusion about what's going on.

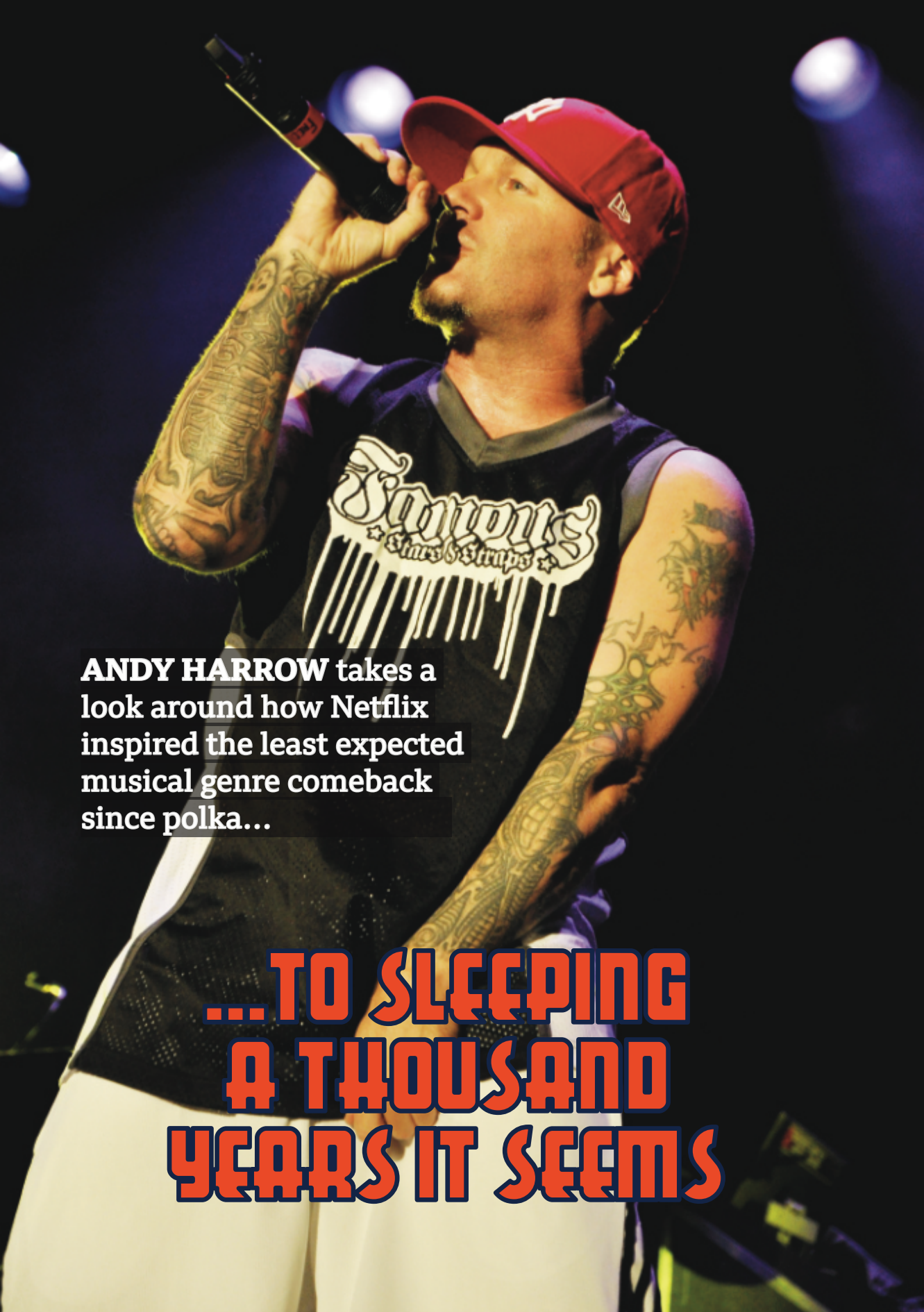
Francis, on the other hand, delegates much of his Sunday morning appearance to others. It's a multi-language event, being filmed and streamed worldwide, yet there's confusion about what's going on and where.
In Rome, we have craning of necks to see what is happening. In Glasgow, our eyes are focused in one direction, homing in on Bob Dylan.

Watching both men depart the proceedings was telling. Francis was wheeled down the aisle for everyone to see, or more accurately snap photos from their phone (or iPad given the skewing age demographic). Whilst looking content, it was clear he wasn't in full control of his destination.

1220 miles away in Glasgow, Dylan shuffles to the front of the stage and takes his bow with his band. He's fully in command. If he returns, it will be his decision.
Two Sundays, and two events that were soul-nourishing experiences.

Perhaps I was wrong in my expectations about how I'd be moved by these two appearances, but it gave me affirmation of one thing I know to be true: there is power in communal experiences, and joy in being part of something that is bigger than you as an individual.

May we all go in peace.



ANDY HARROW takes a look around how Netflix inspired the least expected musical genre comeback since polka...

...TO SLEEPING A THOUSAND YEARS IT SEEMS

Earlier this year, Netflix released Beef, an anxiety-inducing series which pitted Steven Yeun's Danny and Ali Wong's Amy in a bleak - but entertaining - spiral of moral degradation.

The show had plenty of twists throughout its ten episodes, but there might have been few more surprising than its soundtrack choices.

From Limp Bizkit and System of a Down to Hoobastank and Incubus, **Beef** wore its nu-metal inspiration loudly and unusually proudly, given the genre's decades-long cultural absence.

It has been twenty years since nu-metal fell out of favour – and, in the meantime, has had precious little impact on an American society keen to forget it ever birthed such a pugnacious, empty vessel.

Until, that is, this year, with **Beef** at the vanguard of something of a renaissance for the much-derided genre.

In the Netflix show's case, the music fits perfectly with its themes. From the exorcism of childhood demons, to the simmering (and occasionally explosive) anger, to the uncomfortable, painful vulnerability displayed at times by Danny and Amy, so much of what's on screen mirrors the nu-metal scene.

The music also has a personal connection to its creator, Lee Sung Jin. Speaking to the LA Times, South Korean-born Lee explained:

"The characters are trapped in the past in a lot of ways. They're having to unpack their past to move forward... Adolescence and high school and college are the years that I think a lot of these themes were most pronounced for me, and so tapping into the sounds [of this era] made sense."

Despite the dark tones, there's clearly an affection for the songs and the memories they conjure.

In one episode, Yeun sings an acoustic version of Incubus' **Drive** to a church congregation; an echo of what he used to do in the early 2000s as part of his own church's youth group.

Nu-metal's journey to acceptance is complicated though, not least because it might be the most-maligned musical genre of the 21st century.

Emerging in the space vacated by grunge – and pitting itself as diametrically opposed to the wave of manufactured boy bands dominating the charts - the nu-metal pioneers brought with them a raw energy, a self-righteous anger, and a vitality not available elsewhere at the time.

The likes of Deftones' **Adrenaline** and Korn's self-titled album perfectly incorporated crunchy, down-tuned guitars with hip-hop grooves, while their lyrics displayed a rare honesty which spoke to listeners in a way little had since Kurt Cobain.

As with most popular new styles, though, it didn't take long for it to overflow with bandwagon jumpers,

copycats, and label-created flotsam.

Even though they'd appeared as part of that first tranche of bands, Limp Bizkit became the ambassador for this second, much bigger, wave of nu-metal.

Their lyrics were more stupid, their riffs were more radio-friendly, and their intentions much more cynical.

All of a sudden, MTV was awash with artists rapping about Ben Stiller, painting their faces like angry ladybirds, or re-appropriating Red Hot Chili Peppers riffs with naff lyrics ("Come, come my baby / You're my butterfly / Sugar baby").

Somewhere along the way, any credibility that had been built up faded away.

Clive Martin summed it up in a 2022 column in **The Independent**: "Most of the music is formulaic, infantile, tawdry, and occasionally offensive. Or, failing that, it's horribly earnest and self-pitying."

In the years that followed, the New York rock scene – which, initially at least, brought an honesty, credibility, and sense of fun to the airwaves – ascended to prominence and, before long, nu-metal became a term no one wanted to be associated with.

Outside of a few notable exceptions, the bands that propelled the scene into the limelight either withered on the vine or reinvented themselves with nary a rap verse in sight. Indeed, the best chance of hearing a nu-metal song in the 2010s was if one happened to come on as part of a spin class playlist.

In recent years though, and as the kids who grew up with the genre have begun to gain a foothold in creative industries, nu-metal has made a tentative reappearance.

As you'd imagine for such a maligned genre, not all of it has been positive.

Two recent documentaries and a podcast on the ill-fated **Woodstock '99** riots shone a light on a scene powered by male entitlement, unfocused anger, and deep wells of misogyny, while a memoir released last year by **Kerrang!** writer Ian Winwood highlighted similarly troubling attitudes at the magazine during nu-metal's peak.

It could have, understandably, buried the genre once and for all. But nostalgia is a powerful force, and, despite the bad press, the music has found a way back into the mainstream.

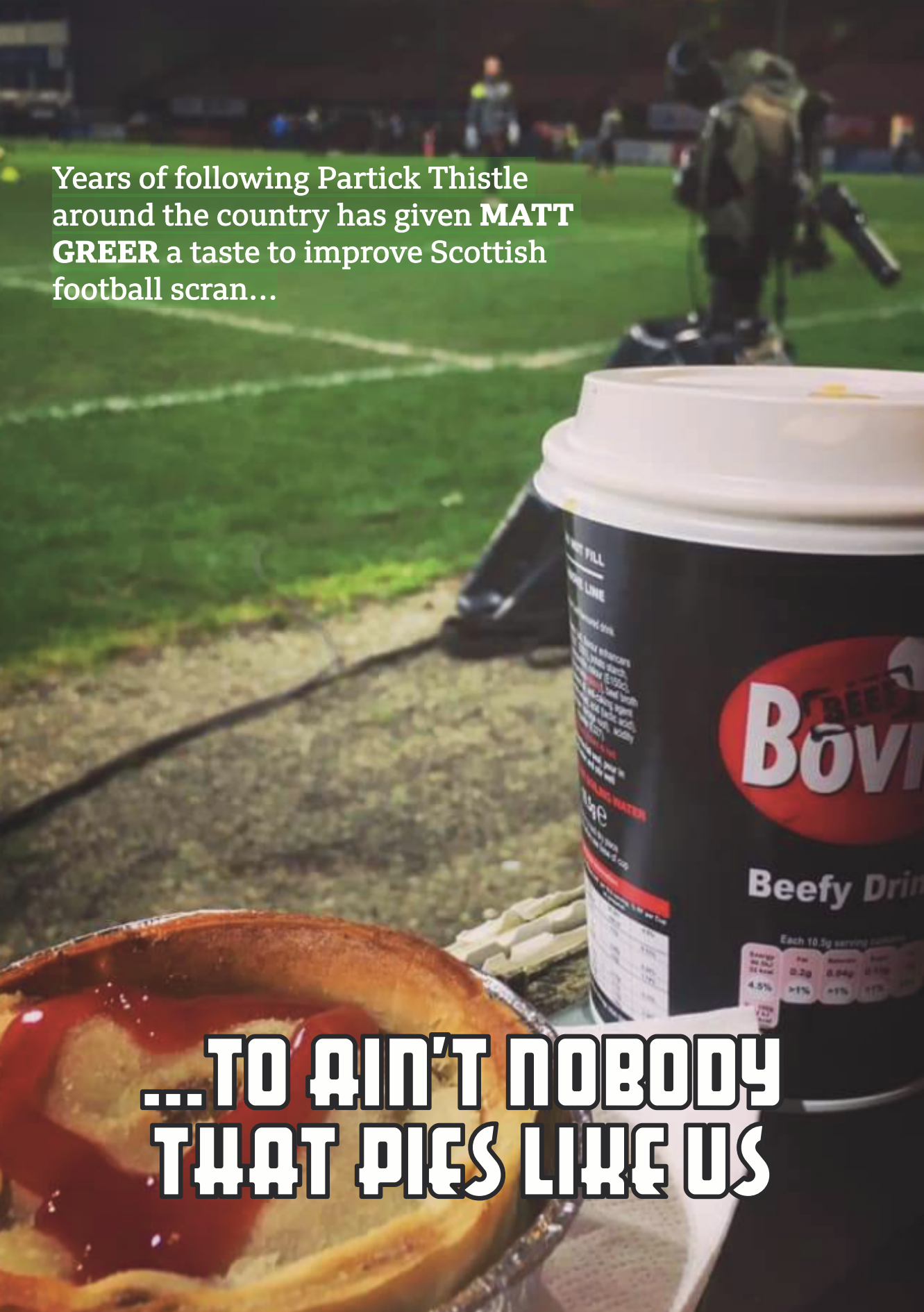
Linkin Park, who have been on hiatus ever since the death of lead singer Chester Bennington in 2017, returned to the top of Billboard's Rock and Alternative Airplay chart in February with a previously unreleased song from their 2003 album **Meteora**, while their breakout song, **One Step Closer,** was 'reanimated' by hyperpop group 100 gecs.

Meanwhile, Limp Bizkit have made a triumphant return to the UK in recent months, culminating with a huge show at London's Gunnersbury Park, and Deftones have released a collaboration [above] with fashion guru Marc Jacobs. Can I interest you in a £300 **White Pony** jumper...?

It's not just old bands making a return though. The nu-metal influence is evident in a wave of new artists.

Refreshingly though, given the original's obnoxious and often misogynistic history, this has been a female-led movement, with the likes of Rina Sawayama, Nova Twins, and Tetrarch lovingly adapting the music into new forms for a fresh audience.

Add **Beef** to the mix, and it's hard to ignore that, like it or not, we might be in the midst of a nu-metal renaissance.



Years of following Partick Thistle around the country has given **MATT GREER** a taste to improve Scottish football scran…

…TO AIN'T NOBODY THAT PIES LIKE US

Your team might be rubbish, you might be freezing with a horizontal downfall blowing into your face, but there will always be solace to be sought in Scottish football's primary culinary offering: the pie.

Pies have been sold to football fans in Scotland since the late nineteenth century, and became synonymous with Bovril - a hot, beefy drink - a couple of decades later.

There's a simplicity and familiarity to football grub which should never be lost. Though as crowds in football grounds become more and more diverse, clubs should be thinking outside the box to attract more people to the stalls.

The emergence of the "Footy Scran" account on Twitter has prompted people from all over the world to submit pictures of food purchased inside stadia.

Some servings look good, some look bad, and some have been clearly staged for a bit of attention online. What it does show though, is an appetite for colourful and innovative food, which currently is not easy to find within Scottish grounds.

What makes a good pie then? Well, it has to make you consider going back to get another one once you've devoured it.

It must be hot and it can't be dry. In a scotch, there has to be grease, but not enough to puddle inside its foil casing.

Steak pies must be filled with tender meat and gravy. They should be so good that you aren't annoyed at yourself for the crumby mess you've made all over your sleeves and trousers.

Alloa's Indodrill Stadium is one of the grounds I look forward to visiting the most. Their "Pie on a Roll", costing just £2.50 on my last visit, should be an aspiration for football clubs across the land.

Not necessarily for the double carbohydrates, but because they have a signature dish that fans across the country can identify as that club's own.

Who wouldn't want a world where fans look at a fixture calendar, and instead of registering the on-field opposition of that day, they can plan their lunch at the next ground?

Signature dishes in every ground, a vision we can surely all get behind.

Ross County's "Staggie Pie" has certainly achieved this status. Containing venison and gravy inside a puff pastry, it is comfortably among the best pies available in Scottish grounds.

At £4, it is on the expensive side, but its individuality and quality make it worth it. Traditional Scotch and steak offerings are still available, but the lure of a pie that is a club's own stands out.

I wouldn't say it completely softened the blow of watching Partick Thistle blow a three-goal lead and promotion there recently, but it helped.

However, clubs shouldn't be limited to serving only pies in order to be this well-renowned in the scran game. A food truck at Cove offers reasonably priced and locally sourced Angus Steak Burgers, as well as a selection of pies.

This was one of the more impressive arrays of choices in Scotland's second tier last season. A happy medium of tradition and local specialty.

Looking further afield, and the options available on a recent visit to New York Red Bulls' Red Bull Arena were staggering. Football culture in Scotland and the States are vastly different, and in no clearer way than the matchday experience.

Tens of stalls in each stand serving food ranging from curries to hot dogs. The different smells of noodles and nachos, attacking the senses from all angles.

The type of smells you associate with street markets and festivals, not football grounds. The dream.

It's clear the goal of this is to maximise income from early arrivals into the ground who are looking to eat, drink, and mix with fellow supporters hours before matches are due to begin.

Fans in this country tend to arrive closer to kick-off and do their socialising in pubs, social clubs, and cafes. Clubs often talk about enhancing the "matchday experience" and trying to attract fans to the ground earlier by means of food and drink (non-alcoholic if you're in Scotland, of course) seems like the clear way to do this.

Doing so could see clubs profit in a testing financial climate.

Friday night games, something Scottish Championship teams are growing accustomed to, seem like the perfect opportunity to try something new.

As someone who religiously visits the West End of Glasgow's Shish Mahal for a curry, every Saturday afternoon that Thistle play at home, I might struggle breaking out of that routine to get to the ground earlier for some untried and untested food.

Superstitions and routine are important to football supporters, but with Friday night football still a relatively young concept, it could be a chance for clubs to get involved in shaping routines of the future.

Food should be at the front of that. Traditional scotch and steak pies should be protected and included on all stadium menus up and down the country.

But those menus need to be spruced up by new, exotic, and exciting choices to make food stalls worth visiting.

Local businesses should be the heart of the changes too. Selling their product inside stadiums or fan zones appears to be a perfect chance for them to attract football fans to their cafes and restaurants on non-matchdays.

Mutually beneficial arrangements like this seem too sensible to work in Scottish football, alas.

Clearly, there is no way most clubs in Scotland can compete with what franchised and financially superior clubs overseas can offer.

Though, through a little communication with fans and some imagination, attracting fans to spend more time and money inside grounds on matchday can be an achievable goal.

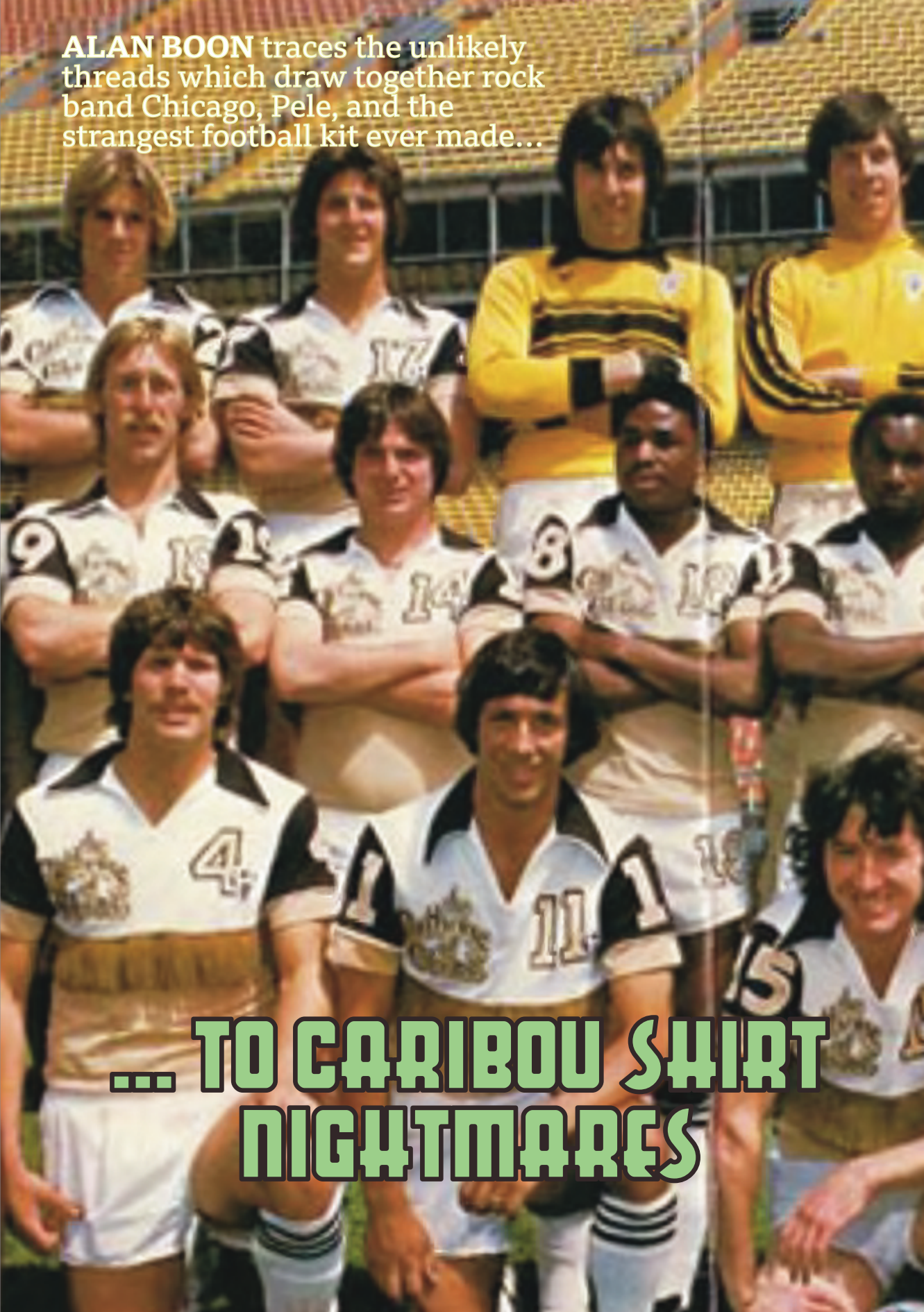
In tennis, Wimbledon is globally synonymous with strawberries and cream, while golf's Augusta National has their widely lauded pimento cheese sandwiches. A snap for the socials with one of these dishes is part of the appeal of going.

Right now, there are only a handful of Scottish clubs who can boast a "signature dish", and there are so many gaps in the market for more.

Is street food at Stenhousemuir's Ochilview, or freshly caught prawns in Peterhead's Balmoor Stadium too much to ask?

Probably. But a man can dream...

ALAN BOON traces the unlikely threads which draw together rock band Chicago, Pele, and the strangest football kit ever made...



... TO CARIBOU SHIRT NIGHTMARES

Jim Guercio was a Chicago native who moved to Los Angeles and briefly joined Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention before becoming a staff producer for Columbia Records.

While at Columbia, he rekindled an old friendship with saxophonist Walter Parazaider, who invited him to hear his new band. Impressed, Guercio convinced the outfit to relocate to LA and rename themselves The Chicago Transit Authority. With Guercio acting as manager and producer for their first eleven albums, they'd eventually settle on a new, even shorter name: Chicago.

But after completing that eleventh record, the band discovered that their deal with Guercio gave him 51% of their sales and 100% of their publishing royalties, and fired him as their manager.

He'd already used money accrued from his time with Chicago to build a recording studio. The Caribou Ranch, which opened outside Denver, Colorado, in 1971 and would go on to be home to albums from Joe Walsh, Rick Derringer, Elton John... and even an aborted Beach Boys project.

Even before the nasty split with Chicago, Guercio had been looking for options outside the music business. He'd already dabble in film production – producing and directing the 1973 cult classic Electra Glide in Blue. But, like many showbusiness figures of the day, he'd also attended a New York Cosmos game and was smitten with the spectacle.

In December 1976, the NASL partnered him with Booth Gardner and granted the pair a franchise for an expansion team – at the cost of a cool million dollars.
Gardner was a businessman from Washington State who had co-owned the Tacoma Tides in the American Soccer League in 1976. That venture ended in failure, but Gardner was keen to get back in the game. Partnering with Guercio, Denver was the obvious destination, having been without an NASL team since the Dynamos moved to Minnesota at the end of the 1975 season.

Gardner and Guercio installed Dan Wood, Gardner's coach at the Tides, as General Manager and brought in former Coventry City and Everton midfielder Dave Clements as player/coach.

The Northern Ireland international had played eighteen games for the Cosmos over the two previous seasons, winning a championship medal in 1977, and would end up playing in half of his new team's games in the 1978 season.

The name of that team? Well, that was obvious...

With a recording studio named the Caribou Ranch, situated on the road to a ghost town called Caribou and home to an outfit dubbed Caribou Records, there was only one name Jim Guercio was ever going to choose for his new plaything.

The Caribou Ranch made great play of its rural location, its logo showing a proud stag in the foreground of a mountainous landscape. The Caribou Records label, too, displayed a stag, designed by Gary Nichamin, a photographer from California who'd also designed many record covers for Guercio's artists.

It made sense, at least to Guercio (and presumably Gardner), to give Nichamin the brief for the Caribous of Colorado. The choice of Colorado over Denver was an attempt to broaden the appeal of the team but also because it was alliterative with Guercio's brand. Nichamin designed a beautiful logo for the team - a reindeer stag with a football between its impressive antlers - and an elaborate wordmark, using a Western (as in "Country and...") font.

Further pushing home that this team was not just a little bit country but a lot of bit country, Nichamin chose a colour palette of browns – and his input didn't end at the logos, as Guercio had him work with Medalist Sand-Knit on the club's jerseys, inspired by the peculiar "yoke" shirts popular with rodeo cowboys.

The resulting home shirt was predominantly

white, but with wide black collars and sleeves, and a tan lower half. The divide between the white and tan sections of the shirt was delineated by a brand-new innovation for soccer: a fringe.

“It looked like a Roy Rogers 1940s shirt,” Guercio would tell the MLS website years later.

“It had a real long fringe. In the back, it went down in a V – 10 inches. It was really cool-looking, and when they'd run on the field, they had Stetsons and fringe and everything. People were laughing their butts off.”

The novelty of those massive fringes soon wore off, at least for the playing squad. Players complained their opponents were grabbing hold of the ten-inch tassels, which also had an unfortunate tendency to whip the wearer in the face when jumping for headers.

Paired with black satin shorts, Guercio insisted that the players completed their outfit with a Stetson hat, although he allowed them to remove it for games (a concession not extended to the team's playing staff).

“The players loved it,” he claimed in 2015. “To begin with, NASL officials said, ‘You know they can’t wear those to play in.’ I said, ‘No, just when they come out on the field.’ And those players, every one of them, took a hat. We never got one hat back.”

Although he had retired the previous season, former New York Cosmos star Pelé was convinced to come to Mile High Stadium - home of baseball's Denver Bears and the NFL Broncos - for the opening day.

"We agreed with Pelé that he would enter the field wearing a cowboy hat, riding a horse," Dan Wood, who led the Caribous during part of the season, said later.

"He took it all in stride. That's the kind of quip you had to make for people to have fun.”

That Pelé appeared for that opening match - a 1-0 win over Minnesota Kicks [the team which had previously been the Denver Dynamos] - was apropos, because the very fact that the Caribous were in existence was down to the PR and audience boost his arrival in 1975.

The Caribous were one of six new teams that would join NASL for the 1978 season, swelling its ranks to an unwieldy twenty-four.

By contrast, the National Football League, which had gone from sixteen teams to twenty-six in 1970 as a result of a merger with the American Football League, subsequently added only two more teams in the next twenty-four seasons, and that was a sport with a much stronger foothold in the American imagination.

Joining them in this new intake was a first-time franchise for Memphis, along with new teams in Detroit, Houston, Boston, and Philadelphia. Pelé may have retired at the end of the 1977 season, but there was still plenty to attract the celebrity fans to Giants Stadium, with Cosmos fielding Franz Beckenbauer, Giorgio Chinaglia, and Carlos Alberto.

Adidas kitted out fourteen sides for 1978, with Admiral taking care of four, and Umbro sticking with two – although it was the Umbro-wearing Cosmos that again won the Soccer Bowl.

At the other end of the league, the Caribous were having a terrible debut season. They may have looked fly in their fringed yoke shirts – only Fort Lauderdale Strikers (an amber and red hooped affair), New England Teamen (a white shirt had a giant red T on the front of it, years before Coventry City accommodated sponsors Talbot with one of their own), and Tampa Bay Rowdies' hooped green and yellow sleeves could give them any kind of run for their money – but things were not going well on the field.

Although ten thousand fans came out to their first game at Mile High Stadium, they averaged just seven and a half thousand, with just 4,136 in for their game against Rochester on May 17th.

There was precious little for the Denver fans to cheer, as they won just eight of their thirty matches, finishing solidly bottom of their Conference. The one bright spark was South African striker Jomo Sono, who scored eight goals after his move from the Cosmos; five years later, he would form his own team in South Africa named Jomo Cosmos, recently celebrating his fortieth year as their owner/manager.

The Caribous downfall probably lay in Guercio's insistence that the team be made up of mostly American players, with thirteen of the twenty-three-man squad eligible to play for either the USA or Canada.

"You've got to have Americans," Guercio would later claim. "Even if you're getting beat all the time, the audience would cheer for Americans."

Only three of Cosmos' 1978 Soccer Bowl-winning side could say the same, something not lost on the league who implemented a rule for 1979 that there had to be two such players on the pitch, with at least six in a named seventeen-man squad.

The new rule came too late for the Caribous, with Guercio admitting defeat and putting the franchise up for sale. Ironically, its roster of home-grown talents made it an attractive purchase for cable television mogul Ted Turner, who was looking to get into soccer himself.

He moved the team to Atlanta, renamed them the Chiefs, and they started the 1979 season in an Admiral-designed white shirt with thick blue and red bands across the front. There was, unfortunately, a dearth of tassels.

After the failure of the Caribous and the disintegration of his relationship with Chicago, Jim Guercio retreated to the Caribou Ranch, but even that sure thing began to wane.

In 1985, shortly before Amy Grant was due to fly to Denver to begin work on her fifth album at the studio, a fire ripped through the complex and caused three million dollars in damages. It never reopened, and Guercio instead invested his money in cattle ranching and fracking, selling the land that the Ranch stood on to the local authorities, and a housing development now occupies the site of the studio.

Guercio did buy Country Music Television in

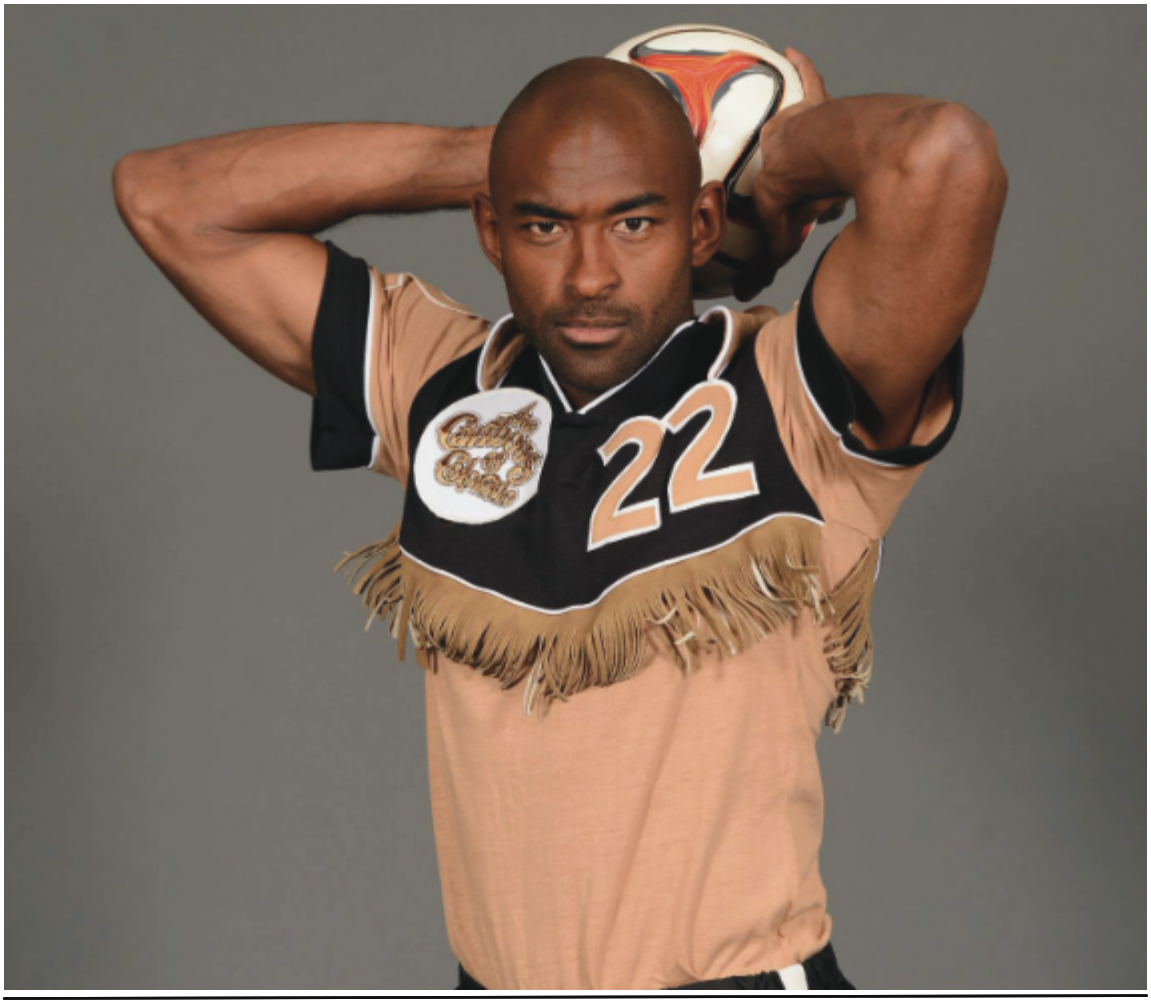
the late 1980s but sold it after a couple of years and faded from public view. His partner in the Caribous, Booth Gardner, went into politics, becoming Governor of Washington in 1985, a position he held for eight years.

During his time in office, he signed agreements protecting the rights of gay and lesbian employees and launched a Basic Health Care plan for the poor, the first of its kind in the US. He remained a huge supporter of soccer in the US and got to see Seattle return to the big time in 2009, four years before his death.

In 2014, Denver's current top soccer outfit – MLS's Colorado Rapids – announced that they would be wearing tribute jerseys to the Caribous for an upcoming game.

It turned out to be an April Fools' joke, but there was an outpouring of affection from all corners for this most unusual of teams and their unique kit.

They arrived in 1978, full of swagger and confidence, but burned brightly and for only the shortest of times. In this, they are the NASL, a once-in-a-lifetime thing that, probably for the best, has not been repeated since.



... TO TEARING OFF A STRIP OR TWO

The colours worn by football teams don't really matter, of course, and yet they matter enormously, *writes Eddie Robson*.

I think most of us have felt the irritation when our team could be wearing their home kit, but instead they trot out onto the pitch wearing their third kit.

It feels like some power has been sapped, some concession has been made: we're not allowed to be fully ourselves. And of course, we know at the root of this is some agreement made with the kit supplier that each shirt will be worn in a minimum number of fixtures each season, to goose replica shirt sales.

All this feels like an artefact of the Premier League era, but in fact third kits go back much earlier than I assumed. The website Football Kit Archive has a Manchester United third kit listed from 1937, with black and white hoops.

Possibly there've been others that just aren't recorded there, but the site has Manchester City and Newcastle third kits from the 1970s and Chelsea ones from the 1960s. The notion of having another kit for European games, resolving clashes that might not occur in the domestic league, came in pretty much as soon as European competitions were created.

It's not so much third kits I have a problem with, and this issue can be traced back to the dawn of the Premier League. In 1992 United switched from Adidas to Umbro as their supplier, and they came up with a new wheeze.

Previously the colours of their second and third kits had nearly always been white and blue. For the first season of the Premier League, United's away kit would be blue and the third would be green and yellow, a homage to the kit worn by the club in the 1880s, when it was called Newton Heath.

In retrospect, this feels like a stealthy bridging tactic: yes, these aren't Man United colours as you recognise them, but they are Man United colours, older and more traditional than the ones you know. And football was going through that odd phase of baggy shirts with lace-up collars that looked like something from the 1930s, so it vaguely seemed to fit (unlike the shirts). But the kicker was a new rotation system: next year, the third kit would be promoted to the away kit, and a new third kit would be created. I'm sure I read about this in Match magazine at the time because I remember thinking: Wow, that means each new kit only has a lifespan of two seasons. Of course, this seems laughable now. Only two seasons?

In a way, this wasn't as much of a shift as it seemed to me. A survey of United's 80s kits reveals that two years was often the lifespan of a shirt. However, the changes were usually minimal. Their white away shirt from 1984-86 had its black sleeve-bands removed for the 1986-88 version, and then lighter versions of those sleeve-bands were put back.

That design then lasted four years – two as the away kit, two as the third kit. And crucially, the colours didn't change much. Aside from a dalliance with yellow in the early 1970s, United stuck with white and blue for decades.

This was generally true across the board. Leeds were yellow, Spurs were yellow or blue, Arsenal were yellow, Everton... in fact, a lot of teams went with yellow because none of the major English clubs had it for their home kit. But some had bold, recognisable change kits, like Man City's black and red stripes. West Ham used the traditional light blue of their home kit to add details to their white away kits, creating continuity between the two while still having an effective colour contrast.

In 1993, United retired their blue away shirt and brought in a black third kit. It didn't really feel like a United shirt, not least because then we still associated black with referees. I got used to it, but then they got rid of it and introduced a grey one that looked like TV static. This was binned after a year, probably because it was horrible.

As late as 2014, the two-year rotation was still in place, which eventually gave way to all-new kits every single year – including the home shirt, which gets an annual tweak. At first, the away colours switched between blue, white, and black. But 2018 brought a pale pink away shirt. The 2019 shirt was 'linen'. The notion of traditional away colours has gradually been abandoned.

Why? I think partly just the pursuit of novelty: the suppliers want each season's new kits to catch the eye of punters and offer them something different from last year.

More cynically, I also think they want it to be very obvious when someone is wearing last season's kit. I don't particularly want to drag United for this, because everyone does it. My own club, Aston Villa, have turned out in green, grey, and electric blue in recent

years, and this season we have a blue-grey angular design which, to my eye, is nowhere near differentiated enough from our home kit.

If I turn on Match of the Day partway through, I feel like I should be able to identify the two teams without having to look up at the box in the corner – but frequently I can't, especially early in the season when all the kits are still new.

Everton are perhaps the worst culprits for being unrecognisable from one season to the next, replacing black and peach away kits with green and yellow ones, though actually,

Chelsea are just as bad. I like this season's effort from Man United, the dark green one with the white stripes and red pinstripes: I think it's smart and distinctive. But it's not distinctly Man United, and I'm sure it'll be replaced next season so it never will be.

Worst of all, this fixation with shifting colours can lead clubs to overlook the basic job of an away kit, which is to contrast with the home kit. For most clubs, there will be one or two logical colours that offer the best contrast with their home kit, and in practical terms, they should really stick with those.

But in 2016, Barcelona, having already worn every other colour imaginable, released an away shirt that was purple and resolved precisely no clashes with their famous red and blue home colours.

To be fair, this freedom to reinvent the kits every season does lead to some real creativity: I've hated a lot of Nike's kits in recent years, but to my surprise, I really liked the mad, Pollock-like swirl they put on the Spurs away shirt in 2021. And if you're the kind of person who tries to dress in colours that suit them, it can be frustrating if your club always uses colours that look awful on you. (Most men don't care about this, which is why a lot of them look so bad when proudly wearing their club's shirt.)

With colour rotation, there's more chance you'll get to buy a shirt that works.

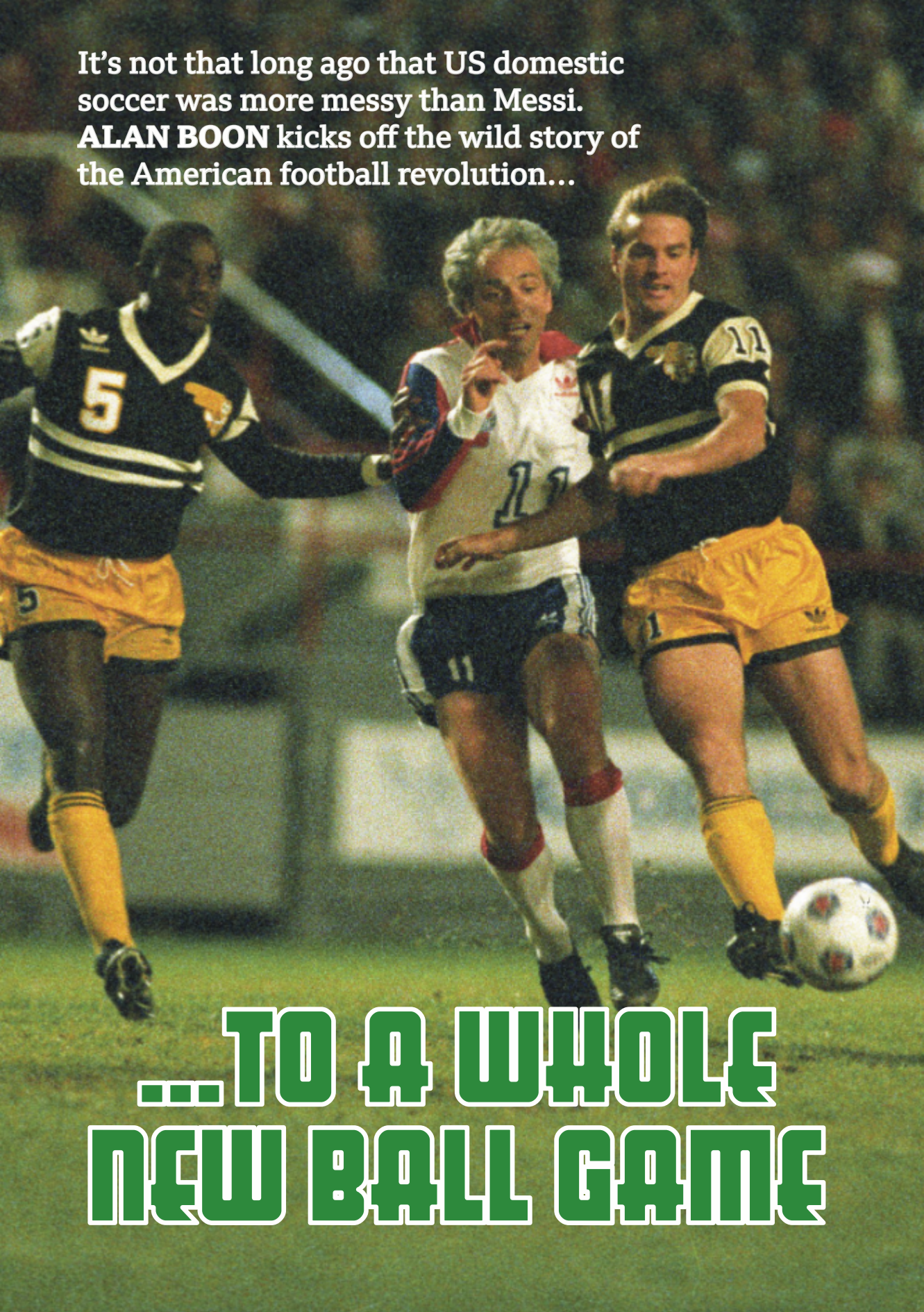
But when everyone is using every colour at some point, everyone becomes interchangeable, and a little bit of football's identity is lost.

The greatest moment in Villa's history came when we won the European Cup, wearing white shirts with claret pinstripes – any shirt that uses that design automatically feels more Villa, and indeed, the 2021-22 shirt that marked the anniversary of that win with a modern take on the design is the only Villa shirt I own.

Or take England: we won our only major trophy wearing red, meaning red feels just as identified with England as white, so why do we occasionally change to blue?

Sure, tweak it, add a trim or some texture – but pick your colours and stick to them. And then we might not mind so much when our team is forced to change our kit for no reason other than the supplier demands it.

It's not that long ago that US domestic soccer was more messy than Messi. **ALAN BOON** kicks off the wild story of the American football revolution...



...TO A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME

On July 4th, 1988, football's governing body awarded the right to host the 1994 World Cup finals to the USA.

But landing the 1994 World Cup came with an additional price for the USA, on top of the actual hosting costs of sport's biggest travelling circus.

Having managed to see off rival bids by Brazil — with its aging infrastructure — and Morocco — without enough existing stadiums to host matches — the US Soccer Federation had, as part of its winning pitch, vowed to establish a top-level league in the country. This was important to impressing FIFA, which was keen to expand the market for football into new territories — whether they wanted it or not.

To take advantage of the hubbub created by the World Cup, the new league was to start the following spring, finally bringing football to the masses for the first time since the NASL. Alan Rothenberg, who headed up the World Cup organising committee, already had one eye on winning that prize and began developing what would eventually become Major League Professional Soccer, tapping into his connections in the wider world of US sports built up through decades of involvement with various Los Angeles-based franchises.

But despite his previous involvement with the NASL's Los Angeles Wolves and Aztecs, Rothenberg was not particularly well known within the US soccer community — which at this point was, essentially, a two-man operation run out of Colorado Springs.

With the support of FIFA head Sepp Blatter, Rothenberg would take charge of the USSF presidency, seeing off incumbent Werner Fricker in 1990 with fifty-nine percent of the vote at the end of a bitter contest that saw third candidate Paul Stiehl reveal FIFA put pressure on him to drop out and support Rothenberg.

Particularly useful to Rothenberg were the votes of the Major Indoor Soccer League, whose eight representatives controlled one-third of the total votes due to their status as the only recognised professional league in the US.

Now installed at the top of US Soccer, Rothenberg's proposal gained momentum. It called for a twelve-team competition, with all clubs owned centrally by the league itself - although they would run as franchises, with the aim of ensuring a legacy from the 1994 World Cup.

"We didn't want to be the circus, where everyone had a good time and when the elephants leave, the only thing to do is clean up what they left behind," he reflected in a 2016 interview.

Rothenberg claimed to have secured $100,000,000 of funding, although he would not divulge the names of his investors, and it was expected that many of the stadiums being prepared for the World Cup would play host to teams in his league.

His main competition looked to come from Jim Paglia, a Chicago businessman with experience of grassroots football coaching after falling in love with the sport while working for NASL club Rochester Lancers.

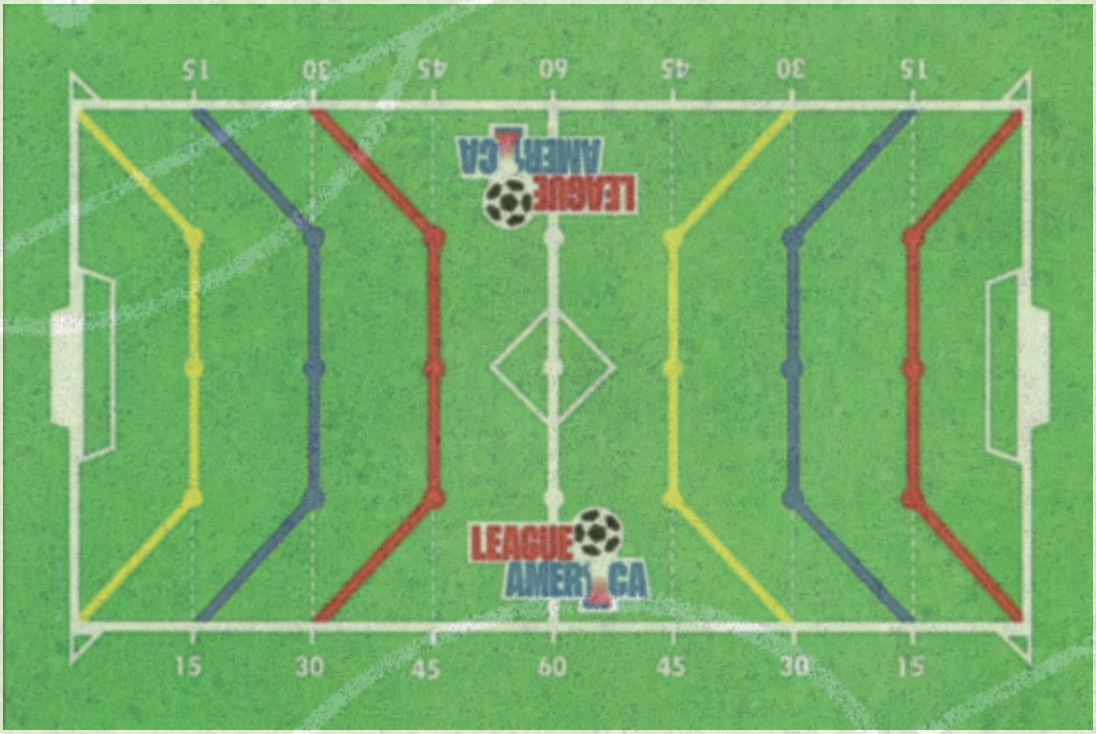
Having seen the demise of both Lancers and the NASL, Paglia felt that football in the US needed extensive surgery if it were to ever rival the big four sports for the attentions of the American people.

His competition proposal - League 1 America - would also feature twelve teams from across the US, each tied to a major retail and leisure facility. Furthermore, he proposed some key rule changes in order to make the game more exciting.

It seemed that the competition would turn into a slugfest between two big money bids. There was, however, a third interested party.

Although the American Professional Soccer League had only been formed ahead of the 1990 season - for the explicit purpose of proving the US could sustain a professional league ahead of the USSF decision - its roots ran much deeper.

Originally formed from a merger between the American Soccer League and Western



Soccer League, many of its eighteen clubs had kept the football fires burning in the US after the collapse of the NASL. Some could trace their lineage back to the earliest days of the ill-fated competition.

The Western Soccer League grew out of the Pacific Northwest in 1984, where FC Seattle had been formed as a "super club" for the best players from the city's regional leagues. They staged a series of challenge matches against the US national team and club sides such as the New York Cosmos.

FC Seattle had turned down a place in the NASL for the doomed 1985 season, preferring instead to organise challenge matches. Originally looking to matches against Aston Villa and West Bromwich Albion, their plans needed a rethink after English sides were banned from playing overseas after the Heysel Stadium disaster.

Invitations were sent to other West Coast clubs and three – former NASL side San Jose Earthquakes, Victoria Riptides of the amateur Pacific Coast Soccer League, and FC Portland - accepted. The Western Alliance Challenge Series kicked off on June 15th in Portland and finished with San Jose declared champions, with the competition growing over the next couple of years.

Meanwhile, the success of the WSA had inspired four Texas clubs – including former pro side Houston Dynamos – to form the Lone Star Soccer Alliance in 1987, joined a year later by a third American Soccer League. This was the brainchild of former Cosmos general manager Clive Toye and was initially intended to become a WSA for the East Coast.

However, interest grew and for its inaugural season in 1988 the ASL consisted of ten teams, split into northern and southern conferences. Most of its member clubs were formed for the league but Fort Lauderdale Strikers and Tampa Bay Rowdies could trace a lineage back to the NASL.

In addition, the Southwest Indoor Soccer League – formed two years earlier with teams from New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas – expanded into an outdoor league, with nine teams lining up for the inaugural season.

The WSA underwent that change of name to the WSL and, although it lost San Jose, it

gained four new sides, including the San Francisco Bay Blackhawks and its first club from Arizona.

More importantly, FC Portland rebranded as Portland Timbers, embracing the name the city's NASL team had used between 1975 and 1982.

This was the state of play in the season after FIFA awarded the US the World Cup - with that mandated national league attached as a condition, something which must have stuck in the craw of the thirty-four clubs now playing professional football across the country, a remarkable recovery from the collapse at the end of the 1984 season, even if the USSF still continued to recognise only the Major Indoor Soccer League as a professional competition.

The USSF had promised to make a decision on which of the three rival bids it would officially sanction by December 1993. Rothenberg's bid had been earmarked as the preferred bidder by the organisation he headed, but ahead of decision day, Paglia's bid had begun to pick up some momentum.

Alongside his innovative plan for multi-purpose sites, he also had ideas about changing the very laws of football to make the game more palatable to US audiences, and these gained enough traction that he was invited to Switzerland to discuss his plans with FIFA in September 1993. Ideas including zones of play marked by colours on the pitch, a basketball-like system for distance goals, and making the goals themselves larger were ultimately not taken up.

By the time his final proposal was submitted, Paglia had secured land in eight cities - Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, New York, Orlando, St. Louis, and Washington DC – and was in negotiations with Los Angeles and San Diego, with an unrevealed slate of sponsors already in place.

Meanwhile, the APSL promised an initial eight-team league, rebranded as the A-League, with established clubs and a traditional approach to the laws of the game, although they did propose to introduce shootouts to settle drawn games.

In the end, it was Rothenberg's bid – a mixture of the two approaches but with some very big stadiums and names attached to the bid – that secured the nomination, with eighteen votes to the APSL's five. League 1 America did not receive a single vote. The USSF presented its plan to FIFA on December 17th, 1993, and Rothenberg began the important work of turning promises and proposals into reality.
With final preparations for the World Cup well underway, Rothenberg ramped up work on what was now known as Major League Soccer. Well aware of the collapse of the NASL, the new league adopted strategies designed to keep costs affordable, promote the development of American players, secure investment, sponsorship, and decent media coverage, and ensure a standard of play that would encourage the advancement of the US national team.

A TV deal was soon struck with ABC, ESPN, and ESPN2, and twenty-nine cities submitted initial bids to host a club, whittled down to twenty-two by May.

The announcement of Nike and Reebok as key sponsors in June was followed by the first seven club locations being revealed; Boston, Columbus, Los Angeles, New Jersey, New York, San Jose, and Washington DC were all accepted, with another five to follow.

Originally, Nike had proposed making ALL the new teams' jerseys - similar to the pan-league deal with Adidas the MLS now has - but at the time Rothenberg was concerned it would alienate other companies.

"We felt not to have the others - Adidas, Reebok at the time, Puma, Mitre - that would be a mistake, he told football writer Phil West in 2016.

"It's pretty gutsy to tell Nike 'Thanks, but you can only have half.'"

Although they had missed out on the grand prize, the APSL were assured of their second-tier status by the USSF, and preparations began for what was expected to be a landmark 1994 season.

Rothenberg's MLS was not due to start play until 1995, putting the APSL in the perfect

place to take advantage of interest around the World Cup. And while only midfielder Hugo Pérez of Los Angeles Salsa currently played in the APSL, the US national squad boasted thirteen players contracted to the USSF - four of whom had played in the APSL or its predecessors.

In addition, five of the overseas-based players had also served time in the APSL, and the league was confident it could use its blank canvas to sell its wares, despite competition from the USISL, which had expanded to a nice sixty-nine mostly semi-professional clubs from Hawaii to Cape Cod.

The 1994 APSL season again kicked off with seven clubs. Toronto's place had been taken by local rivals North York Rockets, the team renamed Toronto Rockets and featuring a mix of Blizzard and Rockets players. Meanwhile, Tampa Bay had gone out of business over the winter, and in their place was a reborn Seattle Sounders, a new club from the Evergreen State reaching back to the heritage of the city's NASL team, which attracted huge crowds to Memorial Stadium between 1974 and 1983.

The Sounders topped the regular season table but were beaten on penalties in the play-off semi-final by Colorado, who faced Montreal Impact in the winner-takes-all final at Montreal's Claude-Robillard Stadium. Over eight thousand fans cheered the home side on to victory, seeing their team become the final APSL champions, although the league was going nowhere.

Part of the bid to achieve division one status was a rebranding to the A-League, and with much of the work done for their proposal submission, it was agreed to go ahead with the change for the 1995 season. There were plans to expand the league to ten teams for the inaugural season, with expansion interest from Atlanta and Detroit, but the competition was dealt a blow when Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, and Toronto all folded.

Atlanta Ruckus and a New York Centaurs side based on Randall's Island joined the league, but a six-team competition wasn't the start the A-League was expecting.

Over in the USISL, a decision had been made to split into two tiers, the Professional and Premier Leagues. As the name suggested, teams entering the USISL Pro-League had to be fully professional outfits, while the lower tier allowed for semi-professional and amateur clubs. The 1995 Pro-League began with fifty-five teams spread across ten conferences, and included Fort Lauderdale and Los Angeles.

A further twenty-seven clubs operated at Premier level and - perhaps due to supporting Rothenberg in his bid to be re-elected USSF President in 1994 – the two leagues were officially designated as division three and four competitions by the USSF; it was clear they had become a major operation, at least in terms of sheer organisational power.

As the A-League and USISL Pro-Leagues got their 1995 seasons underway there was something missing: Major League Soccer. In December 1994, a decision had been taken to postpone the launch of the proposed twelve-team league to 1996, with just ten teams making up the opening class.

Chicago and Dallas were accepted as host cities, although Chicago soon withdrew and were joined in their exit by New York. Instead, the New Jersey team would be branded as a New York/New Jersey side and Denver, Kansas City, and Tampa Bay rounded out the ten founding clubs.

The postponement gave the A-League another chance to prove its mettle, and the contraction to just six teams actually worked in its favour, with the standard of play the highest it had ever been. Expansion sides Atlanta and New York got off to great starts, with the Ruckus actually leading the table in early June until they were toppled by Seattle. The Sounders remained on top for much of the season, finally being overtaken by Montreal, although both teams finished on fifty-one points to make the play-off semi-finals.

They were joined by Atlanta and Vancouver, and the Ruckus caused a massive shock when they eliminated the reigning champions on penalties, progressing to the final where Seattle awaited.

For the first time, the final was a three-legged affair, with Atlanta winning the first match at home on penalties, but losing 3-0 in Seattle. The decider, also in Seattle, finished one-all, and when Seattle goalkeeper Marcus Hahnemann saved Lenin Steenkamp's final penalty for Montreal, the Sounders took the trophy in front of 5,000 fans.

It had been a successful season for the A-League, with a US national team call-up for Hahnemann and several Montreal, Seattle, and Vancouver players included in the Canada team that summer.

The USISL (again renamed as the United Systems of Independent Soccer Leagues) underwent a gruelling series of regular season fixtures and play-offs to wind up with a "Sizzlin' Nine" – three groups of three with the group winners and best runner-up advancing to play-off semi-finals.

At the end of it all, at Mitchel Park in Uniondale, NY, just over 4,000 fans saw the Long Island Rough Riders beat Minnesota Thunder to win the debut Pro-League title, while Richmond Kickers won the Premier Division after beating Florida's Cocoa Expos in a play-off final.

The Kickers also won the 1995 US Open Cup, the first to allow professional sides to compete since the early 1930s. The final was an all-USISL affair, where the Kickers defeated El Paso – who had already knocked Seattle and Colorado out of the competition - and should have given some idea of the relative strengths of the leagues, except for the obvious fact that Richmond were a fourth-division side.

Regardless, it was clear that with MLS about to kick off its debut season, there was an appetite for football across the US.

Major League Soccer began life with a 1-0 for San Jose Clash over DC United in front of 31,000 fans at Spartan Stadium in San Jose.

Former APSL regular Eric Wynalda scored the only goal, and the league's hopes for an average attendance of between 8,000 and 10,000 were soon exceeded, with 17,000 coming through the turnstiles for each game in the first half of the season. The ten teams spanned the country, from California in the west to Massachusetts in the east and Florida in the south.

Under the league's rules, each side was required to have at least thirteen players eligible for the US national team in its eighteen-man squad - meaning some big signings were made to ensure that two-thirds of the national side were playing their football at home, including West Ham's John

Harkes, Alexei Lalas from Serie A side Padova, and Brian McBride and Eric Wynalda from German clubs Bochum and Wolfsburg. Tab Ramos was among the first to join, moving back home from Spain's Real Betis via a loan spell in Mexico.

"I was having some difficulties there after my injury in [the] World Cup," he later recalled. "[MLS] said 'How about if we buy you and loan you out to Mexico and then you sign with us?' And I said 'But there's no league!'"

Joining them was a clutch of international players, many of them nearing the end of their careers but still able to spark enthusiasm and column inches for the nascent competition. Of course, with so many homegrown players needed for MLS, both the A-League and USISL-Pro were raided for talent.

A-League top scorer Peter Hattrup switched from Seattle to Tampa but did not play a single minute during the 1996 season, although Vancouver captain Geoff Aunger did become a fixture of the New England side. The USISL-Pro MVP, Giovanni Savarese of Long Island, was taken by New York/New Jersey MetroStars, as were the goalkeeper and defender of the year.

Without some of their star players, both leagues looked to consolidate their positions, although they were fighting over much of the same territory and fans. Despite MLS drawing around 17,000 fans to each match, the A-League still held its own against the competition, with a respectable 5,000 on average - and sides such as Rochester Raging Rhinos and Seattle drawing comfortably in excess of that.

But the smaller attendances - USISL-Select was seeing on average 1,800 per game - meant the second-tier competitions knew they were fishing for scraps. They also risked being further raided for their best players, with MLS due to expand to twelve clubs in 1998. Less than a month after the conclusion of the A-League season in October 1996, the decision was reached to merge the leagues...

MLS ended up averaging 17,000 fans per game, with the A-League attracting an average of just under 5,000 and the USISL-Select bringing up the rear with 1,800.

Although both second-tier competitions had their supporters, it was clear that they were fishing for scraps and both organisations knew they were liable to be raided for their best talent by MLS, which was due to expand to twelve clubs in 1998. Less than a month after the conclusion of the A-League season in October 1996, the decision was reached to merge the leagues...

Although it was portrayed as a merger, in reality what had happened was the A-League had folded. Six of its seven clubs had agreed to join the USISL Select League, along with 1997 expansion candidates Hershey Wildcats and Toronto Lynx.

In order to gain the A-League's second division status, the USISL adopted the name for its new top division, painting a legacy picture that they needn't have, in all honesty. Of the 1996 A-League sides, only New York Fever failed to return for the 1997 season - the other six were joined by the two expansion sides and sixteen clubs from the USISL Select and Pro Leagues.

The former APSL sides dominated the new A-League, with only Atlanta failing to make the play-offs, but only Vancouver made it through to the Conference Final stage, losing to eventual champions Milwaukee Rampage.

In 1998, MLS clubs and the USSF banded together to field a team in the USISL A-League, with MLS Project 40 failing to make the end-of-season

play-offs won by Rochester. A year later, sportswear giant Umbro purchased a sixty percent stake in the USISL, which underwent a final rebranding to United Soccer Leagues and saw Minnesota Thunder win the championship in front of almost 10,000 fans in Minneapolis.

The next two titles were won by Rochester (which by then had, thankfully, dropped the Raging from its name) and the league welcomed two familiar names from the NASL - Vancouver 86ers adopted the old Whitecaps name, while Portland Timbers joined the league in 2001.

Successive titles were won by Milwaukee, Charleston, and Montreal, and the A-League was renamed as part of a top-down restructure in 2005, becoming the USL First Division with Seattle winning its first title. Nike's purchase of Umbro gave them a controlling stake in the league in 2006, and Vancouver, Seattle, and Vancouver again won the next three championships; Seattle had folded at the end of 2008, although for all the right reasons as its successor club was accepted into MLS for the 2009 season.

Nike decided to sell the league in 2009, and the nature of the sale to NuRock Soccer Holdings, rather than a consortium of club owners, prompted nine of those clubs – among them 2009 champions Montreal and former winners Minnesota, Rochester, and Vancouver – to resign their membership to join a new NASL.

This was especially curious in Vancouver's case as they had already been accepted to join MLS as an expansion club from 2011, alongside Portland. Neither the NASL, with seven of its nine founding clubs contractually obliged to play in the USL in 2010, nor the USL - with just three remaining USL-1 teams – were in any shape to offer second-tier football in 2010. In the end, the governing body had to step in and create a temporary league containing all twelve clubs, won by Rochester.

The new NASL didn't actually start playing until 2011, after which Montreal were accepted into MLS themselves. Vancouver didn't play a single game there, and neither did Rochester, who opted to move back to the USL in the new third-tier Pro League. The NASL was given second division status by the USSF, however, growing to twelve teams by 2016 with a resurrected New York Cosmos among its champions. That status was revoked at the end of the 2016 season, with the second tier sanction returned to the USL, and although eight clubs completed the 2017 season for the NASL, it was to be their last.

Perhaps crucial to the USL regaining its Division II status was an agreement to include MLS reserve sides in the competition, with New York Red Bulls II winning the 2016 title. Louisville City won the 2017 title, the final one under the Pro League branding as 2018 saw the USL Championship debut, a competition which continues to this day, although the MLS reserve sides left at the end of the 2022 season to form their own third-tier league.

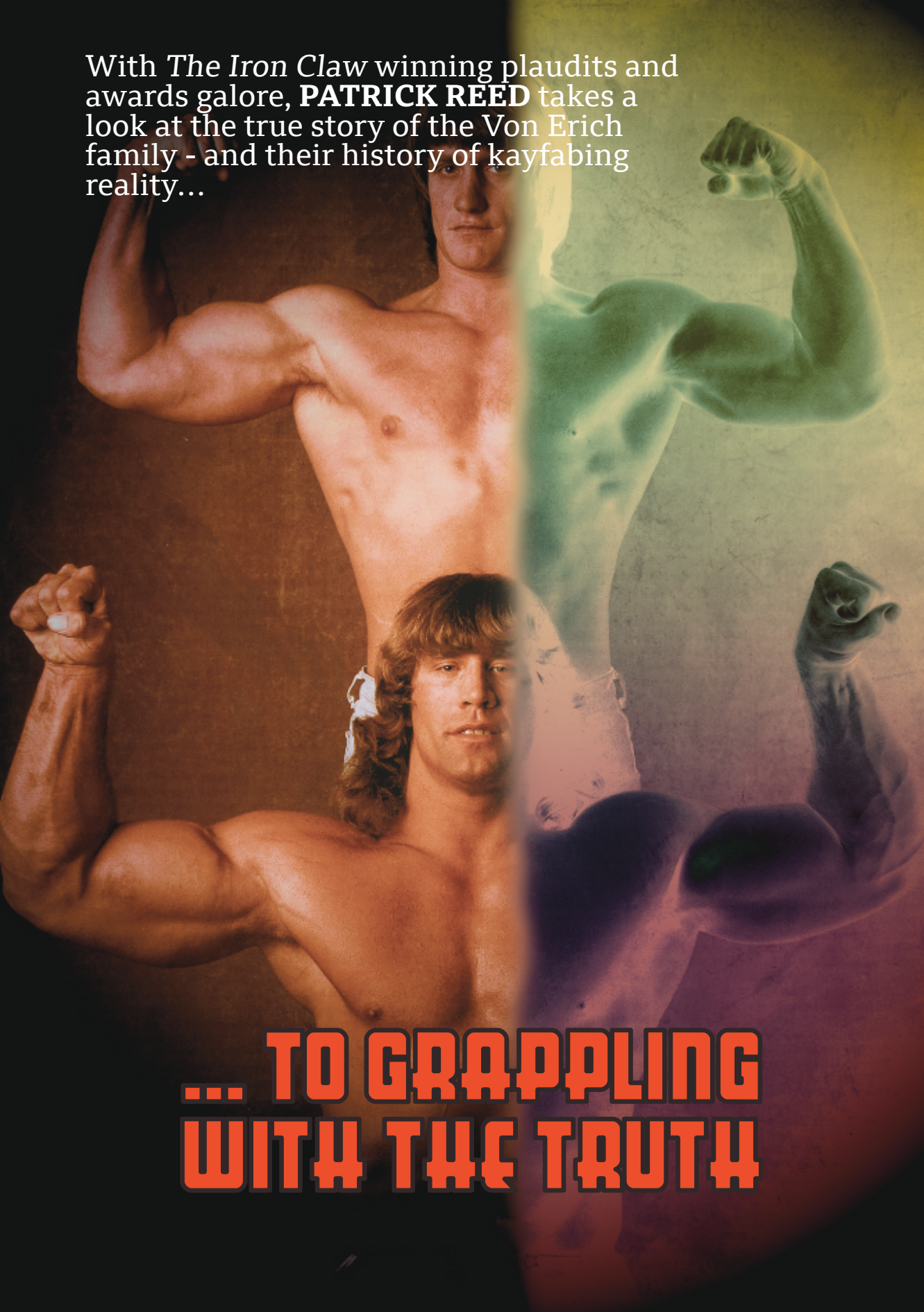
Currently, the USL Championship contains twenty-four teams from across the US, but only Charleston Battery remain from the 1997 A-League season (although Richmond play in the USL First Division and, of course, Montreal, Seattle, and Vancouver are all MLS sides).

Despite some tricky years around the turn of the century, during which it was a whisker away from collapsing under mounting debts, the MLS has become a resounding success story.

With average attendances of 21,000 and a massive twenty-nine clubs competing for the MLS Cup, the league is thriving, and the standard of play has never been better. What's more impressive – and certainly more interesting even than a fascinating MLS story in its own right – is the survival story of professional football below that considered Division I status by the USSF and FIFA.

What has ended up as the USL Championship is a story of mergers and upstart rivals, of clubs and players nurtured for greater things, and the hard work of those willing to look beyond the glamour of big names, big stadiums, and big money.

With *The Iron Claw* winning plaudits and awards galore, **PATRICK REED** takes a look at the true story of the Von Erich family - and their history of kayfabing reality...



... TO GRAPPLING WITH THE TRUTH

While walking home one evening, the same day I began putting proverbial pen to paper on this article, I passed a bus bearing an advertisement for Sean Durkin's **The Iron Claw**, the latest professional wrestling biopic to hit the big screen after last year's excellent **Cassandro**.

It was as sure a sign as any that after decades in the cultural wilderness as the entertainment industry's shameful little secret, in recent years directors, writers and tastemakers are finally recognising what wrestling fans have known for years – that theirs is an artform built on storytelling; what the late wrestling promoter Jerry Jarrett called "Shakespeare for the masses".

While the stories told in the squared circle have traditionally tended toward the simplicity of black hats vs. white hats, good and evil, replete with simplistic stereotypes, the meta-narrative of what goes into making wrestling, and making a wrestler, offers up questions of identity, representation and gender performance that are perfectly attuned to our current cultural moment.

In my book, **Kayfabe: A Mostly True History of Professional Wrestling**, I look at the pseudo-sport's history as it evolved from a legitimate folk sport to a complex performance art and a glitzy, multi-million-dollar global TV production, and how throughout that history it has walked a delicate tightrope between the spheres of sport and entertainment, between the real and the unreal.

Central to that balance is that strange word "Kayfabe", its uncertain etymology rooted somewhere in theatrical or carnival slang.

Kayfabe is the art of presenting wrestling's storylines, characters, and internal logic as real, even long after the cameras have stopped rolling, and it's at the heart of the story of the Von Erich family, the subjects of **The Iron Claw**.

The man who would be Fritz Von Erich was born Jack Barton Adkisson in Jewett, Texas, and was given his more famous name by legendary wrestling promoter Stu Hart.

Characterisation in wrestling tends to be painted in the broadest of strokes, and the wrestling scene of the 1950s, recently emboldened by the advent of television, was one even more than usually replete with stereotypes playing off the basest of middle America's fears and moral panics.

Gorgeous George channelled Liberace to skew conventional ideas of masculinity with a queer-coded performance designed to enrage audiences from Texas to Hollywood, while the Red Scare produced a litany of scowling shaven-headed "Soviet" villains. With the Second World War so fresh in people's collective memory,wrestling promoters couldn't go wrong with adding a goosestepping Nazi or two to their roster.

There was the monocled Baron Von Raschke, the brutal Karl Von Hess, and any

number of other Germanic bad guys prepared to march around the wrestling rings of America, riding crop in hand, and Fritz Von Erich was no different, and took to the role with aplomb.

For much of the latter half of the 20th century, professional wrestling in America was governed by the National Wrestling Alliance, a cabal of wrestling promoters who conspired to monopolise the sport to keep performers' wages down, shut out rival promoters who attempted to run shows outside the Alliance's auspices, and to carve up the country into "territories", each territory a private fiefdom run by one promoter on the strict understanding that Alliance members would never run on another's patch.

One role that the National Wrestling Alliance's board had was to agree by common consent on who they would recognise as the World Heavyweight Champion – the highest accolade in professional wrestling, but also a hugely demanding role, as the Champion was expected to travel from territory to territory, to key overseas locations, and maintain a gruelling schedule, carrying the legitimacy of the NWA and, by extension, of professional wrestling as a whole on their back.

While, as a promoter, Fritz Von Erich would briefly become the President of the NWA, as a wrestler he never managed to win over enough friendly promoters to convince them that he was World Championship material, and that thwarted ambition seemed to eat him alive.

With the writing on the wall that the high-earning, jet-setting life of a World Champion was going to allude him, in 1966 Fritz Von Erich largely abandoned the peripatetic nomadic life of a touring professional wrestler, and took to the office job of promoter, for the Dallas, Texas territory, then known as Big Time Wrestling but, under his stewardship, adopting the name **World Class Championship Wrestling**.

That same year, Fritz gave up his Hitler saluting villainous ways, and reinvented himself as a gruff, heroic, good old Texan boy who fought for all that was right, true, and American – though never giving up his faux-German kayfabe surname. For an America deep into the Cold War, and reaping the morally dubious benefits of Operation Paperclip, it was time to quietly rehabilitate the German villains of years past, and replace them with the dastardly Japanese, brutish Russians, and underhanded Cubans more befitting the political climate of the day.

As a promoter, Fritz Von Erich built a wrestling dynasty of his sons, wanting for them the championship reigns and success that had eluded him. He was to push them harder than any other wrestler under his employ, and live vicariously through them, projecting his ambitions on to every one of them, building them into a hugely popular, idealised vision of clean-living, youthful Christian Americana.

This is the backdrop of **The Iron Claw** – while **Cassandro** dealt with the questions of toxic masculinity inherent in so much of professional wrestling by exploring the liberatory potential of genderplay and queer representation, **The Iron Claw** (below) is an exploration of how the demands and the shortcomings of hyper-masculinity hurt us all, and make victims even of its most visible advocates. It's a tragedy Shakespearean in scale, but also in its sad, crushing inevitability.

It is that scale and inevitability that gave rise

to talk of the "Von Erich Curse", a need to explain the family's story in supernatural, almost cosmic terms. To some in the wrestling business, the Curse was more than just a metaphor – wrestling historian and writer David Shoemaker wrote in his book **The Squared Circle: Life, Death and Professional Wrestling** of a well-worn folk tale in wrestling's mythology; after a match in Chicago, Fritz Von Erich was confronted by a strange man who had somehow found his way into the dressing rooms.

This man asked Fritz how he could live with himself, portraying a Nazi for financial gain night after night despite knowing what evils they had committed, and when Fritz exclaimed that it was all an act and tried to remove the man from the room, the mysterious stranger rolled up his sleeve to reveal the unmistakable numerical tattoo of the death camps on his forearm.

The man told Fritz that he had lost his five sons in the Holocaust, and wished the same fate on Von Erich for failing to heed his warning. In some tellings of the story, the man vanishes after leaving the room, unseen by anyone but Fritz Von Erich himself, with venue staff insisting that nobody of his description was ever admitted backstage.

Fritz Von Erich had six sons. The first, Jack Jr., died at the age of just six years old, an accidental electrocution causing him to drown in a puddle while playing outside on a snowy day.

David Von Erich was the bright young star of the family,

earmarked for success as a future World Champion by the NWA and the lynchpin of **World Class Championship Wrestling**, both as a solo wrestling superstar, and in tag team matches alongside his brothers.

In 1984, while on a tour of Japan, David was found dead in his hotel room, aged twenty-five. The official explanation was of enteritis, a severe inflammation of the small intestine, though it was whispered among other wrestlers that the true cause was a drug overdose. At a tribute show held in David's honour, his brother Kerry defeated Ric Flair to win the NWA World Heavyweight Title, putting it around the waist of a Von Erich for the first and last time – his reign would last only 18 days; shorter than the reign of all but five other wrestlers in the championship's near eighty year history.

Mike Von Erich had been a cameraman for WCCW's TV show, and dreamed of stardom as a guitarist in a rock and roll band, and only wrestled occasionally, but after David's death, he was pressured into taking a much larger role in the family business by Fritz – the territory's formula was of the Von Erich boys on top, in teams of two or three, and losing David meant that there were shoes to be filled.

While wrestling in Israel, Mike suffered a shoulder injury that required surgery – complications arose, and he developed toxic shock syndrome, suffering substantial kidney and brain damage as a result. In spite of this, he was rushed back into the ring, his father selling him as a miracle comeback story – the reality was far bleaker.

In interviews, Mike appeared distant, his eyes unfocused, his speech slurred and unsteady, losing his train of thought mid-sentence, and his skin was unsettlingly sallow. In his matches, he didn't look like an athlete pulling off an incredible return to the ring, but like what he was – a deeply unwell man who was lucky to be alive, and who was spiralling into drug addiction and increasingly erratic behaviour, fuelled by his

inability to live up to the standards set by his late brother David in the eyes of his father as much as by the illness that should have ended his wrestling career.

On April 12th 1987, Mike Von Erich took his own life. He was 23 years old.

Chris Von Erich was the youngest of the Von Erich clan. While his brothers were musclebound matinee idols, each standing over six feet tall, young Chris was just 5'4", and looked like a child playing dress-up in his brothers' clothes.

Chris was asthmatic with brittle bones, which left him prone to injury from even the simplest of wrestling manoeuvres; more than any of his brothers, he had no business being in the ring.

His wrestling career lasted less than a year, and his depression over the death of his closest brother Mike heralded drink and drug problems that, compounded with his frustrations over his shortcomings in the ring, led Chris down the same dark path as his favourite sibling.

On September 12th 1991, 21 year old Chris Von Erich died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

The most famous of the Von Erich brothers was Kerry, the former NWA World Heavyweight Champion, the only one of his brothers to seek the bright lights of international stardom outside the limits of their father's territory, signing with the World Wrestling Federation in 1990, where he competed as the Texas Tornado.

What the fans of the WWF didn't know is that the newest musclebound superstar on the block carried a lot of baggage – a 1986 motorcycle accident left him horrifically injured, and doctors were unable to save his right foot, and were forced to amputate.

For the remainder of his career, Kerry wrestled with a primitive prosthetic, and hid the fact from his fans and many fellow wrestlers. In a now all too familiar story, he returned to the ring earlier than advised, and drug problems that had seen him narrowly avoid prison time in the past only worsened, as gritting his teeth and working through unimaginable pain and discomfort left him in constant need of anything that could dull the hurt.

After the collapse of his marriage, and faced with the prospect of extensive jail time for drug offences and violating probation, Kerry Von Erich, who had spoken for years of waiting for the right time to "join his brothers", drove to his father's ranch, gave Fritz one last hug goodbye, and then disappeared into the woods to end his own life with a single gunshot to the heart. He was 32.

The Curse had done as promised, and taken five of Fritz Von Erich's sons. The sixth brother, Kevin, was the sole survivor. He continued to wrestle until 1995, and still make sporadic appearances on wrestling shows, even coming out of retirement in 2017 to wrestle one final match in Israel alongside his two sons Ross and Marshall, who continue to wrestle under the Von Erich name today. Fritz Von Erich himself died in 1997, but not before telling his only surviving son that the only reason Kevin was still alive because he lacked the courage to do what his brothers had done.

The Von Erichs were the Kennedys of Texas wrestling, an idealised and aspirational family adored by their public. The sons were teen heartthrobs, pin-up matinee idols who wrestled to the screams of adoring young girls at a Beatlemania pitch.

They were folk heroes who fought for what was right, who vanquished villains and bullies, and, more importantly, they were brothers who stood side-by-side. In the cartoon and make-believe world of professional wrestling, the blood bond that united the Von Erich boys was undeniably real.

The death of David was a tragedy, but one that Fritz was able to spin into a moment of triumph, his loyal audience rallying behind the whole family in their darkest moment. But the deaths of his brothers, and the stories of drug abuse, debauchery and run-ins with the law that became harder and harder for Fritz to keep out of the papers, was too much for even the Von Erich family's most loyal fans to stomach. By the end, the Von Erich family

brand wasn't Christian clean-living Texan boys, but a family beset by tragedy, and Fritz Von Erich in his desperation leaned into it.

On a Christmas Day show in 1987, Fritz Von Erich faked a heart attack, and in the subsequent weeks on television updates were provided on his apparent medical condition – all mere months after the death of Mike Von Erich.

His business already starting to fail, the domineering Fritz seemingly looked to the box office success of his tribute show to David Von Erich, and of the Mike Von Erich comeback story, and saw that the only surefire way for the Von Erich family to make money was through exploiting tragedy. But it was a step too far, even for him.

The Von Erich boys' adoring fans had already tasted too much real-life heartbreak, and with even more still to come, they just couldn't stomach the phony kind.

Fans were already dealing with their grief and struggling with revelation after revelation that the Von Erich brothers were less than the perfect American family they purported to be, but cheap stunts like Fritz's "heart attack" and his attempt to pass off an unrelated wrestler as a Von Erich "cousin" to fill Mike's spot on the card were the final straw – the Von Erichs' lasting appeal was their believability, the unspoken promise that they were a lone beacon of honesty in a dishonest business, and Fritz's actions had broken that promise, leaving his fans feeling as cheated as they were heartbroken.

If there was such a thing as the Von Erich Curse, in many ways it was the curse of Kayfabe. Kayfabe turned the Adkisson brothers of Dallas, Texas into the fighting Von Erich boys, a mantle they found it near impossible to live up to. Kayfabe provided the protective shield to keep their trials and tribulations out of the public eye until it was too late. Kayfabe drove Fritz Von Erich to push his sons to work through injuries, fight back against odds far greater than anything they faced inside the ring, to be driven towards steroid and painkiller abuse just to strive for anything near his impossible standards.

Kayfabe was what made Fritz Von Erich try and turn a family's grief into a television storyline. Kayfabe was what made Fritz Von Erich value the allure of a phony championship in a fixed sport at the expense of his own family's health and wellbeing, and even their lives.

We don't need to invoke the ghosts of the Holocaust, or a brutal reapportioning of karma by the cosmos to punish Fritz for the sin of dressing up in Nazi drag; Fritz Von Erich was a curse all unto himself, and a curse of his own making.

EDDIE ROBSON wishes football's governing bodies would stop mucking about with the beautiful game's tournament formats

... TO GROUP STAGE PERMUTATIONS

I got into football in an odd and possibly embarrassing way, but we're all friends here, so I'll tell you about it.

Having resisted all my dad's efforts to get me into the game, sometime around my eleventh birthday, my eye was caught by the first issue of the Orbis World Cup partwork in our local newsagent. In the run-up to the 1990 tournament, this built week-by-week into a guide to the past and present of the tournament, and it doubled up as a sticker album. My dad no doubt seized on anything that might encourage an interest in the sport (or any sport) and bought it for me.

It must have appealed to my geeky side because it kickstarted a lifelong love of football, and I started watching and even playing it (I started much too late to have any hope of being any good, but I still play five-a-side every week). And as with anything you're obsessed with at that age, when you have the time to read it over and over, you retain it. This is responsible for one of my many useless skills: I can recall the host, final scoreline, and structure of every men's football World Cup.

I was especially fascinated by how the structure evolved: the straight knock-outs of 1934 and 1938 being replaced by the 1950 format with no knock-out matches at all. Then the 1954 format with two seeded teams in each group playing the two unseeded teams, presumably created to avoid the final being a repeat of an earlier group match, only to produce exactly that outcome. Then experiments in 1974, 1978, and 1982 with a second group stage, before settling into what's basically an expanded version of the format that worked so well between 1958 and 1970.

While this kind of footballing admin is of no interest at all to many fans, there are plenty of us who've thought a great deal about the merits of different formats and love to make our own custom tournaments on video games. And I can only assume none of us were in the room when FIFA created its 48-team World Cup structure. Either that or we were shouted down. This format is now dead, of course, but the fact it was even considered at all is alarming, so I'd like to exhume its corpse and examine it again.

Instead of eight groups of four, we would have 16 (SIXTEEN) groups of three. This immediately set off an alarm bell with me. Groups of three featured in the 1982 World Cup, and are awkward to schedule because one team in each round is doing nothing. I think there's a clear advantage for the team that plays the first and last matches, with a week's rest in between: of the four three-team groups in 1982, three were won by the team that played first and last.

The exception was West Germany, who'd played their final group game with their slippers on. This is notorious, but I'll explain it in case you don't know (it's the kind of thing I first learned from that partwork): they played that match knowing a 1-0 win over Austria would qualify both teams, because close rivals Algeria had played their final group game the day before. The eighty minutes of aimless faffing that followed the game's only goal led it to be dubbed the Disgrace of Gijón. To avoid this, the final round of group matches were played simultaneously from 1986 onwards (in fact, until the 1974 tournament matches in the same group were usually played simultaneously, not just the final round but all rounds, and this only changed due to the demands of television).

In a group of three teams, one team will always be looking on as the other two play the final match. This isn't ideal, but if only the group winner progresses (as happened in 1982), they are at least assured the other two teams won't stitch them up. They have no such assurances if both teams can progress. Lots of people pointed this out when the format was approved by FIFA in January 2017, and FIFA suggested ways of countering it, including draws in the group stage being settled by penalties. But we don't want more shoot-outs in the World Cup, and eliminating draws would only eliminate collusion via a high-scoring draw: it wouldn't prevent the kind of collusion West Germany and Austria did, where three teams are tied and each has beaten one of the others.

When the format was finally dropped, it was ostensibly because the 2022 tournament provided some fantastic final group games.

But really, the three-team groups would have been a disaster. There's no doubt in my mind that, with sixteen groups, at least one of them would have produced a final result that looked dodgy. Probably three or four. It would have engulfed the tournament.

FIFA's president, Gianni Infantino, was determined to expand the World Cup because (a) profit and (b) more places always go down well with the member associations. In an organisation like FIFA, all the members represent their own interests, and this is supposed to provide balance. But who represents the interests of the tournament?

This isn't a minor point: a vast number of people are fans not just of their own team, but of the World Cup itself. The idea of the World Cup was what got me into football. And endlessly expanding the tournament is not necessarily going to make it better.

There were several proposals for new World Cup formats, and all of them had severe flaws. The fact is — and this isn't a knee-jerk view, I've thought about this a lot — the 32-team format we had is the ideal one. Tournaments work best when you can knock out half the teams in each round: the 24-team format, with four best third-placed teams going through, isn't high-stakes enough.

Some argue a 16-team World Cup would make it a true elite competition, but there needs to be space for nations from all over the world and 16 isn't enough to fit the giants of the sport and represent the globe. The next workable format after 32 is 64, and that's just too big. Part of the joy of the event is following all of its storylines, and 64 is too many teams to keep track of. It also poses huge challenges to any host.

Clearly a 64-team World Cup will happen anyway, because they're not going to stop at 48 and no one is ever going to vote to make the tournament smaller.

The question remains how much football can still fit into the calendar — the masterstroke of the sixteen-groups-of-three format was supposedly that the tournament would still be played in the same amount of time and finalists would still play the same number of matches. But the climbdown to four-team groups changes that: the tournament needs another week (and, incidentally, the hosts need to accommodate an extra 24 matches). This wasn't what the members voted for, but it's what they're getting.

FIFA landed themselves in this situation because they thought their new structure worked, and it didn't. The return to groups of four was presented as 'Hey, great news!' but was essentially an admission they'd fucked up their most important job: to organise the World Cup. It should have been a resignation issue, for Infantino and everyone who proposed it. But with no real accountability in football administration (as we grimly saw with the preparations in Qatar), they just roll on.

And it's not just FIFA who are at it: the new 'Swiss' Champions League format will, I predict, absolutely baffle fans when it's introduced next season, and will not make the tournament more exciting. But it will let UEFA add more teams and matches to the schedule.

We all know these bodies are out of touch with football as fans experience it, and run the game on a wholly different set of concerns to the rest of us. But when they present us with a format that does not work and the members cheerfully vote for it, I feel like they don't understand their own tournament at all. Is it too much to ask for the World Cup to be run by people who know what it actually is?

IAIN HEPBURN tries a trio of games which put their faith - and their creation - in the hands of the fans...

...TO RUSS ABBOTT'S HOUSE OF GAMES

Nostalgia is a lucrative business.

For years, it was video games and toys, but now board games have become the next big market for big retro retreads, cashing in on the Gen X need for revisiting their adolescence on a daily basis.

Of course, these walks down memory lane require paying a very expensive toll — which is why they've often been tested to see if audience demand is there on Kickstarter before putting them on sale in the shops. Perhaps the most high-profile of these is **HeroQuest**, a remake of the classic early 90s board game which served as a gateway drug to the world of Games Workshop for a generation of plook-riddled teens.

It, and sci-fi follow-up **Space Crusad**e, were joint ventures between Milton Bradley and Games Workshop, boiling down the **Warhammer** and **40K** universes into easy-to-digest board games.

During the pandemic, Hasbro launched a fundraiser to gauge interest in a remake — and the timing could not have been better, with a bunch of bored, housebound middle-aged nerds falling over themselves to back the project.

The reboot draws upon the US version of the game, with a modified rules set and — notably — removes all the Games Workshop-inspired ideas for ones which are absolutely different and not just the same concept turned slightly sideways in a mirror.

The miniatures and gaming board have been given a fresh design and look absolutely stunning, but the game plays just about the same as the original — there is one nice, modern update though, in the form of an app which can replace the Dungeon Master. In the old game, some poor sod drew the short straw to be DM — ostensibly in charge, but also arguably missing out on the fun as the players either cooperated their way around the dungeon or (more usually) bickered and fought.

Now in the space year 2023, your smartphone can step in and everyone can play as adventurers instead.

Welcome to the future...

Either way, the game rattles along — the nearly 35-year-old rules have aged surprisingly well with only minor updates to keep things moving and fresh. Whether the unabashed nostalgia hit is worth nearly a ton is up to you — although given how much actual Games Workshop boxed games cost these days, it's probably not far off.

Likewise, in the expensive nostalgia stakes comes a remake of classic spooky horror game **Atmosfear**, initially funded through Kickstarter to mark the original game's 30th anniversary.

The original was part of a wave of early 90s games which came with that most evocative of accessories — the 'interactive' VHS, with players competing to avoid the curses, insults, and general bellowing of the Gatekeeper.

The new version obviously takes into account that most folk barely have a DVD player these days, let alone a working VHS machine, so makes the video available as a streaming Vimeo player for interactivity.

Otherwise, the game follows the same principles — basically being **Trivial Pursuit** reinterpreted by Wes Craven. Each of the players takes the guise of an undead horror and must work around the board collecting

keys. Once they've got six, they can then race to the centre of the board and risk facing their worst nightmare.

Literally. At the start of the game, you write your biggest fear down on a card, and if you draw anything but that, you win. If you get your own, though, you're disqualified.

Which does at least incentivise players to make the fear either something truly unspeakable or so ludicrous it makes being disqualified funny. Being trapped in a lift for all eternity with Chris De Burgh and a piano, for instance. Cthulhu's got nothing on that.

The game is also a race against the clock, with the aim of reaching the middle and winning before the 60 minutes of the video elapse. This is helpfully marked with a countdown on screen — replaced at random intervals by the CBBC 'evil acting' appearances of the Mark Heap lookalike Gatekeeper.

Fair play, the new edition looks absolutely beautiful. The board and the figures have been tidied up and given paint jobs to properly stand out, and the production values of the video have been beefed up with some nice make-up appliances on the Gatekeeper as time ticks away.

But for all the spit and polish rendered to the game, and once the novelty of revisiting your childhood and the video talking back at you wears off, it's still basically just you playing a game of snakes and ladders against the **Demon Headmaster**. And is that really worth sixty quid? Especially for a game that, once you've played through it once, holds no more surprises?

On the other end of the scale, indie creator Fiona Ruthven's magnificent, darkly silly Dead Air requires just the rulebook and a deck of regular playing cards — but is no less enjoyable for it.

Billed, cheekily, as a game about Radio Activity, the single-player Kickstarter-funded RPG puts you in charge of a west of Scotland radio station in the aftermath of nuclear armageddon — a world of danger, although largely just with more actual mutants and less Ayr United fans.

From the outside, the game looks like a challenge of resource management — with the player having to juggle the challenges of staying on air, keeping listeners informed of what's going on... and fulfilling the requirements of their broadcast charter AND the need for survival.

But really, at its heart, it's an exercise in empathy — or lack of it.

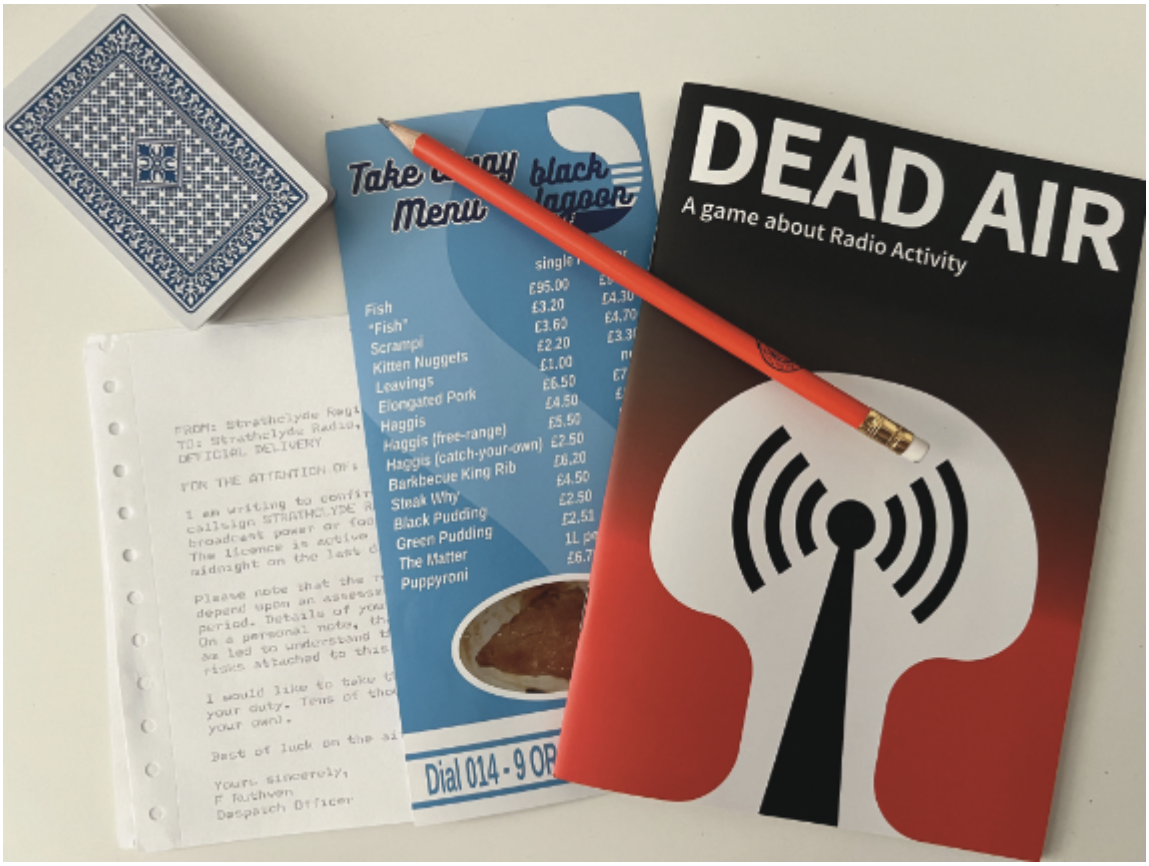
Played properly, you need to actually create and perform a bunch of radio bulletins for your supposed audience. The challenge becomes how to script, and twist reality where necessary, to fit with the requirements drawn at the start of the round.

So while you're shuffling around your scavengers to find your equipment, or balancing if you've enough power to even transmit this round, you're also having to construct in your mind something akin to propaganda — positive or negative, depending on your point of view. Despite the grim-sounding scenario, the game's tonally much closer to the **Mitchell and Webb** REMAIN INDOORS sketch than, say, **Threads** or **The Day After**, with Ruthven's amusing touches scattered throughout the background of the game.

A guide to post-apocalyptic Strathclyde describing Kilmarnock as largely untouched by the disaster, but worth avoiding anyway, or a tourist advert inviting you to visit Scotland's last remaining sheep pretty much sets the tone for what's to come.

It takes a bit of getting used to — the initial set-up rules could be much clearer on how to manage your deck post first draw, and there's a lot of flicking back and forth between tables to find out your remit, equipment, and potential news items each turn.

But once you settle into it, the game becomes remarkably immersive — living in your head rent-free as you start to wonder how to stitch together five minutes of news talk radio warning the people of Inverary that IT is coming, regardless of what IT actually might be.

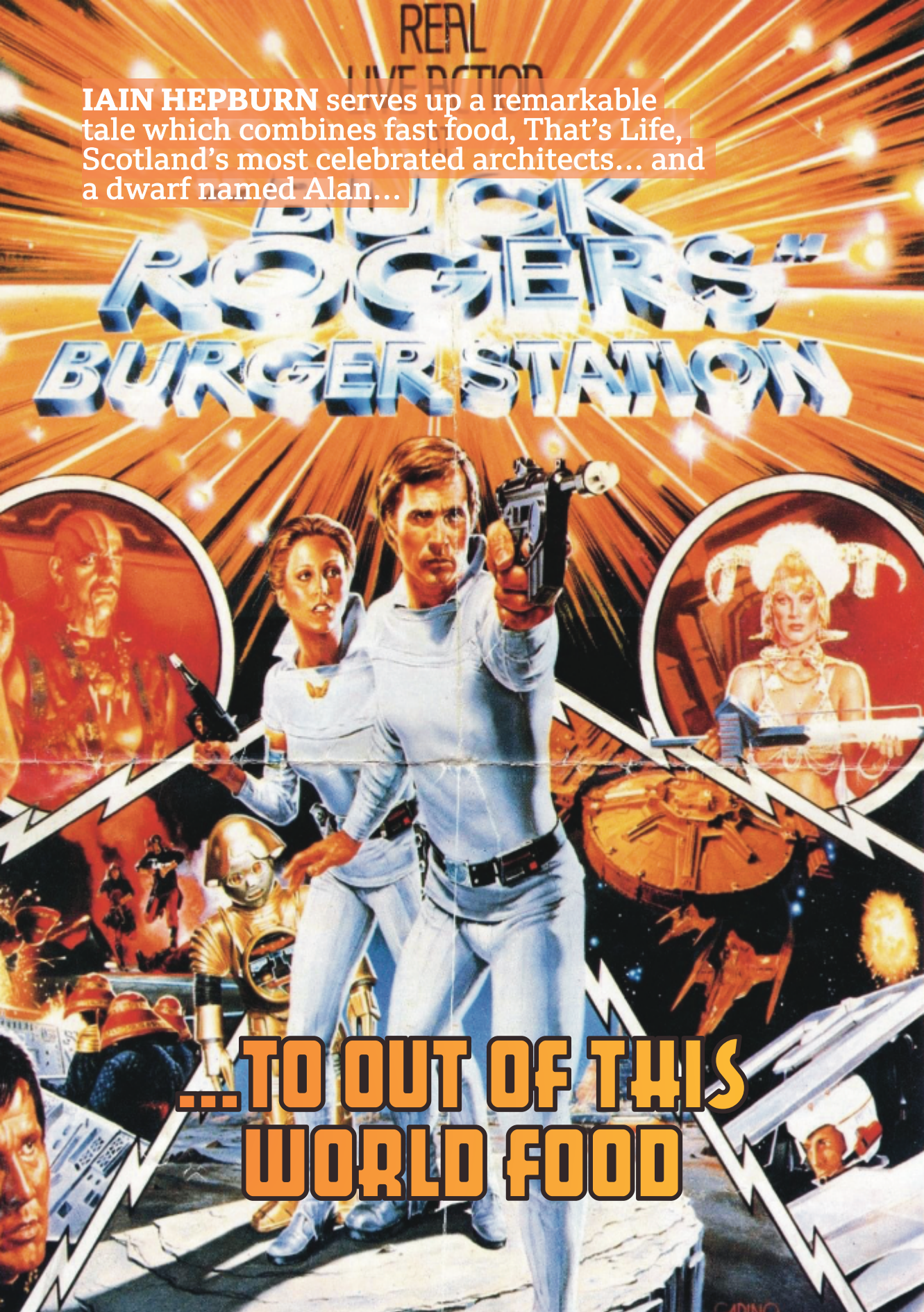


The lore of the game, conveyed through scraps of recovered information and, in the deluxe Kickstarter edition, wonderful ephemera like chip shop menus, helps bring the world to life and gives more launchpads for your radio broadcasts.

It's a game that could, comfortably, do with some minor revision for a second edition to tidy up the layout and clarify the order of things better. But it's also one which feels destined to become a cult classic.

REAL
LIVE ACTION

IAIN HEPBURN serves up a remarkable tale which combines fast food, That's Life, Scotland's most celebrated architects… and a dwarf named Alan…



It's May 1983 in Glasgow. It's warm, and I'm five years old, celebrating my birthday and hyped up from the first part of my treat... watching Paddington Bear in a live stage musical at a theatre around the corner.

Up a narrow flight of stairs next to a joke shop is a humid, dark, seemingly cavernous room. It's packed with people. Most of them are sitting down in beige plastic seats at beige plastic tables. The rest are wandering about, carrying plates of fried food, iridescent milkshakes, and diabetes-inducing bowls of ice cream. They're largely wearing vaguely science fiction-themed outfits – lots of silver and spandex and eye make-up to go with oh-so-80s haircuts.

Around the walls, there are screens, all running slightly fuzzy video clips, their space-age soundtracks buried beneath the music and noise of the rest of the room. Each one has an array of buttons to whack, lighting up and occasionally making a barely audible bleeping sound.

Also wandering about are folk in even stranger costumes. Rubber monster heads, likely procured from the joke shop downstairs. And a little person in a shiny metal costume, lumbering around greeting children with guttural Glaswegian tones.

And to my five-year-old mind, this is the single greatest, most exciting place in the world. For an hour or so, I'm not in Glasgow – I'm in outer space and the 25th century with Buck and Wilma and Twiki.

Every city has a legendary, lost eatery. Something cool and weird and kitsch and slightly ahead or behind its time, depending on your perspective. A common folk memory, handed down in vaguely remembered Facebook posts and nostalgic clickbait articles on local newspaper websites. Usually poorly illustrated with home snaps, if at all.

For Glasgow, it's Bucks. Or, as it was formally known, the **Buck Rogers** Burger Station – a bold, doomed attempt to wed the fast food concept to a kid-friendly sci-fi franchise which was still airing on commercial television in the UK despite long since having been axed in the States.

Glasgow may have seemed an unlikely testbed for a franchised fast food restaurant to have its trial run, but even by 1982 the city was lagging behind in convenience food, beyond fish suppers and curries. There were burger joints, but barring a couple of branches of Wimpy, they were largely novelty places – waitresses on roller skates and 50s Americana on the jukebox, like a child's remembrance of an episode of **Happy Days**.

Indeed, it wouldn't be until 1988 that Scotland would even get its first branch of McDonald's – and that would be in Dundee. Not even the second branch ventured across to the west coast, with Kirkcaldy in Fife, of all places, hosting the second pair of golden arches on Scotland's shores.

So in 1982 there was an undoubted gap in the market for something different, and flashy, with kids in mind.

Enter businessman Brian Waldman. The London-born entrepreneur had been a key figure in shaking up Edinburgh's clubbing and dining scene in the 1950s and 60s, arriving in the city initially to set up a timber business but instead discovering a sleepy city that had barely progressed since the end of the war.

He brought a touch of London glamour and the swinging sixties to Lothian Road, branching out into other areas such as property and mortgage brokering, West End theatre, and even an ill-fated attempt to set up a venue atop the Liverpool Radio Tower – a venue he would keep in mind years later.

"He had charisma and presence, and it was said that he could sell snow to the Eskimos," his brother Paul would tell the Scotsman for Brian's obituary in 2005. "He wasn't driven by money; he was driven by ideas – right to the end."

By the early 80s Waldman, by now in his mid-40s, was casting about for something new. His cafes and bars had proved popular with the kids of the 60s and 70s. Now he was looking for something bang up to date, something which would appeal to the 1980s

generation.

And he found it on ITV one Saturday afternoon.

Buck Rogers originally started as a comic strip created by Philip Francis Nowlan in 1929 – a series of derring-do adventures featuring the adventures of the out-of-time hero, launched into a post-apocalyptic future following a rockslide which trapped him in suspended animation for five hundred years.

The adventures of Buck, Wilma, Doctor Heur, and pals, defending civilisation from Mongol hoards and space pirates – among other very much of their time villains – would prove a hugely successful strip, being syndicated at its peak across nearly 300 newspapers in the USA, and more than 150 overseas, before finally wrapping up after a 38-year run. During that time, it also spun off into the big new media darlings of the era. Initially as a radio serial in the early 1930s, before becoming the iconic cinema – if decidedly low-budget – serial starring Buster Crabb as Buck.

Captain Rogers' adventures would flirt in and out of fashion in the States, with a 1950s tv series – broadcast live and now sadly all but lost to historians – finding brief favour. But it would be the late 1970s when Buck would really blast back onto screens, riding the wave of the post-**Star Wars** boom in pulp sci-fi action all the way to prime time.

Glen A. Larson had already spearheaded the **Star Wars** cash-in cause with **Battlestar Galactica,** the $1m-an-episode saga which had blasted onto screens in 1978 with its heady mix of deep space dogfighting and barely disguised Mormonism.

Universal, which had a production deal with Larson, asked him to turn his attention to **Buck Rogers** as a project for NBC, which had been left behind in the race for sci-fi schlock telly. The result was a much more comical, less expensive series which took the basic outlines for Nowlan's characters and fleshed them out in a far more disco-friendly direction.

The initial pilot – released as a movie garnering an impressive $21m box office domestically, and even more internationally – led to a series which hit US screens in September 1979. A year later, it debuted on ITV in a Saturday teatime slot – and proceeded to spend the next 16 weeks handing **Doctor Who** his arse in the ratings.

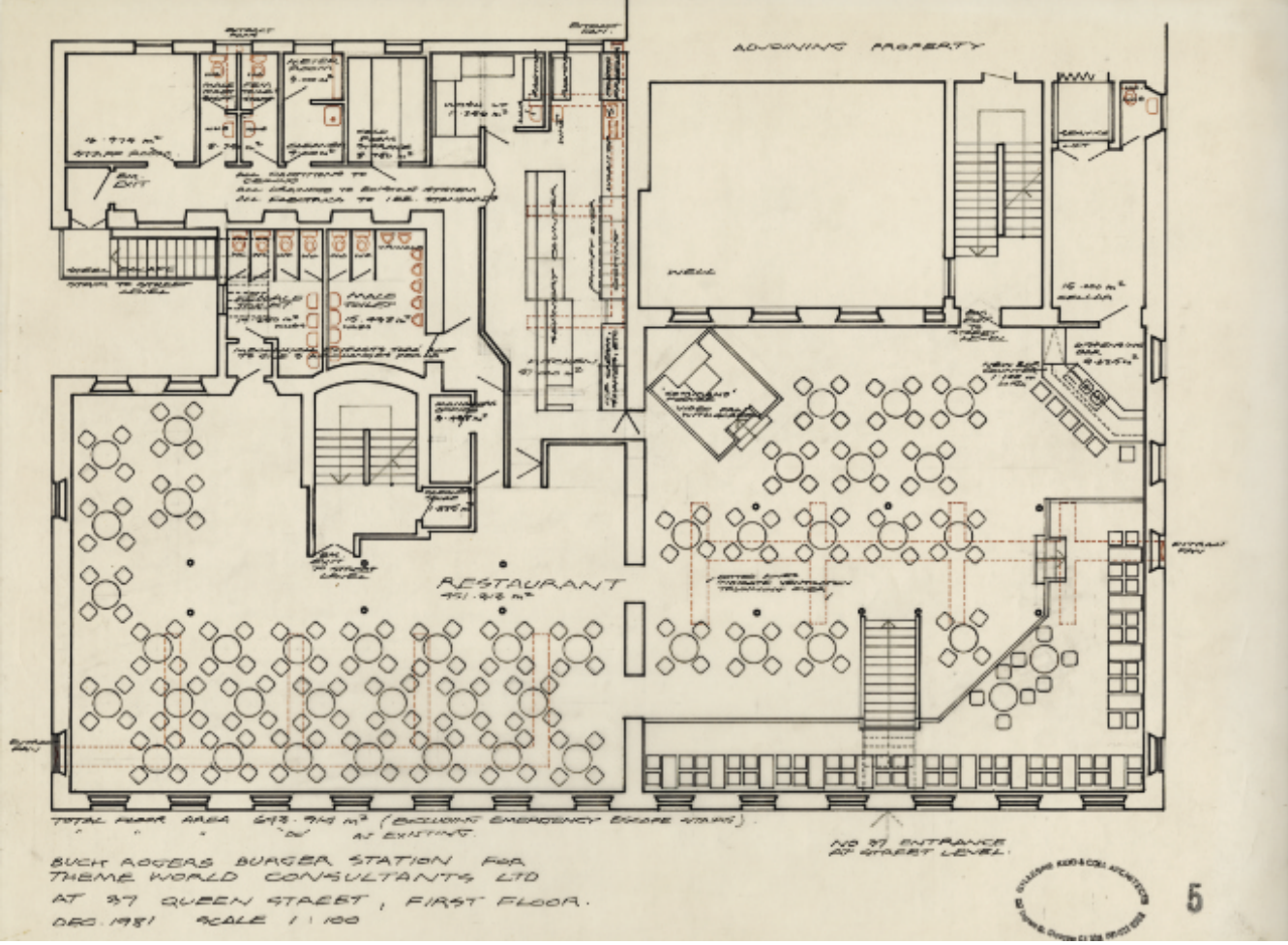
So potent proved the popularity of Buck, Twiki, Wilma, and co to viewers previously swayed by Tom, Lalla, and the tin dog that the BBC began panicking, and eventually shifted the show's timeslot to earlier in the evening to avoid losing the head-to-head battle, before giving up entirely and moving the show to weekday slots from 1982 – despite Buck having already been cancelled in the US.

And it was against that backdrop of ratings success and kid-friendly sci-fi action that Brian Waldman had his idea.

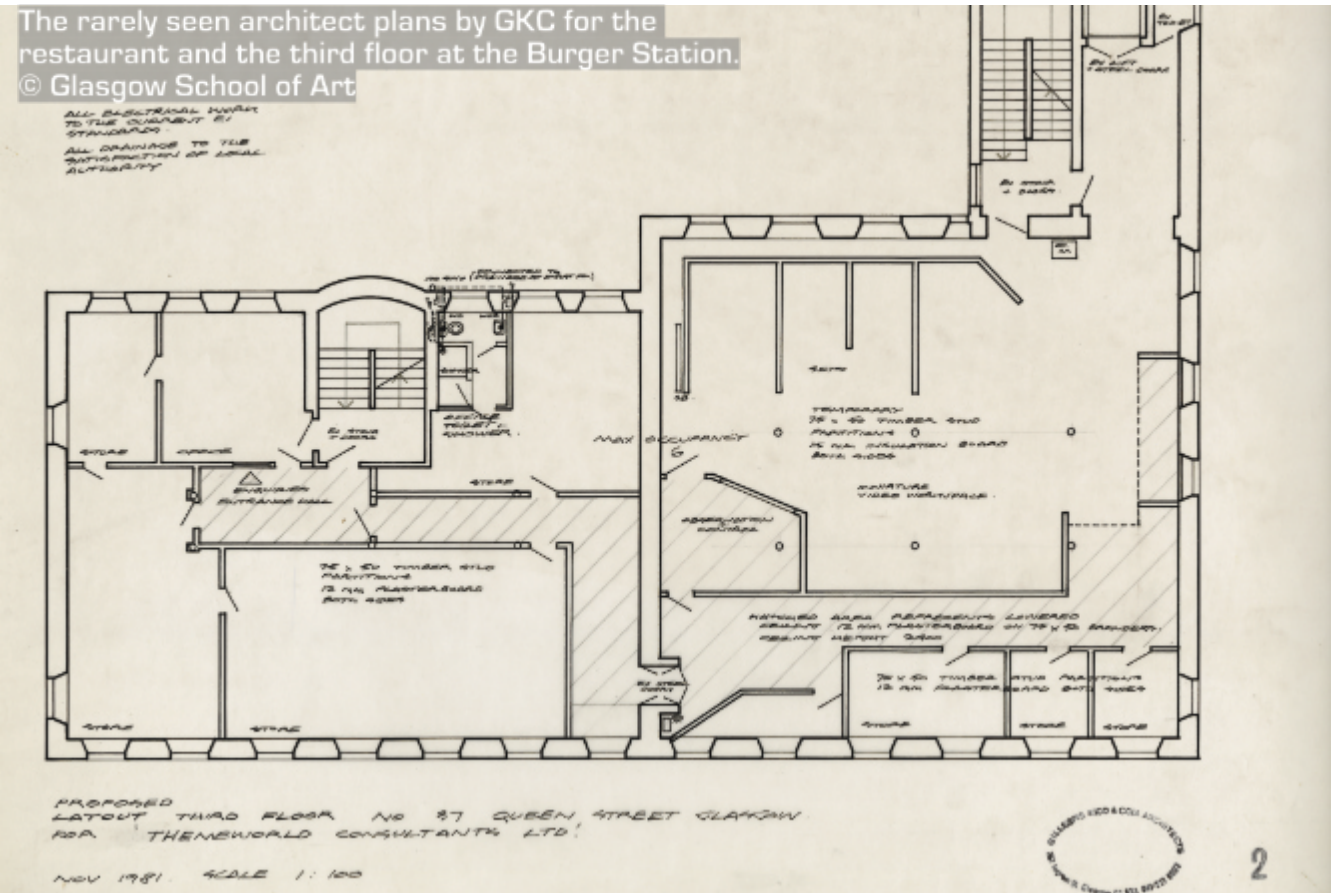
Work began in earnest on the project in late 1981, with the legendary Glasgow architects Gillespie, Kidd, and Coia having been charged with coming up with the plans to turn the former carpet showroom into a modern diner.

As projects go, it was a far cry from the work which had made GK&C's name. They had been formed in the 1920s, making their name as designers of famous modernist and brutalist churches and public buildings – mainly around Scotland, but stretching as far south as Milton Keynes.

Perhaps their most famous work, designed by architects Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan, is the St Peter's Seminary in Cardross – now sadly abandoned but hailed as one of the key modernist structures in Scotland. But by the



The rarely seen architect plans by GKC for the restaurant and the third floor at the Burger Station.



1980s, the practice was winding down and hunting for other work. Which is how they came to be turning the floors of a Glasgow tenement building, sandwiched between the shopping precinct of Argyll Street and the central plaza of George Square, into a burger joint.

While design and construction were underway at Queen Street, work on the project had been underway for months beforehand. Recruitment for staff saw adverts in the local job centre (£1.50 an hour for serving staff, £2.00 for performers). While Ron McClure, former area manager for Wimpy – at the time the only major burger chain operating in Scotland – was recruited to serve as the Burger Station's 'Commander'.

Adverts were put in the Evening Times for performers – specifically, very tall folk to contrast with local little person Alan Campbell, a former panto turn who wore the robot suit. Suitably 80s dancers were hired to provide extra entertainment.

Among those hired would be a young performer called Kevin Devine – then part of robot dance pair Alpha and Omega, who would later go on to be one of Esther's Boys during the final years of **That's Life**. But the biggest innovation was behind the scenes. Up on the third floor, away from prying customer eyes, was a recording studio.

The idea was to offer videos for folk, generally kids, celebrating their birthday at the Burger Station. A small studio was constructed, with young videographers crewing the equipment and staff filling in as cast.

Prices started at £25 for your own little mini-episode of **Buck Rogers** (left) – with scenes on ready-built sickbay or spaceship sets edited in with footage from the birthday celebrations. Some additional filming was done at Glasgow Airport, using the cockpit of a decommissioned aircraft normally used for safety training.

For early 1980s Glasgow, this was a little touch of Hollywood, although still with the tint of haunmade Weegieness about it. Buttons for the control panels dotted about the restaurant were liberated from fruit machines. Stickers for the Burger Station were applied by hand by the staff to little toy spaceships sold at the till.

And Campbell, a notorious ladies' man despite his stature, avoided any attempts at matching the TV show's famous voice of Twiki. Instead, he greeted young visitors to the burger bar with a brutally Glaswegian 'awright, how you daein?', moustache clearly visible behind the slit of his costume's mask.

It was less Mel Blanc, and more Milton. But it didn't make any difference to the folk queueing up to get in.

The Buck Rogers Burger Station finally opened its doors in August 1982. It was situated at number 37, putting it above and beside the iconic Tam Shepherd's Trick Shop, a century-old family-run joke shop and magic emporium, and next door to a low-rent hotel.

Accessing the restaurant required going up the stairs of 'the close' – the Glasgow term for the entranceway to a tenement building – which, in honour of the new series, had been bedecked in yellow and black safety tape to give the stairway an suitably space-age feel.

A photocall for the launch took place on Monday, August 18th, ahead of the grand opening, with 17-year-old waitress Alison Warner in a suitably sci-fi costume, alongside small actor Campbell – who would normally wear the Twiki costume – dressed in one of the alien outfits.

Coverage, perhaps surprisingly, was sparse. Only the **Evening Times** went big on the launch – the city tabloid predictably focusing on the teenage server's assets rather than the restaurant.

"The name indicates what the station will specialise in," proclaimed the article, "although there will be coffee in cups but without flying saucers" and hailed the venue as a "dream come true for youngsters visiting the city centre",

The paper would also run a cartoon strip (below) just over a week later, once the restaurant was up and running, depicting Buck and Wilma (or at least, vague approximations of them) from the TV series attending the restaurant.

The official opening by Lord Provost Michael Kelly would attract another media call; Radio Clyde interviewed McClure, while STV's **Scotland Tonight** show went in to show how the restaurant looked inside. Kids TV magazine **Look-In** also granted the new venue a full-page feature, showcasing the out-of-this-world costumes – no surprise given it was ITV's own mag and had regularly, and heavily, featured the adventures of Buck and co in its pages.

While coverage may not have been overwhelming, public interest in the Burger Station certainly was. Especially at weekends, it wasn't uncommon to see queues to get in backed right down the stairwell and back onto Queen Street.

The restaurant was a sea of plastic seats and


Space-age hostess Alison beams in

moulded walls, flashing lights, and dry ice. It could handle 240 people at full capacity, opening from 8 a.m. for breakfast right through to late nights. It meant a varied crowd – kids at the weekends, after school, and holidays. Students and local nerds propped up the numbers – especially fans of Gary Numan, drawn to the 80s pop tunes and the faux-futuristic decor.

The venue even had its own currency – the equivalent of gift vouchers for 1982 crowds – going by the unfortunate name of dribbles. The food was pretty basic. Burgers, chicken, and fish, the odd starter for the grown-ups (Prawn Cocktail, anyone?), and a sugar-packed selection of desserts, weirdly coloured milkshakes, and fizzy drinks to wash it all down. But for kids going, this was manna from heaven. This was ambrosia, especially when served in a giant glass by a waitress in a space-age jumpsuit and checked up on by Twiki. Actual Twiki off the telly. Sort of.
I still vividly remember going for my birthday. It was the first time I'd had a milkshake. I was underwhelmed and ended up swapping it with my mum for her coke.

The Burger Station had successfully taken off, and kids from across Strathclyde were flocking to see it. But trouble was ahead.

Just over a year after opening, ITV's ATV Licensing failed to extend the license with Waldman for continued use of the Buck Rogers rights.

In a way, it was hardly surprising – the show had already been offered in the US for the best part of two years, and ITV was no longer showing it. As a show and a brand, it was of little use to the broadcaster.

The timing could not have been worse. Waldman had been in negotiations to open a second branch – this time at the top of the Radio City tower in Liverpool, where he'd previously operated. Edinburgh was set to provide the next location in Scotland, with franchising plans pegged on the success of opening up those two locations.

Instead, they were forced to rebrand. Shorn of the props and memorabilia, and the rights to use the characters from the show, it was rebranded simply as Bucks. Out went Twiki and robots, in came gorillas and generic sci-fi monsters – some costumes specially made by a local firm, others kitbashed from what could be found in Tam Shepherds.

Crowds started to dwindle, although trade remained comfortable even after the rebranding. Even the city was undergoing change. Glasgow had just launched its " Glasgow's Miles Better" campaign, which was rebranding, and the nearby Argyll Street and dilapidated railway station were about to be renovated into the vast, greenhouse-like St Enoch's Centre mall. Bucks was, slowly, becoming a place out of time and, increasingly, out of money.

Less than two years after it opened, the final chapter was approaching for the Burger Station. The end, when it came, was both surprising and predictable.

Like many struggling places in Glasgow, it mysteriously went on fire...

Causes of the blaze vary depending on who you ask. Some sources say it was the hotel next door where the fire started, spreading

across the building into Bucks. Others say it was in 37 Queen Street itself – possibly on the third floor, where the studio had been, or in the carpet storage floor sandwiched between the two restaurant bits.

Wherever it started, the damage it did would have been enough to put the restaurant out of commission. The attempts by Strathclyde Fire Brigade to control the blaze, not helped by the cooking materials in the building, were the capper.

Water from the pumps deployed to Queen Street all but destroyed the interior and the fittings, soaking down below into Tam Shepherd's where it managed to cause significant – but not terminal – damage to the joke shop.

Without the license for the show, and now without a building, it was the end of the Buck Rogers dream.

The damaged building went through various uses – with the joke shop remaining a permanent, unchanging fixture still there today. A decade after Bucks met its end, it became Archaos – Glasgow's hottest nightclub.

Where once the kids of Glasgow had gone to see Twiki and eat fish fingers, they now came – ten years older and wiser – to dance with Paul Gascoigne and Charlie Sheen. It would remain a nightclub, albeit one with its own controversies over the years, until 2007, when it finally shut up shop.

Since then, 37 Queen Street has been largely abandoned.

Over the years, various proposals for the building have been announced and come to naught, mainly due to the cost years of neglect and damage has caused. The most recent, in 2022, was to gut the interior and turn it into student accommodation.

Whatever fate eventually befalls the venue, though, it will always have been Bucks. A small piece of cult weirdness dropped ignominiously in the middle of Glasgow.

And for a generation of kids, the coolest place in the world...

Turning a hit sci-fi film into a contemporary stage production is something worth making a song and dance about, finds **Iain Hepburn**

... TO THE DOT DOT DOT MATRIX

Manchester's Aviva Studios, the building previously and unimaginatively known as Factory International, remains a curious over-budget, under-mandated addition to the city's cultural landscape.

Although 2023's Manchester International Festival had been a decent testing ground for the facility in its other role, as the permanent home of MIF, there were still questions about what to expect from it for the other 23 months between festivals.

So when it was announced the opening production would be a new modern dance reimagining of the genre-redefining 1999 action film **The Matrix**, there was — it's safe to say — more than a little raising of eyebrows and cynical 'well, that will never work' going on.

Even the presence of Danny Boyle among the creatives producing the show did little to raise much confidence, despite his role overseeing the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony. Indeed, the project was announced with FIVE co-creators — with Boyle joined by DJ and producer Mikey J, pioneering choreographer Kendrick 'H2O' Sandy, award-winning set designer Es Devlin, and playwright Sabrina Mahfouz. That's not to mention the people realising their vision on a practical level, or indeed the Wachowskis for their source material.

The result was **Free Your Mind**, which had a limited run at Factory around Halloween this year, and is due to be screened for a wider audience in 2024.

And despite the various obvious and many challenges the idea of a dance-based **Matrix** adaptation might face, fair play to Factory. They managed to pull it off. Just...

The wirework of the original film doesn't necessarily translate well to a largely undecorated stage, let alone one where not a single word of dialogue is spoken by the characters on stage. However, the choreography and kinetic dance work of the performers does give an almost bullet-time quality to the restating of the lobby shootout, or Trinity's opening confrontation with the police.

Neo's first training encounter with Morpheus, a rapid-fire kung-fu tribute in the movie, becomes a beautiful capoeira-esque dance between the two on the catwalk - where audiences have been divided either side into red or blue, as per the original movie's pills.

With a huge cast of dancers, and a production which dramatically moves between different parts of the vast Factory building at half-time - literally encouraging the audience to follow the White Rabbit through the corridors from the traditional theatrical space of the opening act to the catwalk runway-style tunnel on which the finale plays out.

Unsurprisingly, it takes more than a few liberties with Lily and Lana Wachowski's original story. But more than that, Boyle and his fellow producers have tried to update the core concepts of **The Matrix** to sit inside 2023 - a world where the implications of AI are a daily discussion point on the news, where social media validation has disrupted and fractured society, and where people are willing to give away their most intimate personal data without thinking of the implications.

Some of these touches are bold and creative - the red dress scene from the original film has been reworked to instead have the unwitting crowds be literal phone zombies, so obsessed with looking through their screens that they don't see what's going on around

them.

The scene grows and develops into a wider commentary on the all-consuming nature of online and social media, culminating in visual representations of a Facebook thumb and someone wearing a dress made from Amazon boxes distributing familiar-looking cardboard envelopes to the crowd.

It's safe to say Factory International won't be getting any sponsorship deals from Amazon, Meta, X, or Apple any time soon...

Both halves open with a decontextualising for the local audience too. It opens with a lecture delivered by Dr. Alan Turing - or at least, a glitchy deepfake version of him - which is presented on an old Bakelite black-and-white TV in front of a massive chalkboard of equations.

Turing, the father of modern computing, worked from Manchester University, having been drawn to the city by the presence of Baby, the world's first electronic stored-programme computer, and it was on Oxford Road where Turing would encounter the partner that would ultimately lead to his prosecution for gross indecency.

And as the performance unfolds, the role of Manchester in the development of computing is also reflected. The city gave the world punchcard-driven machines to mechanise manufacturing - the jacquard loom, an example of which still sits in the city's Science and Industry Museum - a fate reflected in a dance of entwined cotton ribbons, nightmarishly enveloping each dancer like the pods in Neo's time as they struggle to get out.

Meanwhile, the second half opens with a video montage of the role of Manchester in industry and creativity - soundtracked with Blue Monday and encompassing everything from Burgess to **Corrie** (and an obligatory cameo from Anthony H Wilson, who even in death continues to loom large over Manchester pop culture).

Some of the additions, though, are more unnecessary - such as an attempt to backfill the lore, only hinted at in the film, of the war between humanity and the machines, starting with the trial of the first robot to kill a human, and ending in nuclear conflict.

Unsurprisingly, that's not an easy thing to pull off on a dance stage, and the first half storytelling does get as fractured as the future world's sky as a result.

The result is a first half in particular which feels completely overloaded - trying to do too

much and as a result leaving us with little interaction with Neo, Trinity, or the Agents amid all the other bits of storytelling.

That gets inverted for the second half, thankfully, as the story largely reverts to a greatest hits package of the film's most iconic scenes - the red dress, the lobby, the rescue of Morpheus, and the final confrontation between Smith and Neo.

For all the scepticism I had going into the production, it's impossible not to come out impressed - not just by the quality of the dance and the staging, but by the sheer overwhelming effort at immersion, with bullet time static performers in the lobby, a real-time key cutter in honour of his counterpart in the second **Matrix** film, and even giant white rabbit-clad performers wandering about posing with the crowds. It's very much a hard sell to put audiences in the mood.

But with so much going on, ultimately it's fair to say nobody can really be told what **Free Your Mind** is. Not because you have to see it for yourself, but because frankly there's so much going on in it that it's an absolute fucking nightmare to try and unpick it.

*** Free Your Mind (Aviva Studios, 2023. Creators: Michael Asante, Kendrick Sandy, Danny Boyle, ES Devlin, Sabrina Mahfouz, Boy Blue)**

ROBERT WRINGHAM picks up a blast of nostalgia after a chance encounter in a Hawaiian drinks aisle…

… TO FLIPPING OUT

I was 7,000 miles from home - a terraced house on an A-road in the West Midlands.

It was where I came of age in the 1990s, watching **Sliders** at 6pm on BBC2, reading **Sega Power**, and using little more than my imagination to wank myself thin. Today I found myself on Hilo, one of the more jungly islands of the Hawaiian archipelago. Look, I don't find myself in such an exotic location very often, okay? You're damn right I'm going to open with it.

7,000 miles away: the furthest I'd ever been and quite literally the middle of nowhere, unless you consider the Pacific Ocean a place. The culture here was slightly American, a bit Japanese, and quite Native Hawaiian. It was a thrill to feel so untethered from my starting point. I felt like Jim Kirk must have felt in **Star Trek V** when the Enterprise crossed the Great Barrier and he stopped for a little cry next to that ship's wheel thing.

Anyway, I went into a shop in search of refreshment. In the fridge I saw it: POG.

Hah, I thought, there's my annual nostalgic reminder of Pogs, the hopeless collectible cardboard discs of the '90s. I had loads of them back in the day. You'd buy them in a packet of six from the paper shop and add them to a little plastic tube with a sealable lid.

Each disc had a witty or badass design on one side. Sometimes they had little shiny holograms and often they depicted dinosaurs (I remember a green t-rex with a purple tail sprouting between sharp teeth and the phrase "I Loved Barney"). There was a strange preponderance of Rastafarian cultural tropes on Pogs and plenty of Heavy Metal skulls – I remember one with glowing blue stars in the sockets and the phrase "Ol' Blue Eyes," like it was the actual skull of Sinatra.

They had an almost **Mad Magazine** sense of ironic humour and they of course had Pogman, a furry caveman-like mascot with a toothsome grin and big bare feet. I never knew what Pogman was supposed to be but he had the vibe of a beach bum and suggested a laid-back, carefree, irreverent sort of lifestyle. Hakuna Matata.

The back of each disc displayed the emblem of the "World Pog Federation," which amusingly hinted at some sort of sporting body like the National Football League or the World Chess Federation but for Pogs..

There was supposed to be a game you could play with Pogs but really we just collected them, marvelled at the holographic ones, tried to decode the over-our-heads cartoons, enjoyed the copyright-breaching **Jurassic Park** allusions, tubed them, swapped them, lost them.

But what I was seeing in the Hilo shop wasn't a box of Pogs or a comedic nostalgia reference. It was a carton of fruit juice. Huh? It didn't just coincidentally say "POG" either: the typeface was the same as the one on the packets back in the '90s. The font is sort of tribal-looking, designed to evoke bamboo canes, the "O" a rudimentary diamond shape. But then I remembered: didn't Pogs have something to do with juice cartons in the first place? Indeed, they did.

Before Pogs became a commercial craze, it was a more downhome sort of game. Michel de Certeau could have written about it in The Practice of Everyday Life (1979) as an example of how people personalise what the capitalist environment gives us. Pogs started as an improvised street game, the gameplay not dissimilar to marbles or dreidels or jacks.

The actual cardboard discs, even as we collected the branded ones in the '90s, weren't really called Pogs at all: they were called "milk caps" because the original game was played with the disc-shaped cardboard seals from the tops of milk and juice cartons: you'd stack them neatly in a pile, hit them with an agreed-upon heavier object (the "slammer" if you bought the commercial ones) and keep the ones that lay face-up.

Your opponent would then do the same and while the winner is the kid who takes the most caps, you'd essentially have traded a bunch of milk caps in a joyful and randomised way.

Given that old-fashioned milk caps were presumably identical, perhaps children painted their own designs on them, though this is just my own imagination at work. The "Pog" name came from the juice carton I was looking at now. POG = Passionfruit, Orange, Guava.
I once read a German short story about a listless man who follows the cord of a telephone first to the box in his spare room, then out of his apartment and into the lobby, into the street and up the telegraph pole, then back to the switchboard at the end of the town, and finally all the way back to the telephone exchange. It seemed to give meaning–a sense of epic scale and secret backstageness–to a familiar domestic convenience. I felt as if I'd done the same for Pogs. I'd found the Slurm slug of Pogs: the source, the origin.

According to Wikipedia the game of Pogs originated in Maui, Hawaii in the 1920s or 1930s, though it was probably inspired by Edo Japan who had something similar going on. Japan is the next significant landmass west of Hawaii and there's a lot of cultural back-and-forth between the two archipelagos to this day.

Note to self: don't mention slavery or Pearl Harbour; this is a joyful article about a memorable toy.

The POG fruit juice wasn't actually sold with cardboard milk caps but, a piece in the Honolulu Star Bulletin explains, the two became associated when the Haleakala Creamery company dished out promotional POG logo caps in the 1970s. The '90s craze allegedly originates with one Blossom Galbiso, an Hawaiian teacher in '91 introduced milk caps to her classroom, telling the students about the old milk cap game she used to play.

Pogman, meanwhile, is not an individual character at all but a "poglodyte," which explains the caveman vibes. Poglodytes were the corporate mascots of POG juice, allegedly coming from the magical land where the juice was made.

Presumably that place wasn't particularly far

from the fridge at which I was standing as a line of thirsty Hawaiians formed behind me.

Pogs really were a big deal for three or four years of my crap Midlands childhood. Like Mini Boglins, WWF wrestling figures, Troll dolls, Panini's 1992 Gladiators stickers and the Premier League '94 equivalent, they were lust-worthy currency. As kids, you only had so much money–certainly not enough to complete the set–so you thirsted for them and treasured the ones you had, Smaug-like. It's easy to see — as our parents probably did — how they were a tacky commercial rip-off, preying upon this very childhood appetite, but sod it, they were fun.

Just as I was failing to accumulate a full set of Pogs (were there 70 in all? Yes, milkcapmania.com confirms that my memory for all things Pog is sharper than the memory I have for anything that might help to pass an exam) something insane happened. More Pogs appeared: Series 2. I had no idea I'd been collecting "Series 1" this whole time and suddenly the likely scale of Pogmania washed over us all. It might never end.

Some pervert out there is probably waiting for a mention of Tazos. Yes indeed, Tazos (in the UK at least) were Pog-like prizes in packets of Walkers Crisps. Each one depicted a classic **Looney Tunes** character: Bugs, Daffy, Wile E Coyote, et al. Taz, the Tasmanian Devil, was popular at the time–appearing in his own **Taz-Mania** cartoon series from '91 to '95 and on the backs of those embroidered denim mumwear jackets–so I assume Tazos were named after him. Looking it up, they were apparently named after the Mexican expression taconazo, meaning "to kick with the heel," on which I politely call bullshit. Taz even has a passing resemblance to Pogman and the bamboo-like typeface of the **Taz-Mania** show bears more than a passing resemblance to that of the POG logo. Still, Taz existed first and Warner Bros would have mentioned this in any legal battle brought upon them by the World Pog Federation.

A key difference between Pogs and Tazos was that Tazos had five tiny slits along their edges so they could be interlocked and you could build with them in a similar way to those atomic structure models used by scientists or a certain popular-ish toy called K'NEX. This was probably a competitive move on behalf of Tazos or a way to make them legally distinct from Pogs. Given the boringness of the original Pog game and the toyetic buildability of Tazos, Tazos were probably the superior milk cap. But despite a nostalgia for the crisp-greasy transparent packets they came in, I remain a committed first wave Pog fanatic and not even the **Star Wars**-themed Series 2 Tazos with their adorable send-away collectors' album could replace Pogs in my heart.

Returning to the relative expense of Pogs for kids, imagine my excitement one day when I heard a Dudley street vendor bellow the catnip phrase "fifty pogs a pound!" He was running a hot trade, kids and parents lining up for what we'd soon find out were counterfeit Pogs. They weren't even "counterfeit" really since they didn't replicate the designs of official Pogs but simply offered their own.

They were unbranded milk caps with white backs. The designs lacked the wit of Pogs but made up for it with seedy imagery of spiders, lingerie models, biker emblems, and ganja leaves. They were gross. But educational.

The same sort of seedy cashing in led to school headteachers cracking down on Pogs thanks to a line of unofficial "razor slammers," slammers shaped like boss circular saws, seen as dangerous. They weren't dangerous at all, merely Fisherprice-esque plastic, but rumour had it there were metal ones out there, made and distributed by gangs! I wanted one desperately but I suspect they never existed and were subject to the sort of tabloid moral panic that also led to crackdowns on stoner-inspired "no logo" jackets and on the supposedly violent Garbage Pale Kids.

Pogs come up semi-regularly as nostalgia bait. A Guardian G2 supplement in 2004 featured them along with The X-Files and Jar Jar Binks in the first '90s nostalgia blast I can remember seeing: it seemed too soon. The Simpsons memorably refers to Pogs in "Bart Sells His Soul": an exploitative TV advert yells "Remember ALF? He's back, in Pog form!" The nostalgia in this case was for ALF, the 1995 episode being at the height of Pogmania.

Given it took almost a year to make an episode of **The Simpsons** in those days, this was a win for topicality.

I bought my POG juice and a local newspaper from the elderly Hawaiian woman staffing the store. I thought about telling her about POGs but I didn't want to run the risk that she was the could-have-been-a-millionaire Blossom Galbiso who rekindled the whole idea. I didn't want to be chased off the island.

There have been some half-hearted attempts to bring Pogs back, though nobody thought to use the slogan "Remember Pogs? They're back, in Pog form!" which is presumably why they failed.

There are mentions of Pog comebacks in 2005 and 2007 press though the comebacks never happened or, Quantick-like, I'd remember them. Dating from 2020, the World Pog Federation has an official website pushing a tawdry NFT ("Authentic POG™ Blockchain Collectibles") and a suite of official social media accounts. The website boasts not unfairly of the 1994-98 craze and the ten-billion Pogs sold in thirty countries but it also shows a sinister image of Pogman clambering out of a window like a burglar and saying "aloha."

"Fast-forward to today," the website says, "and [the] diehard fans are all grown up, totalling some 100 million nostalgic adults." True! I'd probably be glad to geek out over Pogs again, to buy them in units of six from the corner shop just like I used to, though frankly I'd probably end up buying the whole series on eBay in one big whack with my superior adult wealth before sinking back to my previous depression.

Unfortunately, their Twitter profile has fewer followers than even I do while their YouTube channel has only 69 subscribers and no video content at all. I don't think I'll hold my breath for a Pog renaissance, though frankly I'm not sure why it can't be done. Most things from my childhood have "come back" (but not in Pog form) for better or worse. Could the return of Pogmania be so impossible to achieve? Come on, World Pog Federation, get on with it! Modernise your Pogs: I want to see woke Pogs, Nu**Trek** Pogs, Pogs with QR codes, **Steven Universe** Pogs, Dave-era **Red Dwar**f Pogs, Pornhub Pogs, **RedLetterMedia** and Counterpoints Pogs.

2024 has called, World Pog Federation, and it says you should get off your ARSE!

Don't be nosey...

BONK

COMING HALLOWEEN 2024

50 THINGS...
YOU RARELY SEE IN SCI-FI FILMS THESE DAYS

1 Boffins! In lab coats! Doing science!

2 Microscopes

3 Quarries standing in for alien planets

4 Aliens with massive foreheads

5 Cats

6 Dick Miller. Sadly. RIP Walter...

7 Weird coloured space food and drink

8 Cute kid sidekicks

9 Robot dancing

10 Dirty, lived-in space ships. Thanks a bunch Jonny Ive...

11 Fake sports

12 Thinly veiled adaptations of the Bible

13 Religion generally. Unless its zealots

14 Cool hackers - presumably being blackmailed by weaponised Russian and North Korean nerds isn't as cool as cybergoth Angelina Jolie...

15 Thinly veiled Cold War parallels

16 Guaranteed series cancellation harbinger Barry Van Dyke

17 Nuclear armageddon. Viruses are the new H-bombs...

18 Comedy sidekick robots. Bless you Star Wars for keeping the flame alive

19 Repurposed American Football pads as body armour

20 Stop motion animation

21 Multi-coloured alien blood

22 Smoke from rocket engines

23 Smoke from cigarettes

24 This font!

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNO
PQRSTUVWXYZÀÅÉÎ
ÕØÜabcdefghijklmnop
qrstuvwxyzàåéîõøü61
2345678901[$€.,!?]

25 The government being benevolent and working in people's best interests. Even SF has limits...

26 Men wearing eyeliner and glittery make-up

27 Tinfoil bikinis

28 Tinfoil bikini on women, too

29 Sad lonely AIs falling in love with nerds

30 Latex masks with completely immovable jaws

31 Space helmets clearly made out of a Habitat bowl

32 Futuristic 'music' which sounds like a Boney M b-side

33 Completely original IP

34 The credit 'Produced by Roger Corman'

35 Ads for existing companies who will clearly have gone bust by 2150AD. Hi PanAm!

36 Cameron Mitchell. Obviously

37 VFX sequences absolutely in no way influenced by drugs

38 Clipboards

39 Reused control panels. Pinewood must have loaned them out like library books...

40 Obvious stuntmen

41 Humans peeling their faces off to reveal robots underneath

42 Blood squibs. Actual blood squibs

43 Non-quippy dialogue

44 Hunky scientists regarded as ugly nerds purely because they're wearing glasses

45 Sticking the word space in front of everyday terms to make them futuristic. Space food, space government, space fuel...

46 Everyone living in giant domes. The O2 has a lot to answer for...

47 Cheap Italian knock-off versions of real films

48 Little people that aren't Deep Roy

49 A blue beam being fired into the sky... just kidding, you can't fucking move for them

50 Literally everything in this picture...

PODCASTAMATOR!

Want to know what the hottest and/or most unnecessarily hyped listen of 2024 will be? Try our FTS Podcast Generator! Just roll two six-sided dice three times to reveal the next big celebrity podcasting sensation. But remember – snake eyes is cursed...

	PRESENTER	ACTIVITY	GUEST
2	Jake Humphrey	INTERVIEWS	Jake Humphrey
3	Forgotten 90s comedian	VISITS	cheese
4	Three random middle-aged nerds you've never heard of	DEBATES	their favourite weird American serial killers
5	Josh Widdicombe	REWATCHES	Jonn Elledge
6	Rob Beckett	SLEEPS WITH	Prince Harry and/or Meghan Markle
7	Josh Widdicombe AND Rob Beckett	EATS	Josh Widdicombe AND Rob Beckett
8	Actor who used to be in a sci-fi show	MURDERS	someone who just happens to share their agent
9	Annoying American inspirational speaker	TALKS UTTER PISH ABOUT	apparently smaller chocolate biscuits
10	Blair government politician	FULFILS A CONTRACTUAL OBLIGATIONS WITH	someone off YouTube or TikTok - you don't know them but kids love them
11	Celebrity married couple	GOES ON A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY WITH	Rosemary West
12	David Tennant	HAS A TAKEAWAY WITH	Stormzy

40 THINGS...
WE EXPECT(ED) TO HAPPEN IN 2024

1 The new James Bond is revealed. The Daily Mail kicks off because it's not a traditional white heterosexual English man.

2 The US election sparks a whole new round of **The West Wing** reboot series rumours.

3 At least one major sport goes all in on streaming and signs a billion quid deal with Apple/Netflix/Britbox.

4 Marvel capitulates and releases the Trank Cut of **Fant4stic 4**. Nobody cares. Not even Josh Trank

5 Mark Millar joins GB News as their new weekend breakfast host.

6 Graham Linehan spontaneously combusts during a podcast.

7 Warner Brothers removes **Casablanca** from its streaming platforms to save money.

8 Paramount announces a new **Star Trek** series. Internet fans are up in arms before they've even read the title.

9 John Barrowman's inclusion in **Celebrity Race Across The World** collapses after it's discovered he's banned from about 15 different countries.

10 The new **Doctor Who** is revealed. The Daily Mail kicks off because it's not a traditional white heterosexual English man

11 The next big techbro 'pivot to' is announced as VR. Lots of arseholes spend a month walking about wearing helmets like they've escaped from a 1980s Virtuality machine.

12 **Consolevania** celebrates its 40th anniversary by staging a worked falling-out between Rab and Ryan. Who then actually do fall out again and the whole series is cancelled for another few years til Robert needs to pay some bills.

13 Games Workshop announces a new rerelease of **Space Hulk.** The box set costs £400 and comes with 12 Terminator armour Space Marines, 20 genestealers and a sense of nostalgia-exploited regret...

14 James Gunn quits DC after being told he can't have a three hour **Superman** film where Clark wanders around shouting 'CUNT' at everyone he sees to a soundtrack of 80s power pop.

15 Brewdog launches a new service allowing you to add your photo to a bottle's label - it's dropped when it's discovered the system mysteriously adds a creepy bald man to the background of any pictures of young single women.

16 Jose Mourinho is hired as Chelsea manager.

17 Two weeks later Jose Mourinho is fired as Chelsea manager. He now has enough money from his redundancies to complete his passion project, directing and starring in a remake of **Apocalypse Now**.

18 Warner Brothers removes all the **Batman** and **Superman** films from its streaming platforms to save money...

19 Claudia Winkleman's fringe is commissioned to host a four part celebrity travel series on ITV1.

20 The new John Shaft is revealed. The Daily Mail kicks off because it's not a traditional white heterosexual English man.

21 Big Finish announces that, thanks to AI, it will now be able to keep releasing Fourth Doctor audios until the heat death of the universe.

22 **Football Manager 2025** is released featuring women's teams for the first time. Gammon boycott efforts are so successful it becomes the biggest selling football game of all time.

23 Max quietly cancels the new **Harry Potter** series on the grounds it was a fucking stupid idea in the first place, and Rowling is an absolute lunatic.

24 Graham Linehan tries to cancel his Max subscription in protest - before realising he doesn't have one.

25 The SPFL signs a new league-wide sponsorship deal with a 'major new crypto company'. Three days later it's revealed the company is actually just three racoons in a trench coat.

26 James Gunn is rehired by DC, who issue a statement that it was 'all just a misunderstanding'

27 Nicola Sturgeon signs a three-book deal with Polygon. The first title, surprisingly, is a national puzzle quest adventure, where the prize is a buried golden branch worth more than half a million pounds.

28 **Popmaster** is suspended amid allegations of performance-enhancing drug use.

29 **Grand Theft Auto 6** sparks tabloid outrage and talk show debates after it emerges you can play the game without killing a single person. "What will be blame youth violence on now?" rages Rod Liddle in The Sun.

30 The new editor of the Daily Mail is revealed. The Daily Mail kicks off because it's not a traditional white heterose... oh who are we kidding?

31 **The Traitors** is spectacularly axed mid-way during its third season when it's discovered that all the contestants are Tories using the show for their new leadership election process.

32 A wrestling ring finally arrives in Blackburn 20 years late. Turns out Lynskey didn't divert it, it just got sent second class by DPD.

33 So many folk are fired by the WWE after the Vince McMahon scandal that **Summerslam** ends up being booked by the post room intern. It's the most acclaimed card in a decade.

34 George R R Martin announces **The Winds of Winter** has been delayed again, this time because his dog ate the manuscript..

35 Craig Fowler gets his kitchen done again. Really high quality work.

36 Warner Brothers removes itself from streaming platforms to save money.

37 BBC Scotland drops **Off The Ball** after Cosgrove and Cowan reenact that scene from Women In Love in the canteen of Pacific Quay.

38 Scotland contrive a new way to exit the Euros at the group stage, becoming the first country in history to do so.

39 The new **Superman** film, '**Superman Pops**' is released. It's a three hour film where Clark just wanders about shouting 'CUNT' at everyone he sees, to a soundtrack of 90s indie pop. It wins eight Golden Globes.

40 Issue Four of **FROM THE SUBLIME** is released.

CONTRIBUTORS

ART

8bitnorthxstitch is a serial cross-stitcher and artist from Greater Manchester. Her work can be bought at etsy.com/uk/shop/8bitnorthxstitch

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Alan Boon is the author of Blood and Thunder - a book chronicling early Japanese independent wrestling, and editor of the excellent Wrestling Can be Anything 'zine. He's also a regular contributor to Starburst.

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and **Iain Hepburn** is the unemployable idiot responsible for the rest of the magazine. He used to be a proper journalist but thankfully he's recovering now.

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INSPIRED BY SOME ABSOLUTELY WILD MADE-UP PISH

buckfast BEAR

THE BUCK STOPS HERE
2024